

# NEW APPROACHES TO FEAR

## A PROGRESSIVE RESPONSE TO ISLAMIC STATE

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ARTICLE BY

**RICHARD  
MCNEIL-WILLSON**

The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – and subsequent IS-inspired attacks in Europe – has led to expanding counter-terror legislation which sacrifices the personal freedoms of citizens to safeguard national security. This approach has created a set of conditions which not only jeopardises the rights of citizens, but is both counter-productive and dangerous, supporting the stated objectives of Islamic State. A new course urgently needs to be charted.

**W**ith heightened concern over Islamic State attacks in Europe and the potential return of foreign fighters, counter-terrorism has expanded exponentially. It operates within a geopolitical context beset with fear and fast veering rightwards – with migrants, minorities, and disadvantaged groups regularly scapegoated by powerful media and an emboldened Far Right. This is most notably visible, amongst other examples, in Brexit's anti-immigration clarion call, and Donald Trump's recent 'Muslim' immigration ban, both justified by national security concerns. Progressive parties face a difficult and complex task when responding to Islamic State: they need to ensure an erudite response to the threat of 'terrorism' whilst understanding the repercussions that such responses may have on the lives of citizens.

In forming a response, it is important to explore the aims of Islamic State towards Europe and the credibility of the threat. But providing a detailed analysis of Islamic State is only half the process – we must also be brave enough to criticise counter-terrorism and be realistic in what should be achieved. In creating a more effective response, we must radically rethink the relationship between the twin concepts of security and civil liberties

– redefining the relationship between them not as antagonistic but, inversely, as interdependent.

## ISLAMIC STATE'S STRATEGY IN EUROPE – WHAT DOES IT WANT?

It is easy to dismiss the actions of Islamic State as irrational, the brutality of indiscriminate attacks too dangerous or zealous to be understood. However, important findings can be made by treating jihadi groups as strategic actors and we should look to understand Islamic State's strategy, exploring both their discourse and their organisation.

In examining their discourse, we turn to what is arguably the most prominent text in Islamic State doctrine, a publication widely circulated amongst members and credited with greatly influencing tactics: *The Management of Savagery* ('Idarat al-Tawahush'). Written by Abu Bakr Naji in 2004, it offers indications as to Islamic State's general approach to Europe, proffering three conditions for a sustainable Islamic state, or caliphate (دولة الخلافة), within the current political world: first, the West must attack the Middle East directly; second, an Islamic state must engage in tactical terror attacks; and third, Western failure to prevent these must be exploited. These three goals – distilled into a process of *escalation*, *insecurity*, and *exploitation* – can roughly be understood as the basis of Islamic State's strategy in Europe.

## I. ESCALATION

The first key aim of Islamic State in Europe is to encourage the escalation of direct military intervention, provoking the West into a military response through the carrying out of 'terrorist' actions in Europe. Escalation may seem counter-intuitive, especially as Islamic State is losing strategic power in the Middle East. Strategically, however, 'terrorist'-style tactics have often been used by groups facing diminishing opportunities: when insurgent organisations lose territory, terrorism becomes a way of regaining momentum, with attacks on civilians cheaper, easier and just as politically effective. Constant insecurity in Europe, it is hoped, increases calls for military intervention.

This manipulation of the West into an intensified air war or ground invasion against Islamic State would be costly, unpopular, and yield counterproductive blowback and instability. This is shown in previous interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya – and jihadi organisations are aware that the presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil enabled the creation of al-Qaeda. Furthermore, the escalation of military intervention supports Islamic State's narrative that the West is engaged in aggressive and expansionist acts against the Islamic World, and allows European states to be portrayed as 'Judeo-Christian Crusaders', whilst Islamic State become both the heir, and answer, to historical grievances of Muslim communities.

## II. INSECURITY

In order to ensure such a military escalation, *The Management of Savagery* encourages the creation of insecurity in the West through the following two actions: first, ‘qualitative, medium operations’ – by which it specifically references the attacks in Bali and Djerba, and by which we could also understand the *Charlie Hebdo* and Bataclan attacks; and second, operations ‘small in size or effect’ – often referred to in the media as ‘Islamic State-inspired’ or ‘lone-wolf’ attacks, whereby individuals declare allegiance before committing seemingly random attacks. In marked contrast to other jihadist groups, Islamic State takes a decidedly ‘hands-off’ approach, encouraging decentralised, disparate groups to take action with little or no guidance.

Such attacks are difficult to legislate against and impossible to predict, designed to place the West “in a constant state of apprehension”. This approach shows a complex understanding of how to ‘game’ Western media, politicians, and public opinion into adopting an increasingly militarised position: the publication states that, “although the blow of the rod may strike a (single) Crusader head, its spread and

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escalation will have an effect for a long period of time”. Singular attacks have the purpose of demonstrating the far-reaching strength of Islamic State and – they hope – will encourage “crowds drawn from the masses to fly to the regions which we manage” joining the caliphate. This represents an extensive propaganda effort – evidenced by hours of slick propaganda – focused on “particularly the youth” in order to create a sustainable state-building project.

## III. EXPLOITATION

Islamic State’s final aim is an exploitation of the previous goals of military escalation and European insecurity to highlight the weakness and moral bankruptcy of the West. It aims to exploit this by taking aim at what has been termed as the ‘grey zone’ in European society, heightening divisions within and against multicultural states so as to realise a ‘clash of civilisations’ condition – a binary struggle between (those Islamic State considers) Muslims and the rest. By encouraging terrorist attacks, Islamic State hopes to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment and trigger violence against minorities, thus creating an escalating spiral of mutual alienation, distrust, hatred, and collective revenge.

Following acts of terrorism, there is clear evidence of upswings in Islamophobic attacks, with large spikes in anti-Muslim activity documented following the murder of Lee Rigby and the 2015 Paris attacks. This helps to normalise anti-Muslim sentiment within society, weaving Islamophobia into the everyday spaces that European Muslims navigate. An increasing prevalence of anti-Muslim and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric is developing in concurrence with this, with rising far-right groups including the Dutch Partij Voor de Vrijheid, Denmark's Dansk Folkeparti, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, France's Front National, and the United Kingdom Independence Party – all of which propound an alarmist discourse framing Muslims as the vanguard of a hostile 'other'. Such language is increasingly thrust into the political mainstream, leading to the securitisation of minority communities, proposals to deport Muslims, and the problematisation of 'Islamic' identity markers.

By encouraging Western aggression, the securitisation of Muslims, and the stoking of anti-Muslim animus, Islamic State aims to recruit supporters and intimidate, disrupt, and demoralise European societies. This approach is effective, with Islamic State media delighting in provoking European states into "a wave of panic and intensified security measures" in order "to turn the world into a series of wildernesses in which only those under our rule enjoy security".

## **BUILDING A RESPONSE**

When examining Islamic State's aims and the orthodox security response, it becomes clear that current responses are failing to effectively challenge the narrative set by Islamic State. In response, progressive parties should look to develop an approach built on the following three foundational statements: first, Islamic State look scarier than they actually are, and we should treat them as less powerful and less coherent than we do now; second, counter-terrorism is, on the other hand, scarier than we think it is, and it's time we took the threat from counter-terrorism more seriously to understand how to make it work; and third, security against Islamic State does not, and should not, involve the erosion of the civil and political rights of the citizen; rather, a more efficient response – and one that takes account of the society within which we wish to live – is to be found through the explicit bolstering of these rights, particularly towards minority communities.

### **I. ISLAMIC STATE: MORE BARK THAN BITE**

It is easy to be worried about Islamic State, especially when only examining their rhetoric, as many commentators tend to. However, a closer look at the organisational dynamics of Islamic State reveals limitations. For instance, their structure reveals different objectives at different levels of hierarchy. Whilst the majority

of media and policy focuses on jihadi foreign fighters, much of the organisational spine and leadership of Islamic State is comprised of Saddam-era, ex-Ba'ath Party officers. These have benefitted Islamic State, endowing them with effective military tactics, battlefield discipline, and links to local tribal leaders. However, these members are largely 'pragmatic' actors, involved in Islamic State due to local power struggles and anti-Iraqi Government grievances. Their alignment and their tactics have little to do with any desire for a global jihad, in which they have neither an interest nor a stake. Thus, viewing Islamic State through their propaganda – which portrays them as unified in a jihadist-eschatological cause – is misleading, as Islamic State's interest in Europe is more cursory and fragmented than is projected.

Furthermore, Islamic State's involvement in terrorist attacks in Europe is questionable. In 'outsourcing' violence, the organisation's participation and influence becomes limited: of those involved in European attacks, only a minority travelled to Syria as foreign fighters, whilst the majority were drawn to act through petty crime networks, individual grievances, or mental health issues. In fact, the danger of returning foreign fighters has been critiqued as overstated, and research suggests returnees are more likely to return disillusioned or battle fatigued than interested in conducting attacks. Those that are drawn into terrorism

do so because Islamic State are seen within mainstream discourse as the embodiment of anti-Western action. By turning Islamic State into a 'bogeyman' of the West, we give vast amounts of undeserved credence to the notion that it can strike at will, has a coherent strategy, and credit them more prestige than they deserve.

## II. COUNTER-TERRORISM: THE REAL THREAT?

Secondly, the continual expansion of counter-terrorism is a problematic response to Islamic State as it is ineffective and erodes individual liberties – in fact, it is ineffective *because* of its negation of rights. Simply in terms of resources, counter-terror programmes have seen vast amounts of resources poured into prevention – yet, the threat is supposedly greater than before. In the UK, for instance, funding on counter-terror increased from £2.5 billion in 2007-8 to £3.5 billion in 2010-11; and in 2017, amid large-scale cuts, Prime Minister Theresa May promised an extra £500 million to counter-terrorism. Meanwhile, the threat remains 'severe', as it has since 2014.

Alongside a high financial cost, civil freedoms have been dealt a significant blow, with fear of terrorism exploited by politicians as a way of "ensuring re-election, silencing their critics, controlling dissent, creating a more docile public, distracting the public from more

entrenched and difficult social problems”, as well as ensuring the creation of a number of other projects unrelated to terrorism, “such as the introduction of identity cards, restrictions on immigration, increasing financial regulation, and limiting civil liberties”<sup>1</sup>. Such governmental legislative changes are generally framed as temporary means of tackling immediate threats, yet security laws are rarely, if ever, revoked – as seen in Northern Ireland, Germany, and in France’s indefinite state of emergency.

Critics state that terrorism does not pose a threat sufficient to justify the kinds of legislation currently being enacted. What is more, current counter-terrorism practices often pose more of a threat to the individual physical security and well-being of citizens than terrorism, limiting and securitising forms of political engagement, dissent, and activism. As such, “we should fear counter-terrorism more than we should fear terrorism”<sup>2</sup>.

### III. CHAMPIONING – NOT ERODING – CIVIL RIGHTS

We can respond best by re-orientating our response: security against Islamic State should not mean the dilution of civil rights and the militarisation of society. Rather, in championing rights, we make counter-terror responses more effective by limiting Islamic State’s ability to incite governments and political forces to scapegoat Muslims and minorities. The best answer to Islamic State is to demonstrate that Europe can credibly be a common home, by drawing upon concepts of what sort of community we want. This is not utopian thinking but a necessary strategic response. Take, for instance, the large numbers fleeing persecution for Europe within the ‘refugee crisis’. This migration undermines Islamic State’s state-building credibility as well as their narrative of the Western oppressor – so they have responded by shifting the narrative to security.

1 Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, Jeroen Gunning & Lee Jarvis, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan: London (2011), p. 141

2 Jessica Wolfendale, ‘Terrorism, Security and the Threat of Counterterrorism’, in *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, Vol. 30 (2007), p. 75

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By treating refugees as potential enemies rather than common allies, we become complicit in Islamic State's narrative, recasting the 'crisis' not as a clear demonstration of the caliphate's intrinsic dysfunction, but as an unsubstantiated extension of its threat.

We must respond by rejecting the simplistic narrative of a 'clash of civilisations', holding to account policy-makers that eliminate the 'grey zone', and pushing back against rhetoric that securitises Muslim communities. For instance, whilst Matteo Salvini of Italy's far-right party Lega Nord cited the 2015 Cologne assaults as proof that Islam is incompatible with European values, German Green politician Simone Peter took the lead in challenging racial profiling, questioning the proportionately and legality of such actions within a highly racialised context. In rejecting the securitisation of Muslim communities, we reject the problematic racialisation of 'terrorism'. We must also challenge media and politicians who reflexively ascribe all attacks to Islamic State, often without evidence of involvement. Such attribution makes Islamic State look more threatening and coordinated, and gives the organisation airtime, something which, in the immediacy, provokes anti-Islamic sentiment and, longer-term, advances Islamophobic responses. In protecting minority rights, however, we assuage grievances and delegitimise Islamic State support, more so than current approaches are managing.

Progressive politicians and parties must shift the narrative away from an all-encompassing security. Security and freedom are not mutually exclusive concepts, and treating them as such creates easy propaganda wins for Islamic State, alienating minorities and militarising society. Conventional security wisdom, as such, is counter-productive and acts to enhance the threat. Responding to terrorism from an inverse viewpoint, in which we champion hard-fought rights and support those most vulnerable within European society, offers us a far more efficient and sustainable approach to the threat posed by Islamic State.



#### **RICHARD MCNEIL-WILLSON**

is a British Research Council doctoral researcher at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, and visiting researcher at Istituto di Scienze Umane e Sociali, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy. He specialises in researching the organisational development of 'radical' and anti-state social movements, protests and demonstration tactics, and critical explorations of securitised forms of governance, such as counter-terror programmes.

