The Sight of Blood and the Apocalypse:
the Motivations of Daesh's Recruits

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Road Map

- This is mainly an extended literature review that traces to Saint Augustine the analysis of the impact of the sight of blood on human behavior.
- It shows that this "loyalty filter" was used already for recruiting crusaders to send to the Middle East in the Middle Ages.
- But the main focus is on the rise of Daesh in recent times, which relied both on the display of brutal blood spilling and on the Apocalyptic mythology.
- A simple model is then used to provide a synthesis and derive some policy-relevant comparative statics.

Saint Augustine on the Sight of Blood

- I first met an analysis of the impact of the sight of blood on people's behavior in Saint Augustine, as the Dominican monks were having us read crazy things when I was locked up at Sorèze boarding school (I was 14 or 15).
- Augustine was one of the doctors of the Church, writing in about 400 CE.
- Born in Hippo Regius, in what is eastern Algeria now, close to the current Tunisian border, he studied in Carthage (north of Tunis).
- His mother tongue was Punic, suggesting Phoenician descent, i.e., from what is Lebanon nowadays.
- He was voted as a bishop even before he had converted to Christianity.

Bay of Biscay • GAUL • ALPS • Po • APENNINES • ITALY • ILLYRIA

Massilia • PYRENEES • Ebro • CORSICA • Aleria • Rome • Adriatic Sea • Capua

ATLANTIC OCEAN • Tagus • SPAIN • Saguntum • BALEARIC IS. • SARDINIA • Olbia • Tyrrhenian Sea • Messana

Baecula • IBIZA • Caralis • Segesta • Motya • Himera • SICILY

Ilipa • Mediterranean Sea • Utica • Lilybaeum • Agrigentum • Syracuse

Gades • Malaca • Carthago Nova • Hippo Diarrhytus • Cape Bon • Neapolis

Tingis • Cartenna • Iol • Saldae • Hippo Regius • Carthage • Hadrum

Rusaddir • Cirta • Sicca Veneria (Al-Kāf) • Zama • Thapsus

Lixus • NUMIDIA • Theveste • Thaenae

MAURI • GAETULIA

Oea • Leptis Magna

Sabratha

LIBYA

Arae Philaenorum

Hippo

Carthage

Oujda, where I was born

0   100   200   300   400 mi
0   200   400   600 km

Carthaginian territory, 265 BC
Carthaginian territorial losses, 238 BC
Carthaginian territorial gains, 219 BC

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4

Alypius and the Gladiators

- One of Augustine's friends, Alypius, had been reluctantly dragged by his pals to watch gladiators fighting at the circus.
- "… and [he] was wounded more deeply in his soul than the [gladiator] was wounded in his body."
- "As he saw the blood, he drank in savageness at the same time. […] and he drank in madness without knowing it. […] He was no longer the man who entered there…"
- Alypius, who came to Rome to improve his religious training, became addicted to watching gladiator fighting, very excited by the sight of blood.
- Saint Augustine: *Confessions, book VI.* (Tr. J.K. Ryan)

Loyalty Filters

- George Akerlof (1983): "Loyalty Filters", *American Economic Review*, 73, 54-63, has provided a rational-choice framework to analyse this kind of effects.

- "When people go through experiences, frequently their loyalties, or their values, change. I call these value-changing experiences "loyalty filters" (Akerlof, 1983).

- The mechanism described by Saint Augustine thus entered modern economics thanks to a future Nobel Prize winner, who got it in 2001, unwittingly.

- Recent papers by Roland Bénabou and Jean Tirole are extending this analysis of Akerlof's.

- I also use this kind of ideas in a paper published in *Public Choice* (2012) to explain "why suicide terrorists get educated".

The Conversion of Rome

- According to James J. O'Donnell (2015), the main impact of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity on the daily life of the Romans has been the end of blood sacrifices and gladiator fights, within about one century.

- He credits Saint Augustine's influence for this change.

- The latter advises Christians to focus their attention on the "heavenly city" in order to turn a blind eye on the ugliness of the "earthly city", and thus enhance the chances of peace in the city.

- James J. O'Donnell (2015): *Pagans. The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins: New York.

- Gerard O'Daly (1999): *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, Oxford U.P.

The Management of Savagery

- One generally blames Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, killed in February 2006, for the drift towards extreme violence in Iraq (see, e.g., Joby Warrick (2015): *Black Flags. The Rise of ISIS*, London: Transworld).

- Superficially educated, al-Zarqawi was strongly influenced by a book published in 2004 in Arabic by Abu Bakr al-Naji.

- This *nom de guerre* refers probably in fact to a group of al-Qaeda theorists.

- This book has been translated into English in 2006 by William McCants as: *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass* (http://www.jamestown.org/).

Saint Augustine on His Head

- Al-Naji brings out the dual strategic value of extreme violence:
- "Those who have not boldly entered wars during their lifetime do not understand the role of violence and coarseness […] in combat and media battles […]"
- "The reality of this role must be understood by explaining it to the youth who want to fight […]"
- "If we are not violent in our Jihad and if softness seizes us, that will be a major factor in the loss of the element of strength, which is one of the pillars of the Umma of the message." (al-Naji, 2006) (Cited by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger (2015): *ISIS. The State of Terror*, William Collins: London).
- Obscenely extreme violence is thus regarded both as a deterrent for the enemies and a recruitment factor for young fighters.

The Channels of Impact

- The sight of bloody violence can give some people a craving for crossing the line and commiting similar acts themselves.
- Various channels may be followed to produce such a "contamination":
  - Liberating violent drives that are inhibited by cultural taboos;
  - Mobilizing herd tendencies driving to imitation;
  - Urging for revenge, if an affective or tribal link exists with the victim;
  - Unleashing the Herostratos syndrome, pushing to seek publicity even at the cost of infamy.
- For many other people, by contrast, the sight of bloody violence may have a "cathartic" (i.e., purifying) impact (René Girard, 1972: *La violence et le sacré*, Grasset: Paris).

A Precedent: Recruiting for the 1st Crusade

- Jay Rubenstein (2011) shows the part played by the taste for blood in the recruitment process for the first crusade (1097-99) (*Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*, Basic Books: New York).

- Pope Urban II mainly preached the crusade in the South and West of France, with a relatively poor recruitment impact.

- In fact, the largest number of crusaders has been recruited in Germany and north-eastern France, where the Pope did not go and preach.

- Comparing the following two maps suggests a striking potential explanation for that.
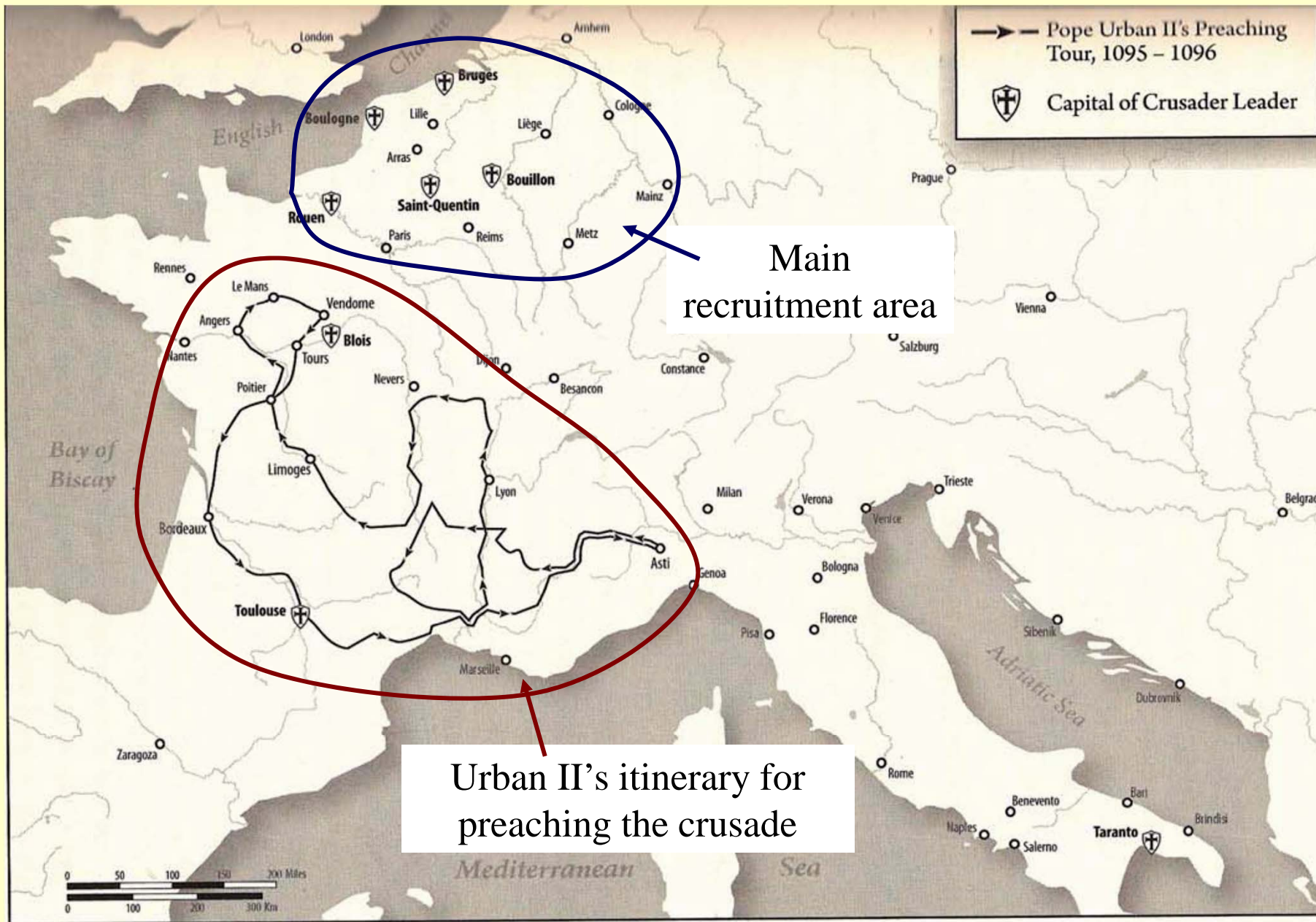
Urban II's preaching itinerary in 1095–1096 and the capitals of crusade leaders
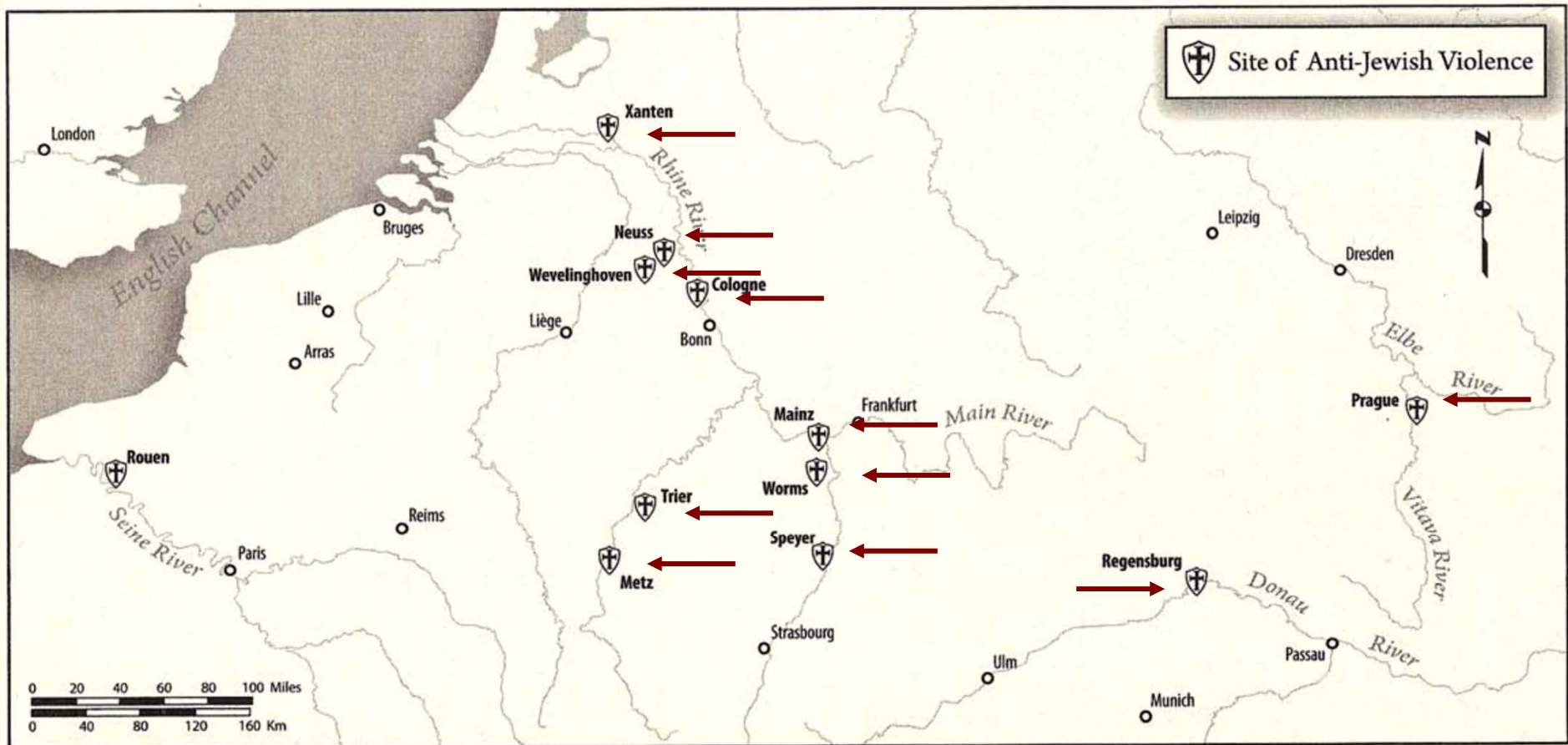
Sites of anti-Jewish violence at the time of the First Crusade

Rubenstein argues that it was by organizing pogroms
in Germanic cities that German lords and princes
have recruited the largest number of crusaders.

Cyber-Barbarism

- Abdel Bari Atwan (2015): *Islamic State. The Digital Caliphate*, Saqi Books: London, and Stern and Berger (2015) (Op. Cit.) describe the technical refinements used by Daesh to amplify the impact of this violence by broadcasting in social media and by other means the atrocities that they inflict on civilians and soldiers alike when they take a city over.

- Producing Hollywood-standards footages of beheadings, amputations, and other spectacular assassinations and diffusing them globally turned out to be a powerful attraction factor for young recruits that largely exceeded their expectations.

- A lot of "cyber-geeks" congregated in Jihadist training camps in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, probably attracted by the fascination of blood spilling and the prospect of playing a part in these gore videos and snuff films showing unrestrained murders.

Geographic Dispersion

- Gilles Kepel (2015) analyzes the decentralized organisation of Islamist networks on the Internet, based on the proliferation of social-networks accounts and various blogs. He shows that this communication strategy played a major part in the self-radicalization of many Jihadists in France (*Terreur dans l'hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*, Gallimard: Paris).

- Petter Nesser (2015) provides a similar analysis enlarged to Europe as a whole (*Islamist Terrorism in Europe. A History*, Hurst & Co.: London).

- Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen of Yemeni descent played this kind of part by broadcasting Jihadist propaganda worldwide. He, and his 14 year old son a few weeks later, were killed by drones in 2011 (Jeremy Scahill (2013): *Dirty Wars. The World is a Battle field, S*erpent's Tail: London).

Tricky to Control

- The CIA and the police worldwide have responded to this online challenge.
- The dilemma is to leave enough activity on these networks to collect usable information to identify and catch the Jihadists without leaving too much of it on the web to control the extent of online self-radicalization.
- J.M. Berger has shown statistically that Twitter, which was especially popular at first among Jihadists, has been highly active at closing these accounts as soon as possible.
- A new challenge arises from cryptal networks, which are very tricky to control.

The Apocalyptic Narrative and the Foretold End of the World (1)

- William McCants (2015) brings out the mechanisms by which Daesh has partly determined its strategy with a view to strengthen the credibility of a coming doomsday (*The ISIS Apocalypse. The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, Picador: New York).

- *Dabiq*, their online magazine, is named after the place where the ultimate battle between the Byzantines (USA and allies) and the Muslims is predicted to take place.

- The existence of the Caliphate, mentioned in the Koran, is a pre-requisite for an Apocalyptic interpretation.

The Apocalyptic Narrative and the Foretold End of the World (2)

- Daesh has been surfing on a tidal wave of interest for Apocalyptic novels and essays in the Middle East, first identified by Jean-Pierre Filiu (2008): *L'Apocalypse dans l'Islam*, Arthème Fayart: Paris.

- Even Nostradamus has been mobilized in that literature, which borrows from the Jewish and Christian traditions as well as from the Muslim one.

- Simon Sebag Montefiore (2011): *Jerusalem. The Biography*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, shows how such Apocalyptic narratives have been used since times immemorial to convince people to go and get killed near Jerusalem, in order to jump the queue for the final judgment.

The Apocalyptic Narrative and the Foretold End of the World (3)

- Jay Rubenstein (2011) illustrates it in the case of the first crusade (1097-99) (*Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*, Basic Books: New York).

- In particular, Peter the Hermit, who never met the Pope and preached the crusade in North-East France and Germany, used the theme of the Apocalypse extensively.

- Even those who do not really believe in it might be attracted by a kind of Pascal wager: the probability that this story is true is very small, but what's at stake is eternity...

The Apocalyptic Narrative and the Foretold End of the World (4)

- The full impact of the apocalyptic narrative argument is obviously geographically limited to the Levant, the places mentioned in the Scriptures.
- However, some indirect and attenuated impacts can also be expected on the people who joined the Jihad in Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, Yemen, etc., if the end of the world is understood as a global event.
- Nevertheless, this might explain why the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham attracted more foreigners than the other Jihadist fronts.

Participation Constraint (1)

- A very simple model allows us to understand how these two influences interact to incite some people to join Daesh in the Middle East or elsewhere.

- Let $U(\psi S, i)$, $U'_S(\psi S, i) > 0$, be the value attached to the sight of blood by individual i, increasing with the observed quantity of blood spilled ψS, which depends on an index of media coverage ψ;

- Individuals $i = 1, \ldots, N$, are ranked by decreasing order of their taste for blood for a given value of ψS: $U'_i(\psi S, i) < 0$.

Participation Constraint (2)

- Let $V(T)$, $V'(T) < 0$, be the value of dying now in the places described by the Apocalypse, decreasing with the time left before the end of the world T,

- And let $W(T, Y)$, $W'_T(T, Y) > 0$ and $W'_Y(T, Y) > 0$, be the reservation utility, i.e., the present value of a quiet life away from Jihadism and violence, an increasing function of the time left before the end of the world T and of the level of economic activity Y.

Participation Constraint (3)

- Individual i will join the Jihad if:
  - $U(\psi S, i) + V(T) > W(T, Y)$. She will abstain otherwise.
- Let R be the index of the marginal recruit, such that all individuals having $i < R$ enroll, and not the others.
- The value she attaches to bloody violence may be written:
  - $U(\psi S, R) = W(T, Y) - V(T)$.
- The resulting number of recruits is:
  - $R = R(T, \psi S, Y)$, which is decreasing in T and Y, and increasing with ψS.

# Recruitment and the Equilibrium Supply of Bloody Violence

- Let's close the model by assuming that bloody violence is produced using a standard production function $S = S (R, K)$, where K represents military hardware.

- The following diagram may then be drawn to analyze the equilibrium levels of recruitment and bloody violence and their comparative statics.
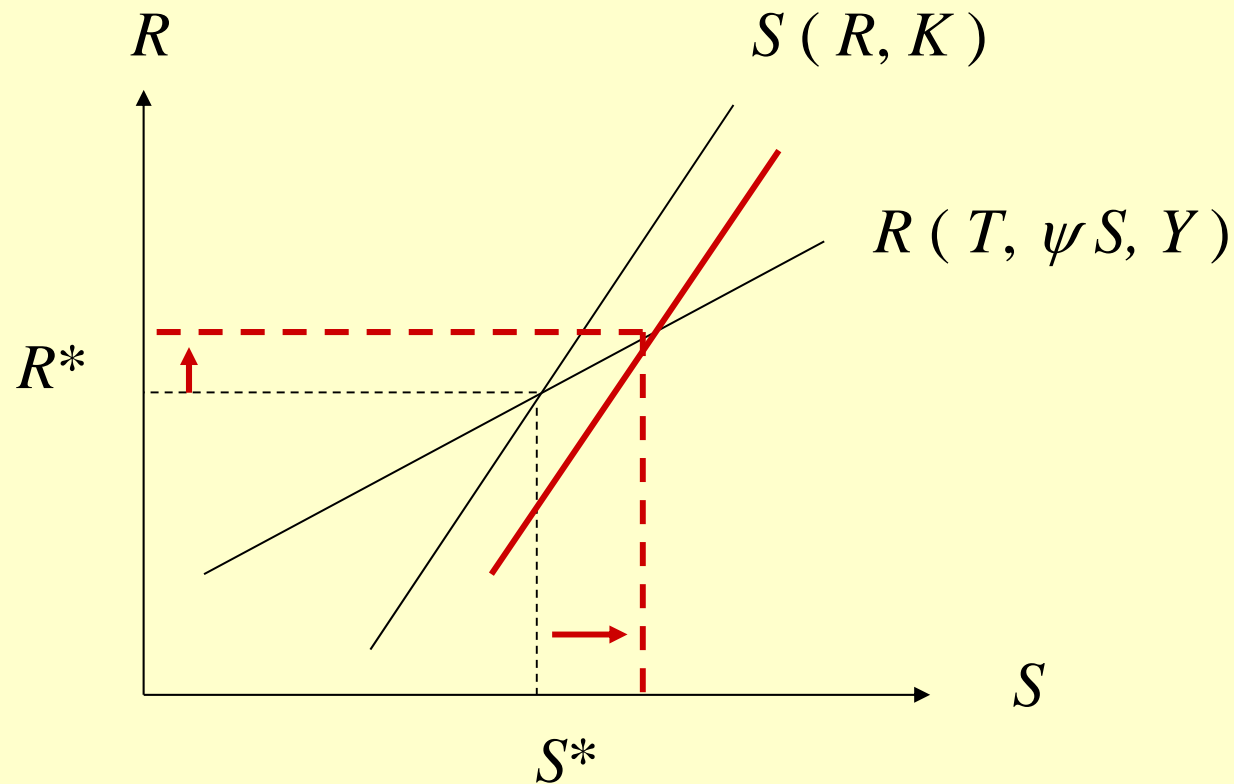
Equilibrium in the { R, S } Space
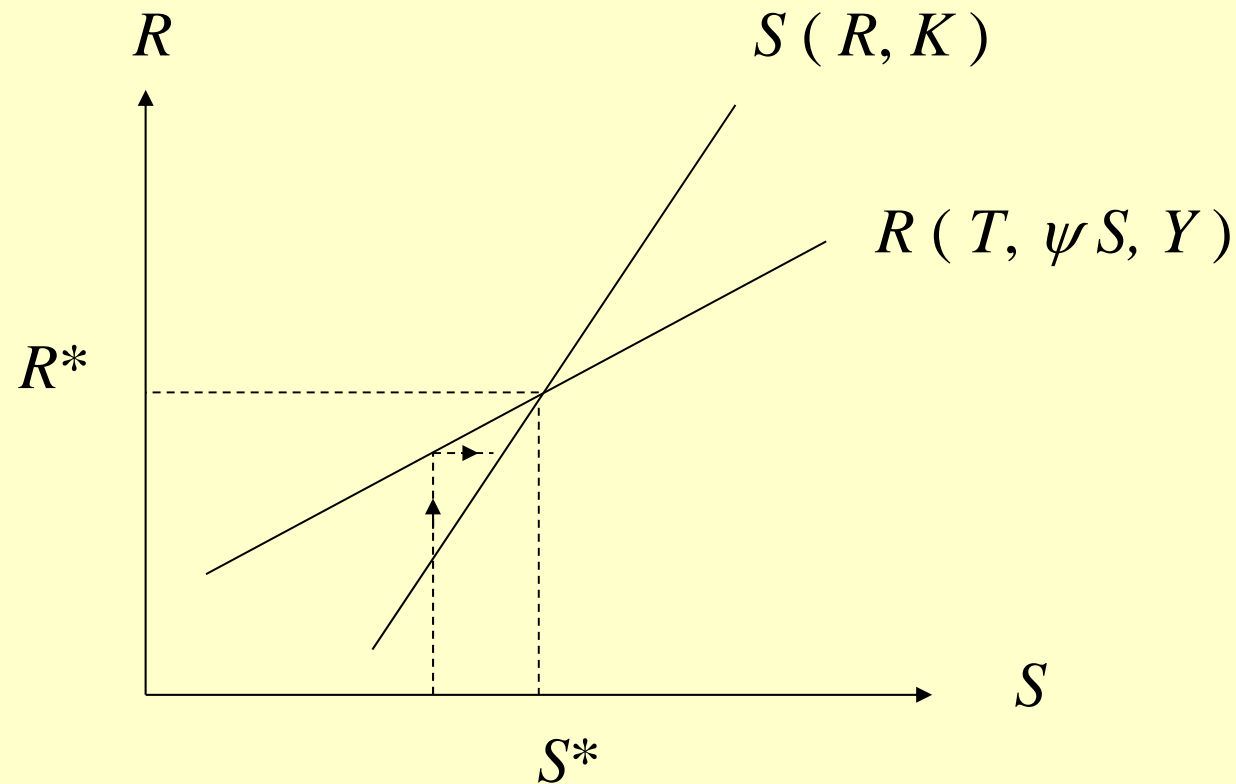
The { R^*, S^* } equilibrium is stable provided the slope of the S (.) curve is steeper than that of R (.) in this space.

Comparative Statics (1)
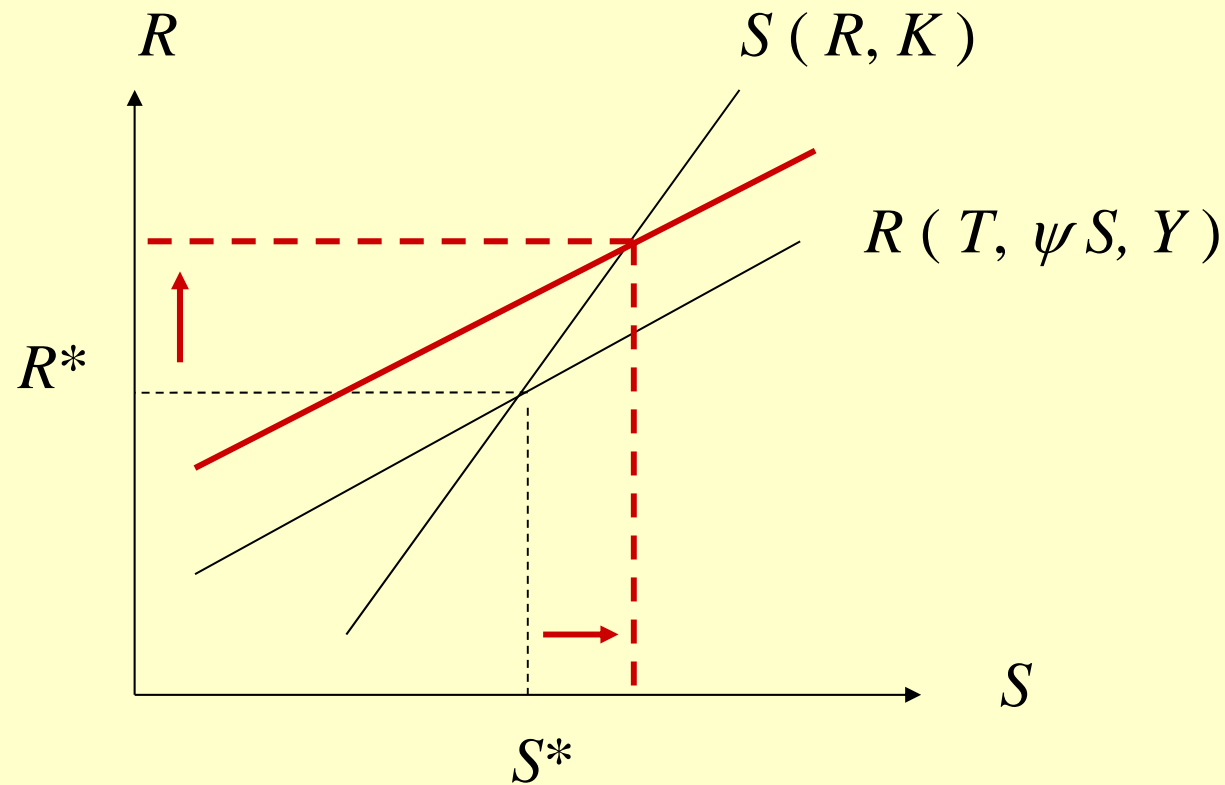
A fall in T, the end of the world being viewed as closer, or an increase in ψ, due to an enhanced media coverage, as well as a fall in economic activity Y, entail a simultaneous increase in R^* and S^*_{26}.

Comparative Statics (2)

An increase in K also entails a simultaneous increase in R^* and S^*, with a relatively smaller impact on R^* because of a substitution effect.

Testable Predictions

- This very simple model helps us to understand Daesh's strategy based on:
  - (i) reinforcing the belief in apocalyptic writings;
  - (ii) investing in a sophisticated communication strategy at the global level; and
  - (iii) displaying massive shows of force bringing out it's troops' discipline and their sophisticated military hardware.

- These predictions shed a particular light on a crucial episode of the civil war in Syria, suggesting that this model can usefully be used for an analytic narrative of the recent events in the Middle East.

28

A test: Daesh *versus* al-Nusra

- Daesh has evolved from al-Qaeda in Iraq, its successive leaders having pledged allegiance to Ben Laden and then al-Zawahiri.
- Jabhat al-Nusra has been sent to Syria by al-Qaeda's central direction to exploit the disorder created by the civil war and to promote Jihad.
- However, Daesh has pushed its territorial expansion into Syria, in direct opposition to al-Nusra and the central direction of al-Qaeda.
- Breaching the Sykes-Picot line, drawn between Syria and Iraq by the British and the French at the time of the Mandate, was an explicit target of ISIS.

Opposite Strategies

- Like al-Qaeda's central direction, al-Nusra seeks to conquer Syria while respecting popular feelings to a larger extent, by avoiding in particular to unleash its violence against Muslim civilians, and by focusing its action against governmental forces.

- In contrast, Daesh concentrates in fact its violence against civilian populations in the conquered cities as well as against the other rebel militias at war against the Syrian regime.

- In January 2014, al-Zawahiri has officially broken its ties to Daesh, accused of barbarism.

- **A very large number of al-Nusra's fighters have then switched side and pledged allegiance to Daesh.**

- See Charles R. Lister (2015): *The Syrian Jihad. Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London: Hurst & Co.

Comments

- The model seems to provide a simple analytical framework to understand how Daesh has taken over from al-Nusra in Syria.

- More generally, it brings out the logics behind the strategy of Daesh, which combines four main pillars:

- The immemorial contagious attraction of the sight of blood to attract recruits from the whole world,

- Cutting edge information and communication technology and Hollywood-quality filming to amplify its impact on watchers,

- The Millenarian myth of the Apocalypse, to provide recruits with a sense of urgency and a drive to die in the Holy Land,

- Massive military hardware, funded by stolen and smuggled oil, to enhance the blood-letting efficiency.

Fighting Daesh on Both Fronts
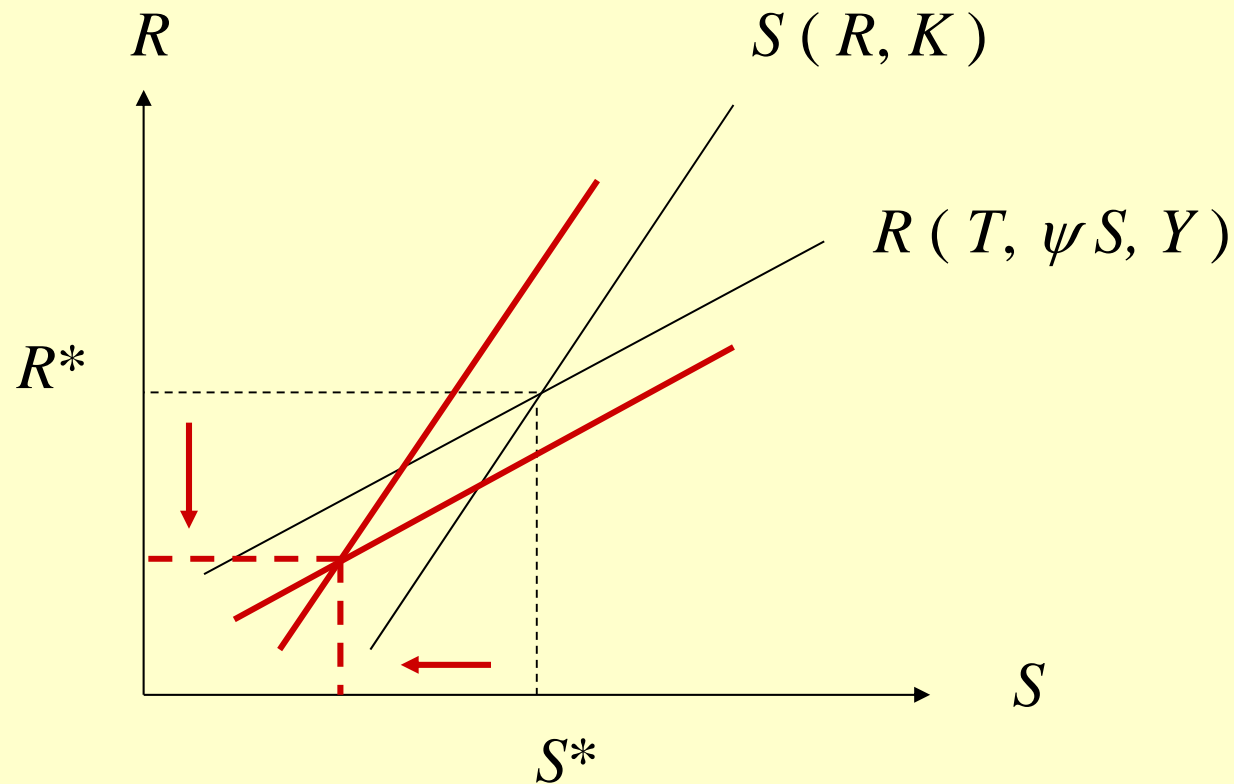
Military action to demolish *K*, social media "cleansing", aimed at cutting the spreading of gore videos to get ψ down, and boosting the economy to increase *Y*, should be combined to beat Daesh.

Is the Islamic State Sincere?

- Most of Daesh's leaders were initially Baathist under Saddam Hussain, i.e., atheist and socialist.

- It seems that they are above all Sunni Arab nationalists. This ethno-religious group has been very severely affected by the break up of the Ottoman empire after 1918. They were highly powerful landlords, rich traders or high-ranking public servants before the mandate and the split of their heartland between Iraq and Syria (see John McHugo (2014): *Syria. From the Great War to Civil War*, London: Saqi).

- They had later acquired a position of power in Saddam Hussain's Iraq, despite their relatively small number. This has been shattered by the US aggression in 2003, to the benefit of their hereditary Shiite enemies.

- For them, it looks plausible that the scripturalist Islam and Apocalyptic narratives that they emphasize are just a means to mobilize youngsters as "cannon fodder".

33

Strategic Implications

- This analysis suggests to act on three fronts:
- To scramble as much as possible Jihadist communications on social media. Twitter has been very active on this front.
- Ridicule the Apocalyptic message by showing its lack of predictive power, showing that some of the current interpretations of current events are blown up by the fate of arms on the ground
- Let those who want to go to Syria do it, so that they realize what it's like and spread the word if and when they come back (see David Thomson (2016): *Les revenants. Ils étaient partis faire le jihad, ils sont de retour en France*, Paris: Seuil.
- Disorganize militarily the Islamic State, even if this involves supporting El-Assad and Putin, to show that it does not work as foretold.

"This is the end…"

"…All the children are insane…"

The Doors (1967)

Soundtrack of *Apocalypse Now* (1979)