

ANTHROPOLOGICAL FEATURES OF TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AL-QAEDA AND ISIS MODELS

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Abstract: The thesis provides a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of transboundary terrorism, which transform perceptions of personality, belonging, social role, and global space, using the examples of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. At the same time, the methods of these organizations in forming a sense of transnational belonging in an individual, reinterpreting existing social identities, and implementing certain social roles are studied. The transformation of these mechanisms under the influence of globalization and digital communications, as well as the manifestation of terrorism in new forms in the virtual and transnational social space, are also analyzed.

Keywords: transnational terrorism, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, global identity, collective affiliation, network, ideology, social role

Transnational terrorism is one of the most important transformations of modern terrorism, and it is insufficient to explain it solely by the fact that the organization operates in the territory of several countries. From an anthropological perspective, transnationality also signifies a change in an individual's answers to questions such as “Which community do I belong to?”, “Which territory do I consider my sphere of interest?”, and “Who do I perceive as my enemy?” In this process, instead of national or local identity, a sense of belonging to a broad, boundless ideological community may prevail. Al-Qaeda and ISIS demonstrate two different organizational-anthropological models of this transformation.

The formation of a transnational entity in the Al-Qaeda model is primarily linked to the expansion of social ties and the circle of collective affiliation beyond national borders. Local conflicts are interpreted as the shared fate of a broad ideological community, while the concept of a “far-away enemy” links an individual's attitude toward violence to a global space. Thus, the terrorist entity justifies its actions not by the interests of a specific state or territory, but by a transnational ideological task.

In Al-Qaeda's network model, personal connections, trust, and relationships between small groups played an important role. Mark Seidgman emphasizes the importance of social ties close to friendship and kinship when studying terrorist networks. From this perspective, transnationalism is not an ideological command from above, but a social mechanism that connects people from different regions through a common narrative, a network of friendship, and mutual trust. Even with the weakening of the organization's central structure, such social networks can maintain ideological influence [1].

In the ISIS model, transnational affiliation has acquired a more institutional and social content. A person was required not only to approve of a certain ideology or support its ideas, but also to realize themselves as a full member of the “new community” formed by the organization, to obey its norms and rules, and to occupy a certain social role. In this sense, ISIS offered a person not only a political or religious goal but also a specific social environment, a sense of belonging, and a lifestyle. It is in this regard that the idea of the organization's “caliphate” is important, which served as a platform for transnational identity, uniting virtual and real social spaces. Alongside the idea of a territorial caliphate, ISIS propaganda materials strongly manifest a sense of belonging to a “large

community”, heroism, self-sacrifice, and involvement in a common goal. Research also notes that a sense of belonging is one of the mechanisms for attracting ISIS supporters.

In this context, a terrorist organization has emerged not only as a structure that plans and carries out violence but also as a “social space” with its own alternative social order, norms, roles, and criteria of affiliation. This situation demonstrates that it is insufficient to explain the process of radicalization solely through ideological influence or the assimilation of religious dogmas. After all, when a person joins a radical group, it is important that they feel they belong to a specific community, have a social status, and find a narrative that gives their life “clear meaning”. Thus, radicalization transitions from an individual psychological process to the formation of institutional and collective identity.

Olivier Roy’s approach provides an important theoretical basis for explaining some aspects of this process. He often interprets the radicalization of modern Western jihadists as “Islamization of radicalism” rather than “radicalization of Islam”. According to Roy, some young people become radical not because of prior deep religious training, but under the influence of factors such as personal dissatisfaction, identity crisis, alienation, or searching for the meaning of life, and then begin to express their radical views through Islamic symbols and jihadist narratives.

In this approach, ISIS is viewed as a means of linking existing personality identity issues with a “ready-made” ideological and social construction. That is, the organization provides a holistic framework that defines who a person is, which collective they belong to, whom they should perceive as “their own” and whom as “outside”, and what their goal in life is. Thus, the crisis of personal identity is replaced by a transnational religious-political identity. Roy’s subsequent research also emphasizes that jihad allows individuals and groups to reconstruct their local or tribal affiliation within the framework of a global “ummah”.

However, it is incorrect to perceive Roy’s concept as a theory that completely denies the religious-ideological factors of terrorism. His thesis on the “Islamization of radicalism” is aimed at showing not the absence of religious content in terrorism, but the one-sidedness of seeking the causes of radicalization only in religious radicalization. From this perspective, understanding the ISIS phenomenon requires a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between personal identity, social alienation, the need to belong, the aesthetics of violence, and religious-political narratives. Regarding Roy’s concept, some researchers argued that he did not sufficiently consider the role of religion and religiosity in radicalization.

Thus, in the ISIS model, transnational affiliation represents a new socio-anthropological form of terrorism: a person attempts to restructure their identity through belonging not to a specific territory, ethnic group, or national community, but to an imaginary global “mass” beyond its borders. In this process, digital communication tools reduce territorial boundaries and allow a person to constantly communicate with this virtual community. As a result, the terrorist organization becomes not only a real political-territorial structure but also an environment of transnational identity that influences self-awareness, the definition of social role, and the interpretation of the meaning of an individual’s life [2].

The anthropological appeal of ISIL is also manifested in the fact that it offers a simple and emotional answer to the question: “Where do I belong?” The organization sought through virtual propaganda to ensure that even a geographically distant person felt like a real member of the community. Scott Atran argues that in extremist groups, mechanisms of symbolic kinship and “imaginary family” can strengthen loyalty and readiness for sacrifice between participants. In this sense, it is necessary to explain involvement in ISIS not only through the acceptance of religious texts but also by considering the needs for belonging, meaning, heroism, and social role [3].

When comparatively summarizing the differences between Al-Qaeda and ISIS, it can be seen that in the first model, belonging to a networked global struggle is more pronounced, while in the second model, joining an alternative social order alongside a global ideology. However, in both cases, there is a common mechanism: a person's local social experience is linked to a transnational narrative, the “we” category transcends national boundaries, and violence is justified as a means of protecting or restoring the global community. This feature indicates that in the fight against transnational terrorism, it is necessary not only to disrupt the organization's logistics but also to create social alternatives to its narratives that offer belonging and meaning.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the anthropology of transnational terrorism requires the study of Al-Qaeda and ISIS not only as organizational structures but also as ideological and social systems seeking to restructure concepts of human identity, social role, and space. Alongside the technical limitation of transnational propaganda in prevention, it is important to strengthen the positive content of local and national identity for youth, developing channels of social recognition, education, constructive community, and spiritual resilience.

References

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