

# A Theory of ISIS

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Political Violence and the  
Transformation of the Global Order

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# Introduction

## The Islamic State and Political Violence in the Early Twenty-First Century

Madam, your imperial Majesty gives me life back by killing Turks.

Voltaire, Letter to Catherine II of Russia,  
Ferney, France, 30 October 1769

Little babies in make-up terrorise the Western world.

Prince, 'Crystal Ball' (1986)

What is the Islamic State (IS)? What lies behind this name? From whence did it originate and what is its function? What meaning has been given to it, and for what purposes? What does the manifestation of this phenomenon reveal? What do the narratives built around it say about the evolution of international relations in the early twentieth century, and not merely about security affairs or counter-terrorism? How is it that within a mere three-month period – the summer of 2014 – a previously nondescript acronym, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), became, so rapidly and so globally, an instantly recognisable brand name, at once carrying threat for millions of people and appeal for thousands? Where did this entity come from and where is it heading?

This book attempts to answer these questions through an examination of the place IS occupies in contemporary international history and politics. The critical interpretation offered here is a departure from the dominant existing literature, which portrays the group primarily as an apocalyptic religious entity bent solely on destroying the West. Considering the organisation's declarative religious identity as one of adornment, and secondary to its more consequential social and political nature, this analysis argues instead that a conceptual geology of IS holds the key to its understanding, and is to be found in three related dimensions: a continuation of the earlier armed radical Islamist group Al Qaeda and that entity's deeper upstream regional context; degenerated political developments in Iraq in the aftermath of the American invasion of that

country in March 2003 and later in Syria in 2011; and the wider rise of an original type of political violence linked to both the unfinished and resurgent practices of the colonial era and more recent problematic military interventionism. In reconstructing this complex and interwoven genealogy of the group, the analysis similarly situates IS in three different and interrelated contexts, constitutive, it is argued, of a transformation moment of violence-production in the early twentieth century: post-colonialism, post-globalisation and post-modernity. As such, the work traces the emergence and evolution of the organisation and identifies its nature, highlighting an understanding whereby *periodisation* and *spatialisation* of IS warrant further qualitative expansion, beyond the available narrative of mad-terrorist-group-bent-on-destroying-the-West-and-establishing-a-Caliphate, if they are to be meaningfully accounted for historically.

Since its emergence, IS has been studied overwhelmingly under a reductionist and sensationalist mainstream journalistic approach and through policy-oriented security expertise – the same twofold perspective that had been used previously for analysis of Al Qaeda in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks on the United States. Focus on the group's extreme violence and its alienating discourse has prevented deeper examination of the political and social conditions behind its rise. In contradistinction, the present study discusses the IS group from a historical and social science perspective, unpacking its dynamics not merely in terms of the group's terrorist nature and its religious rhetoric, but with a view to arguing for a reconceptualisation of the production of violence by IS – a group this analysis locates at the dawn of a novel form of globally privatised, transnationalised, interweaved and hybrid insurgent political violence. It is submitted that the cultural mixity and multilayered nature of IS inaugurated a revealing moment in both the nature and direction of contemporary political violence, while echoing its deeper colonial underpinnings. Once expressed only domestically or internationally, the new violence now travels back and forth, at once impacting periphery and metropolis with equal acuity and consequential unpredictability, as the full spectrum of the interaction space is occupied rather than a single point. 'Return to sender' is in effect the motto of the violence counter-produced, remixed and shipped back by IS to the imperial centres, but also to the group's immediate domestic and regional contexts of states it seeks to reconfigure. In turn further deepening the vicious circle, defensive reaction to that beamed violence

has led to a renewal of authoritarianism in the Middle East and a faltering of democracy in the West, as seen in the rampant, all-purpose securitisation and unrestrained Islamophobia rising in the United States and Europe.

Close to two decades after the 9/11 attacks conducted in New York and Washington by the transnational non-state armed group Al Qaeda, and several years into IS's own saga, the patterns of a transforming form of globalised political violence are cementing, and the longer-term impact of the Al Qaeda/IS story is vividly perceptible beyond the latest episodic 'crisis', 'attack' or 'terror'. Although the deeper questions about ISIS abound by virtue of the novelty the group carries, they have not been asked fully and unpacked scientifically. Captive to a self-imposed normative cul-de-sac on the issue of radical Islamism generally, and Al Qaeda and IS specifically, social sciences have so far failed to initiate a historically contextualised, global (not merely Western or Westernised) and nuanced discussion on the phenomena at hand. Such persistent lack of deeper analysis is consequential, as a ritual of contorted commentary on the international situation ushered in by the two groups has solidified in spite of being unconvincing to many. Anchored in the matrix developed in the autumn of 2001 following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, this zeitgeist-seeking, catastrophising sequence is at the heart of both the conceptual misunderstanding of IS and the policy impasse, leading to the replay of violence in recent years. For every time a new radical Islamism-related attack takes place in New York, Washington, London, Paris, Brussels or Berlin, a ritual of denial of the deeper political issues plays out in an increasingly familiar fashion. The sequence is performed thus: shock gives way to fear followed by anger; security experts step up hurriedly in television studios and on social media to denounce the lack of preparation by the authorities; specialists in radical Islamism (or simply Islam) follow, declaring that IS (previously Al Qaeda) has been weakened, is on its way to be defeated and is merely lashing out with desperate attacks; Muslim communities in Western countries are called out and racist and violent attacks against them sometimes take place (hours after the March 2016 attacks in Brussels a #stopislam movement started trending, revealing the depth of the bias that had come to overtake sectors of the Western world, readily associating Islam and terrorism); sympathy movements for the victims or city where the attack took place are set up (*Je suis Charlie*, I am Brussels, etc.); calls for tougher legislation (surveillance mechanisms,



detention conditions, nationality measures, immigration procedures, travel regulations, dress codes, access to pools, prayer sites, etc.) are spoken urgently; arrests are made in neighbourhoods where Muslim migrants are known to reside and bombing is redoubled in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen or Libya.

In such a context, where ethos becomes pathos, and as was the case for Al Qaeda in the 2000s, IS became in the 2010s the bogeyman of international security – *naturally named* as a *natural* threat. Yet as Salman Sayyid remarks, ‘the act of naming is an exercise in history-making ... A name is not just a label that can simply be attached to something that is already there: it is the means by which heterogeneous elements are marshalled together to become the intrinsic features of the named entity.’<sup>1</sup> That marshalling was the unexamined mainstay of what IS heralded for the world, for the Middle East and for the West in particular. Above and beyond IS itself, its extremism and violence, such evocation has deeper problematic roots. In the contemporary political geography, terrorism has been not-so-subtly placed in the middle of a canvas that has been painted in the vivid green and black colours of Islam. As a result, the notion of terrorism is now in a state of conceptual deformation, whereby the elasticity it has been given in recent years allows it to serve almost exclusively the purpose of identifying threats against Western states and societies as coming primarily from Islam and faceless Muslim attackers. To be certain, terrorism suffered by other regions is reported regularly, and is portrayed equally as an ill of our times to be dealt with urgently. Indeed, according to the Global Terrorism Index released annually by the Institute of Economics and Peace, the first casualties of terrorism in this period were Iraqis, Afghans and Nigerians. However, the core representation of terrorism per se in the well-embroidered media and policy drapery is centrally the menace it represents to the West. An illustration of this – only partially coded – reality is the inconsistent use of the term ‘terrorism’ by mainstream media, at once resorting to it reflexively when attacks have Muslims associated with them, and opting for another terminology (‘attack’, ‘shooting’, ‘security incident’, ‘assault’, ‘situation’, etc.) when events of a similar nature have different types of perpetrators involved. Hours after a gunman had performed terroristically in Munich, Germany, on 22 July 2016 – killing eight civilians, mostly children and teenagers, in a mall – authorities were ‘still considering whether this was a terrorist event’ and the main international media outlets (CNN, BBC) were refraining

from using the word when video had already surfaced of the masked attacker boasting about his murderous actions. In an obvious attempt to link the ongoing event to the question of migration from the Middle East which has engulfed German and European politics since 2014, the first question put by journalists to the Munich chief of police at the press briefing that evening was an inquiry as to how long the perpetrator had lived in Germany. When, in February 2017, US President Donald Trump provided a list of 78 recent terrorist attacks (from September 2014 to December 2016), which he claimed misleadingly had not been reported by the media, he revealingly overlooked an anti-Muslim terrorist attack that had taken place a few days earlier in Canada, which a Republican congressman who supported his policies justified. Defending Trump's stance, US Representative Sean Duffy declared to CNN that 'there is a difference' between terror acts by white people and those committed by Muslims.<sup>2</sup> When, on 19 June 2017, Darren Osborn drove a van into a crowd near the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, re-enacting a terrorist *modus operandi* seen earlier in London, Berlin and Nice, the BBC and CNN refrained from using the term terrorism for several hours, initially depicting the attack as a 'collision'.

The primary subtext of the IS discussion is that terrorism is today largely serving the purpose of naming Islam as an enemy without actually naming it. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) that was declared in September 2001 by the George W. Bush administration has almost exclusively targeted radical Islamist groups; initially Al Qaeda, then its franchises and affiliates, and eventually IS. The power of a hegemonic discursive conflict of the sort the GWOT represented was in effect to attain *a victory of interpretation*, ensuring that a particular viewpoint triumphed,<sup>3</sup> which played out precisely in this fashion. Two logics emanating from the Global South itself enabled the furthering and perpetuation of this state of affairs. The first was a similar, all-purpose delegitimising and criminalising use of the 'T' term by authoritarian regimes such as Abdel Fattah al Sisi's in Egypt and Bashar al Assad's in Syria against their political opponents (regardless of the actual use of violence by those opponents). The second was the consequential propping-up of these authoritarian-clientelist systems by their partners in the North, even in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, in the name of fighting terrorism and under a logic of needed 'security partners' (as had long been the case with Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt or Zein al Abidine Ben Ali's in Tunisia, among others). Consequentially,

and again regardless of the actual terrorism performed by the radical groups, a diffuse, intangible, unfathomable ‘terrorism’ endowed with a free-floating, independent existence is presented as having taken over the world parasitically. Omnipresent, the threat is defined almost only in relation to the presence of Islam in its vicinity and of ISIS ostentatiously.

Regularly replayed and patterned in such depoliticised and culturalised ways, the contemporary presentation of political violence has not evolved significantly beyond this static dimension. The public commentary context in which the representation of IS was initiated in earnest in mid-2014, when the group emerged publicly, illustrated that powerfully. Just as Al Qaeda had been called a formula system, a venture capitalist firm, a commissioning editor, a newspaper, a television production, a publishing house, a wealthy university, a financial godfather, a transnational corporation, a franchise outfit and a multinational holding company, IS conjured up a variety of similarly eclectic names: revolutionary chameleon, cult, super-gang, proto-state, network, state of mind and online Caliphate. Beyond the groups’ objective complexities, the proliferation of appellations is indicative of a discomfort in the presence of the type of intricate actors that both Al Qaeda and IS represent. Indeed, the very action of naming the new group (‘an exercise in history-making’) became itself an issue: ISIS, ISIL or Daesh?<sup>4</sup> As in the Zapruder film, the disconnects between what was seen and what was unseen, hidden or imagined, interpreted or reinterpreted, became legion.

### *Misunderstanding IS*

This book examines the history and the historiography of the organisation of IS. It argues that the IS phenomenon takes place as neo-colonialism continued lastingly to define the setting in which the group appeared in Iraq; as globalisation<sup>5</sup> deepened worldwide, offering further opportunities for the organisation to beam its violence internationally; and as modernity accelerated, bringing North and South into an ever-closer interface, with individual actors on both sides experiencing related, but not similar, radical insurgent and violent rebellious urges. It is proposed that, above and beyond the important domestic and regional story of the evolution of radical Islamism, IS is more importantly the manifestation of the persistent dystrophies that have long been playing out politically between the West and the Middle East (and, beyond, the Islamic world). Furthermore, the book argues that the path embarked on in facing up

to the group in the name of the defence of democracy has paradoxically fuelled authoritarian patterns in the West itself, as the effect of lingering colonial strategies and more recent interventionist outlooks used to control distant lands are echoed corruptively in the heart of the Western metropolis. These nascent but possibly lasting dimensions are playing out in largely unexamined ways, as relates to the discussion of IS. However, for the majority of commentators the problematique has remained one of 'terrorism and counter-terrorism', 'them against us', 'Middle East strife' (a region given only in terms of 'unreadability', 'enigma' and 'riddle') and 'Islam and its problem.'<sup>6</sup> The actual political archaeology of the group has been sidelined,<sup>7</sup> displaced by a Pravda-like focus on religion<sup>8</sup> and rah-rah presentism that is emptying the historical context of its crucial backdrop and pinpointable consequences. The radical Islamist group – as the titles of most books devoted to it denote in their echoing of the policy phraseology – is apprehended as a 'phoenix' 'cult' of 'strangers' that has 'madness and methodology' in an 'empire of fear', setting a 'trap', with a 'doomsday vision' whose 'brutal' 'rise' is a 'new threat' that 'can't be ignored' and must be 'defeated' in this 'great war of our time'. The larger setting of this call-and-response is the absence of a dispassionate, intelligent framework to understanding the question of contemporary terrorism and its permutations away from a unilateral, state-centric and depoliticised stance.<sup>9</sup> Such work has had a direct relationship with the contemporary practice of power and the projection of force in increasingly culturalised and long-skewed international relations. In effect, the uncritical and unreflective mobilisation of prestidigitator expertise on terror is today a *political* process featuring officialdom, journalism and their networks. However problematic this may be, it is nonetheless of lesser concern here, as it remains a matter or prerogative (including in the case of the media per editorial choices). What matters more to an academic analysis seeking to conceptualise IS is that such practice has resulted in an un-nuanced under-theorisation of one of the most important developments of our times. As a result, academia has remained captive to a simplified twofold narrative about apocalyptic terrorism and theology readings. That horizon-closing narrative has not so much found its ways into institutions of higher learning as it has stunned them into emollience, since it has not yet been debunked – and also because its power derives from the fact that it is the product of a mostly Western-based uncritical understanding of societies that are not Western but which are beholden to that reading. (For example, Malian

newspapers circa 2012 reflexively calling Paris-based terrorism experts to seek enlightenment on what was happening up north *in their own country* with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was a tell-tale sign of such withdrawal from self-representation and intellectual dependence on the former colonial power.)

The wider discussion that has not been tapped into, and was indeed kept at bay when it comes to understanding the origins of the contemporary transnational violence of IS (and before it Al Qaeda), concerns two important ongoing phenomena of our times that have been termed respectively the ‘decolonisation of international relations’ and the ‘decolonising of war’.<sup>10</sup> As concerns the new breed of non-state armed groups, these ongoing shifts primarily imply, I argue here, a transnational repositioning of violence – precisely what Al Qaeda introduced in the 1990s and 2000s (see Chapter 2), and what IS deepened in the 2010s (see Chapters 3 and 4). Grammatically, colonial war was *international*. Post-colonial conflict is, for its part, eminently *transnational*. Both connect in the martial nature of that encounter between actors, times and spaces, and if, as Isabel Hull summed it up, imperialism was war,<sup>11</sup> then so too are Al Qaeda’s and IS’s actions essentially military. Despite the military studies and philosophical works at both ends of the spectrum, the revolutionary cross-pollination of these strands has not been researched with a view to deciphering the situation in relation to its historically intertwined *dual* Muslim and Western context. Instead, starting in autumn 2014, the emergence of IS led to the publication of a number of works on the group *telling its inside* story in isolation from those histories and contexts.<sup>12</sup> As the (self-standing) ‘problem of ISIS’ took shape thus: the military-academic network was expanded to the military-academic-terrorism-expert on this issue and, just as had been the case a decade earlier with Al Qaeda, the discussion remained explicitly about mapping the defeat of a repellent entity bent on annihilation of the West. When present in the analysis, the entanglement of domestic and foreign was confined to matters of ‘failed policies’ (in Washington or in Baghdad) or of dangers of the spillover of these actors (coming to attack Fortress West or returning as ‘foreign fighters’). Commentators in Western mainstream media oscillated between the appearance of objectivity and the knowingness of the corporate-driven culture of sensationalism, and moved ever closely to giving voice solely to the sentiments of an irate and frightened public rather than offering sober and contextualised analysis, while all the time stressing the religion of the assailants. In time

the problem emerged thus: to understand Western terrorists of the 1970s such as the German Red Army Faction or the Italian Red Brigades, one is invited to examine the societal conditions of post-war Germany and Italy, the ambient malaise in these countries 25 years after Nazism and fascism, and their relationship with their rebellious youth; to make sense of Al Qaeda or IS, one is asked to read the Qur'an.

Such voluntary matriculating in a school for the blind, as Tennessee Williams once put it poetically, is arresting and deserves emphasis as it is in effect a component of the problem at the root of the question of contemporary political violence. The public deployment of tokenism expertise on IS is itself a symptom of this lost analysis with at least four trends dominating the discourse on IS: impatient journalistic accounts, one-dimensional security expertise, ethereal Islamism exegesis and short-term think tank analysis. To varying degrees, these approaches share the following: the evidence used for the analysis is taken unquestionably from often unverifiable governmental statements; boastful statements by IS itself or 'found' documents are accepted at face value (one can only be amazed at the proclivity of these non-documenting-inclined groups to produce compulsively and lose regularly such materials, and indeed at the luck of the counter-terrorists in systematically recovering readable self-explanatory materials<sup>13</sup>); emotionalism is worn on the sleeve by analysts who are expected to be detached; sensationalism is the mode of communication; and analysis knows only two directions, that of rise or fall, victory or defeat, new or old. Who's-up-and-who's-down scorekeeping accounts of the rise of IS are, however, not sufficient to make sense of the incubating, asynchronous and dysrhythmic transformation of terrorism taking place at the hands of this group. Such 'rise' talk also locates explanations of violence in the stance of the Western observer who, atop the hill, scans the landscape for threats to his dominion. Can the subaltern re-strategise his or her violence? If he or she actually does, and visits it upon the Westerner's living room, as IS did in the extreme, then surely that larger shift in meaning is happening factually. Yet, time and again, willy-nilly, analysts and experts take us down the self-satisfied road of elevation of religious theatrics or demonisation of identity, with the ways of the *homo islamicus* observed with a magnifying glass, from Raqqa to the French suburbs. What matters is solely the materialisation of a religion- and identity-driven problem that needs to be seen as disappearing as soon as possible. The more this story proceeded monotonically, the

more its intellectual contradictions became visible as a matter of political violence dealt with minimally and peripherally by historians, political scientists and sociologists. In effect, media vigilantism, terrorism expert pronouncements and condescending interrogations of Islam and its long-awaited *aggiornamento* have joined hands to produce a non-history of one of the dominant forms of contemporary non-state violence.

Locating uncritically, the violence of IS in the religious mantle of the movement was the first and often only choice made by many observers. No matter how many facts piled up to demonstrate the political nature of the violence and the relevance of wider contexts (colonialism, post-colonialism, interventionism, authoritarianism, rebellion, armed conflicts), Muslim studies, or rather studies of Muslims, invariably remained the preferred locus of alleged explanation. This rising Muslimology (often with roots in works such as Raphael Patai's racist 1973 book *The Arab Mind*) took Orientalism to new dimensions. Beyond the imagined Muslim and the extrapolated ins and outs of Islamist jurisprudence (what Irfan Ahmad calls 'an over-legalisation of Islam and Shari'a'<sup>14</sup>) came two new categories: the reformed Muslim and the faux Muslim (and so inevitably too the Uncle Tom Muslim). Stunned in this way, or allowing themselves to be, international scholars were made to understand that thinking on Al Qaeda and IS should be limited to those exercises of dutifully, one-dimensionally compiling information and data demonstrating the group's violence, irrationality and dangerousness. Any effort to map the groups' historical significance beyond those confines ran the risk of being depicted as an exercise in *political* thinking – a peculiar value-judgement, we should note, seldom applied to work on other questions of international affairs. Engagement with the issue beyond these given narratives is often near-unrecognisable to many mainstream journalists (who need to translate it in the by-now-familiar vernacular of reporting on these entities as variably 'on the rise', 'on the retreat', 'adopting new tactics', 'developing new ways to finance themselves', 'kidnapping sexual slaves', 'using human shields', 'expanding foothold', etc.) and stigmatised intellectually or deemed controversial. Soon enough coloured as 'angry' (particularly if it is voiced from the South), critical analyses are next asked to offer solutions, lest their usefulness be lessened. Skip the diagnosis (we know it) – solutions please.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, if formulated – justice, state-building, international reciprocity – these are dismissed as unrealistic; the religion of pragmatism overtaking the discussion. Yet such side-stepping pronouncements are precisely the reproduction of a