

Guest Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue

Constructions of Terrorism: Confronting the Challenges to Global Security Created By Daesh/Islamic State

by Scott Englund and Michael Stohl

The articles in this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* represent a multi-disciplined, concentrated effort to address the new challenges presented by the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by the Arabic *Daesh*. These articles were first presented at the Stimson Center at a conference co-sponsored by TRENDS Research and Advisory, an independent research group based in Abu Dhabi, UAE; the Orfalea Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara; and the Stimson Center, Washington, D.C. The articles address three broad sets of questions: First, what, if anything, sets the Islamic State apart from other terrorist organizations, and are there analogous groups that can better inform our analysis and policy making? Secondly, what is the true measure of the threat that the Islamic State poses to global peace and security and how does this differ from other organizations and threats? Finally, what motivates the Islamic State, how do others perceive those motives, and how can we best respond to them? Combined, these present a thorough and rigorous approach to understanding a complex phenomenon.

The first two articles by Craig Whiteside, and Scott Englund and Michael Stohl offer new perspectives on the Islamic State using a comparative approach, drawing parallels between the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations to which it is not often compared. The authors argue that the Islamic State is best understood as a social movement or political revolutionary group that employs terrorism as just one tactic among a variety of tools at its disposal. In the first, Whiteside compares the Islamic State to the Vietnamese Communists in a revolutionary warfare framework and makes a causal argument that the Islamic State's defeat of the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement in Iraq was the key to its successful establishment of control of Sunni areas and the mobilization of its population for support. This research provides insight into the return of a powerful method of insurgency as well as a glimpse into the vast clandestine network that provides the strength of the Islamic State movement. In the second, Englund and Stohl compare the Islamic State to the *Sendero Luminoso* (or Shining Path) of Peru, to help understand the forces that gave rise to them, sustained them, and, in the case of the *Sendero Luminoso*, ultimately led to its demise. Through this comparative analysis, they argue that understanding the Islamic State as a social movement, not simply as a terrorist organization, allows us to contextualize its violence within patterns evinced by other violent social movements, with the ultimate aim of developing effective plans to counter the threat it poses.

Next, John Mueller and Mark Stewart throw cold water on the hysteria that often marks the public perception of the Islamic State—hysteria that is fanned by official statements and media reporting. Mueller and Stewart thus challenge the prevailing construction of the Islamic State by flatly answering in the negative whether it is a serious challenge to global security. They argue that although the group presents a threat to the people under its control and contributes to instability in the Middle East, it scarcely presents a challenge to *global* security. They conclude that, as with al-Qaeda, the unwarranted fear and alarm ISIS has generated around the world is likely to persist even if it is effectively extinguished as a physical force in the Middle East.

In the next article, Benjamin Smith, Andrea Figueroa, *et al*, quantitatively compare media representations of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda and find a connection between the perceived motives of a group and the perceived organizational structures of that group. Further, they find that because Daesh is often framed by the media as being an existential threat that there is an inherent disconnect between public perceptions of the threat posed by Daesh and the response to Daesh being pursued by the Administration. This has resulted in a consistent lack of support for the policies pursued by the Obama administration.

Next, Professor Richard Falk turns to the choices that are often made in crafting and implementing counter-terrorism policy. Though international law traditionally limits the application of lethal force by states against others, a militarist response to terrorism in the 21st Century has been dominant, and has largely failed. Falk suggest that old international legal standards may be inadequate to address contemporary terror threats by themselves, but rejecting those normative constraints is not justified either. A mixed approach is called for, one that allows decisive action to maintain the peace, protect people from violence, and preserve the best of international legal traditions that constrain the use of force.

Finally, in a Special Correspondence to *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Clark McCauley offers a thought-provoking vision for the Middle East after the demise of the Islamic State. He begins by taking a social psychological approach to discover the motives behind Islamic State action, suggesting that the conflict is essentially ethnic and is evidence of the emotional response to humiliation, which is the combination of anger and shame. To ameliorate this humiliation is to remove the underlying emotion that prompts support for the Islamic State. He then proposes a radical solution that effectively re-draws the political geography of the Middle East.

Cumulatively, this diverse approach to the Islamic State has produced a multi-faceted image of a confounding complex threat. How to respond to the violence engaged in and inspired by the Islamic State has risen to the top of agendas at international institutions, is raised during domestic political debates in many states, and dominates news media constructions of the contemporary terror threat. These contributions from many disciplinary perspectives combine to offer a set of useful and interesting insights into the phenomenon of the Islamic State and the threat it represents to the peoples and states within the region as well as globally. They also demonstrate that how we perceive the threat constructs much of our preferred responses to it and suggests that we should be much more reflective of those perceptions and the solutions designed to confront them.

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