

**"Narratives of (non)intervention: Syria from the humanitarian to the
terror lens"**

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Course "Lessons (not) learnt in Afghanistan"

Taught by Robert Kluivjer at Sciences Po

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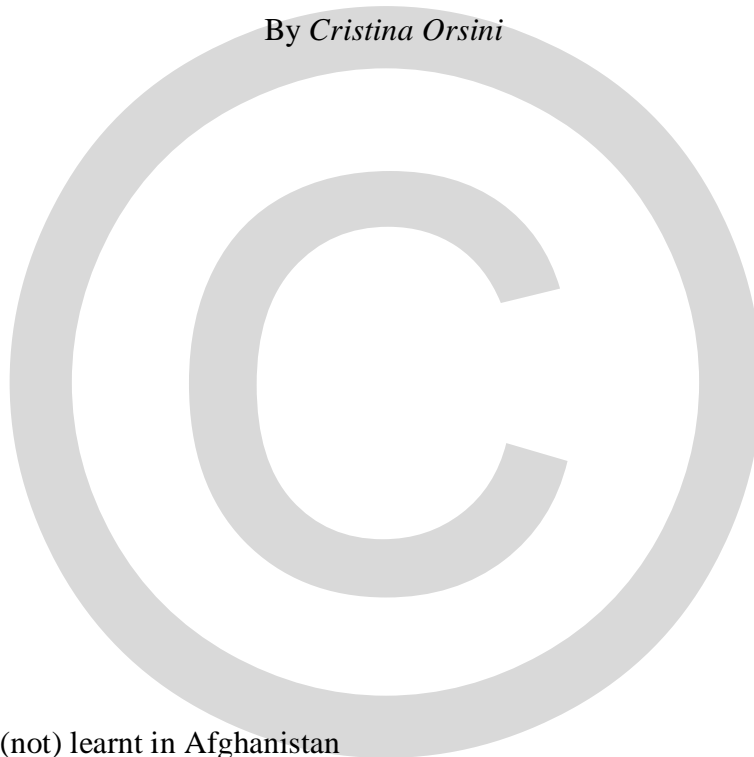
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I. Introduction

On 29 August 2013, the British Prime Minister David Cameron summoned Parliament to discuss the possibility of military intervention in Syria against the Assad regime. In the next two years, British Members of Parliament (MPs) were summoned two more times to vote on military intervention in the same region - but against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While the option of conducting airstrikes against Assad was rejected, they were given the green light against ISIS. This shift in British policies, mirroring a similar shift in the United States (U.S.) and in “the west” in general, was accompanied by a growing interest in ISIS, as media articles and whole books on the lines of “ISIS explained” “ISIS exposed” “How to defeat ISIS” proliferated.

At the same time, the danger for western journalists and researchers to travel to Syria and Iraq, and particularly to territories held by ISIS, means that most of this coverage has been based on ISIS’ own propaganda (Williams, 2016). This propaganda has become the very subject of much scholarly attention to understand ISIS’ religious ideology or its strategic use of social media to attract new recruits. However, there appears to be a dearth of research on the effects of such propaganda on Western media and political discourse and, in turn, on Western policies.

In this context, the aim of this research is to analyse how dominant narratives on the Syrian civil war have changed over time, consequently affecting the ways in which Western powers have responded (or not) to the situation in Syria. How has ISIS gained centrality in the Western outlook towards Syria (and Iraq)? What are the consequences of an ISIS-dominated Western discourse?

It will be argued that the visibility granted to ISIS in Western discourse along with the frames that are used to depict it have refocused the interpretative scheme through which the Syrian conflict is seen, talked about, and acted upon from Assad to ISIS. The threat posed by ISIS has been constructed through the repetition of images taken from ISIS’ own propaganda which have a highly emotional appeal. In turn, this has favoured a view of the situation in Syria through a lens of terror, building a rationale for intervention.

The above-mentioned changes in the United Kingdom’s response to the Syrian civil war will be used as a case study. Specifically, a first-hand analysis of the British MP’s debates on intervention in Syria and Iraq will provide insight on existing narratives. This will be enriched by public statements as well as news media articles that illustrate relevant narratives.¹ The case of the UK has

¹ The analysed media sources include major British media such as The Guardian, The Economist, the Independent, or BCC reports.

been chosen because it provides a clear a example of policy changes that corresponded with a narrative shift.

II. Theoretical framework

The following analysis departs from the theoretical assumption that social and political reality is constructed: it is defined by its constant and mutually influencing interaction with how people look at and understand reality (e.g. Weldes, 1999; Wodak, 2009). The way in which people talk about and represent an issue creates a framework for its interpretation, which, in turn, limits the array of possibilities for dealing with such issue (Doty, 1993). More concretely, in the case of violent conflict, the “interpretative scheme” through which the conflict is understood can play a role in the elaboration of the policies that are considered in response (Friis, 2015). For example, a specific interpretative scheme can enable decision-makers to think of an entity in terms of “an enemy” that needs to be destroyed. Discourse, thus, can have very concrete political consequences.

The concept of framing in communication theory helps to understand how interpretative schemes are formed: it is the repetition of some aspects of reality that makes a particular interpretation of the issue more “easily comprehensible and memorable” (Merz, 2015). This does not mean that the information that is inconsistent with the dominant interpretation is fully eliminated, but it is generally less visible. Visibility, in turn, tends to be granted to images (or “frames”) that resonate with the public’s existing cultural references, those that are able to trigger reactions, interest, and emotions (ibid). In the context of violent conflict, framing can have an “adversarial” function, as the enemy can be constructed by association with concepts that carry a “pejorative” and “condemnatory” connotation.

In this context, the importance of analysing how the Syrian conflict is portrayed in the British discourse derives from the fact that the ways in which a conflict is represented and talked about affects the way in which it is understood both by the public and by decision makers. The interpretative framework through which a conflict is understood, then, influences politics and the decision of whether to intervene and how to do so.

III. Syria as a humanitarian crisis

The first time David Cameron asked the British Parliament to consider military action in Syria it was the end of August 2013. Since the protests against the Syrian regime in the spring of 2011, the situation in Syria had deeply transformed, from a popular revolution to a full blown civil war. In the first year of escalating regime crackdown on the opposition, in the summer of 2012, Obama had set a “red line”: the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would change Obama’s

“calculus” for a military intervention (White House, 2012). This brought chemical weapons at the centre of attention in the western discourse on Syria. Indeed, it was after the Syrian regime allegedly used chemical weapons against its population in a major chemical attack on the suburbs of Damascus on 21 August 2013 that the U.K. and western powers seriously considered the option of military intervention against Assad.

Indeed, the chemical attack of 21 August was widely reported by western media and it quickly triggered political debates on the possibility of intervention. Previous chemical attacks had already been reported, and UN inspectors were on the ground for investigation. However, the attacks of 21 August were of much bigger proportions, making it easier to point the finger at the Assad regime’s chemical capability.

Analysing the British MPs’ debate and the media coverage of the attack it emerges that the situation in Syria was then primarily seen through the interpretative framework of “a humanitarian crisis”. Indeed, the military action proposed by Cameron’s motion “relates solely to efforts to alleviate the humanitarian suffering”, it is “focused on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria’s chemical weapons” (House of Commons, 2013).

The rationale for intervention put forward by Cameron was based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine along with the legal argument that the attack was a moral and legal breach to international law: “there is the 1925 post-first world war agreement that these weapons are morally reprehensible, so do we want to try to maintain the law?” (House of Commons, 2013, Cameron).² Despite moral references, the legal dimension of the rationale for intervention, coupled with the centrality of the UN investigation, centred the discourse on “evidence”: the word “legal” and the word “evidence” were respectively repeated 34 and 47 times in the course of a 2-hour-long parliamentary debate (ibid). In fact, the motion presented by Cameron clarifies that for Britain to take military action “a further vote of the House of Commons will take place” after a final report by the UN investigation team in Damascus at the time (ibid). To complement the dry language of law and to mobilize his public emotionally in favour of his motion, Cameron repeatedly referred to the “sickening human suffering” caused by chemical weapons and invited the MPs to watch the several videos available online documenting such pain (ibid). Interestingly, however, Cameron himself mentions these “95 different videos - horrific videos” as “*documenting the evidence*” that chemical weapons were used (ibid).

Emotional responses may have been triggered by major news media, which covered the attack publishing videos of people “gasping for breath and convulsing” and pictures of bodies aligned on the ground (e.g. CNN, 21 August 2013; The Daily Mail, 2013; The Guardian, 21 August 2013). Despite

² At the time of the debate, Syria had not signed the Convention on Chemical Weapons (CCW), the main international instrument in this regard. Syria, however, signed and ratified the convention on 12 September 2013. Before the ratification, the legal case against Syria was mainly being articulated in terms of a breach of customary law.

the capacity of such images to create outrage in the public, the detailed reporting of the suffering of the victims often employed a scientific, medical language outlining the symptoms that can *prove* the use of chemical weapons: “we received 60 cases [...] patients who were vomiting and had high temperatures, breathing problems, limb stiffness and were in comas (The Guardian, 21 August 2013). The focus on evidence, central for the formal attribution of blame to the Assad regime in legal terms, thus permeated the media coverage of the chemical weapons attacks as well.

Lastly, Assad’s regime was characterized as a “brutal” “dreadful regime” that needs to be deterred from carrying out “dreadful actions” (House of Commons, 2013). This frame, however, failed to mobilize support for intervention. Firstly, by the time of the vote, the enthusiasm of the “Arab spring” in terms of an awakening of the people against brutal dictators had partly vanished, as the situation in Syria had been defined as a full-blown “civil war” by the UN already in 2012. Thus, in line with Assad’s own propaganda, the conflict was increasingly seen as sectarian rather than a democratic struggle against dictatorship (Galina, 2015). Secondly, the “brutal dictator” discourse proposed by Cameron inexplicitly reflected the narrative of “deterring” a “rogue state” that had become dominant during Bush’s presidencies and that had led the U.K. to participate in the intervention in Iraq in 2003, which by 2013 was largely regarded as a negative experience.

Furthermore, the rogue state paradigm that had been used by previous political leaders as rationale for intervention is, according to Homolar (2011), formed through the combination of three characteristics: gross human rights violations, the capacity or willingness to use Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and the sponsoring of terrorism. While the first two characteristics were crucial in Cameron’s view of Assad, the terror element seems to be missing - regardless of the reality on the ground. In fact, the word “terror” or “terrorism” is used only three times in the British Parliament on 29 August 2013, and never in relation to Assad. On the contrary, terrorism is mentioned by the opponents of intervention as a potential negative consequence of air strikes on a Muslim population that risks to become radicalized against “the West” (House of Commons, 29 August 2013).

Overall, the above-mentioned framing of the situation in Syria as a humanitarian and legal crisis does not provide an exhaustive account of the British discourse on intervention against Assad. Yet, the analysis shows how this discourse had a limited emotional charge that did not mobilize the strong condemnatory connotations that play a crucial role in the construction of an enemy in the context of violent conflict (Merz, 2015). This may help to understand why the British Parliament did not allow military action despite relative agreement on its legal rationale.

IV. Syria through the lens of terror

With the further escalation of the Syrian civil war, the framing of the Syrian conflict through the humanitarian paradigm gradually started to be infiltrated by a preoccupation with the rise of jihadist groups, and specifically of what is now known as ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State (IS) or Daesh.

Indeed, along with Assad's labelling of the opposition as "terrorists", Western media and politicians started to look at Syria through the fear that the war would allow for an empowerment of terrorist groups of the kind of Al-Qaida (Merz, 2014).

The crucial moment that ultimately refocused the West from Assad to ISIS was the publication of videos depicting the beheadings of Western citizens, starting with the decapitation of the American journalist James Foley in August 2014 (Friis, 2015). These beheadings, gradually accompanied by attacks against Western targets that were attributed to ISIS (.e.g. the shooting of British tourists in Tunisia on 26 June 2015; the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015) shifted the Western interpretative scheme of the Syrian conflict from a humanitarian crisis to a terrorist problem - to "our" terrorist problem (ibid). Within this new interpretative scheme, the British Prime minister summoned the Parliament on two occasions to call for military intervention against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria. On 26 October 2014 - after the first beheading of a British citizen- the British parliament voted in favour of airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq; and on 2 December 2015 - following attacks in Paris- airstrikes were extended to ISIS in Syria.³

The change in interpretative framework of the Syrian conflict in which military action was decided was enabled by two interlinked processes: ISIS' visibility in the Western discourse on Syria increased exponentially; and the framing of the terrorist organization through strong moral images allowed for the successful construction of an adversarial framing.

a. Shifting the focus: ISIS' visibility

First of all, ISIS came to dominate the discourse on Syria, as the attention of politicians, scholars, and the public alike gradually focused on its emergence. Although relatively invisible in the years of its formation, by 2015 Williams can rightfully state that ISIS "trends on global research engines" (2016). If this can be a measure of anything, the number of hits for "Syria ISIS" on Google are almost double than those for "Syria Assad", an enormous difference when considering that "Assad" could be both Bachar and Hafez, the men who have been ruling Syria for the last 35 years. This may be partly attributable to the fact that ISIS dedicates many resources to its media branch to ensure its online visibility. Yet, the fact that a university library contains approximately six times more documents relating to the search "ISIS" than to the search "Assad" clearly points at an

³ Although the focus of this research is the framing of the Syrian conflict, it can be argued that, by the time of the parliamentary vote of 26 October 2014, the border between Iraq and Syria had become blurred, to the point that the presence of ISIS in Iraq could not be distinguished from its actions in Syria. In fact, the framing of ISIS in Syria in the parliamentary debate of 2015 is strictly linked to how ISIS was already being framed in the context of the vote on the airstrikes in Iraq. The focus on Iraq was a strategy employed by Cameron to win the vote given internal political balance. Furthermore, the legal case for airstrikes within the Iraqi territory was easier to make on the basis of the Iraqi government's consent to the airstrikes. In the debate in the House of Commons of October 2014, however, MPs often refer to Syria.

exceptional Western interest in this organisation.⁴ According to Williams (2016) this growing attention can be understood in terms of a self-perpetuating cycle in which news on ISIS create more curiosity and demand for more news, so that even the “casual news consumer” cannot avoid to come across ISIS.

According to Friis (2015), the videos of beheadings of Western targets strongly contributed to ISIS’ visibility in the Western discourse on Syria. In fact, after an initial resistance towards the publication of “graphic” material, Western media circulated part of the videos or still images, to the point that the image of a Western man (or ally) wearing orange clothes and kneeling next to a ninja-looking man holding a knife has become “the predominant visual icon” of the war against ISIS (ibid, p. 733). However, the shocking potential of a beheading captured on video is not enough to ensure visibility in the media: as Friis points out, the online availability of videos of beheading perpetrated by a diverse array of actors (often including amateurs’ videos of state-mandated executions in Saudi Arabia⁵) greatly exceeds the few beheadings reported on Western media. Online visibility does not equate with political and public visibility (ibid). Why, then, are ISIS’ beheadings so visible in the West?

While this question could be the topic of an entire book, it is interesting to point at a few possible explanations. Firstly, ISIS’ beheadings are strategically made and filmed by ISIS in order for them to be seen: they are an integral part of its propaganda. These videos are filmed for Western audiences, as they recall Western cultural references, such as the visual imaginary of Hollywood films and video games along with the orange suits of Guantanamo bay. Additionally, despite politicians’ insistence on their brutality, the videos strike a careful balance between shocking gruesome elements and a “derealisation of horror”: the graphic element is carefully kept at the end of the video, it is easily erasable, so that it can be digestible for Western audiences living in a protective “virtual reality” (Zizek, 2002, p.8). Secondly, the crucial difference between ISIS’ video beheadings and other videos available online is that the victims filmed by ISIS are American and British citizens, and thus more “publicly grievable” in the West (Butler, 2009, p.75). Public grief, such as the references made by British MPs in relation to their citizens who had fallen victims of ISIS, in turn, provides the discourse with an emotional charge that may favour an interventionist approach.

Regardless of the explanations for ISIS’ visibility, the public focus on ISIS can be problematic in so far as it may obscure other aspects of the situation on the ground. In fact, as argued by Friis (2015), the visibility given to ISIS’ beheadings created boundaries between the violence that is seen (perpetrated by ISIS, mostly against Western targets), and the violence that is not seen (the one

⁴ For example, the search “ISIS” in the online Sciences Po library gives 123,846 results (without counting the searches for “Islamic State” or “Daesh”); the search “Assad” has 20,851 results.

⁵ Beheading executions in Saudi Arabia are reported to be increasingly growing: see, for example, Human Rights Watch (2014). Saudi Arabia: Surge in executions. [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/21/saudi-arabia-surge-executions>] or Aljazeera (10 November 2015). Saudi Arabia’s 2015 beheadings [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/21/saudi-arabia-surge-executions>]

perpetrated by all other parties in the conflict). This does not mean that the violence perpetrated by the Assad regime went unreported. Yet, in “media saturated societies” (Friis, 2015, p.731), growing preoccupation on ISIS’ violence implied a reduced preoccupation for Assad’s violence, which would not be explained by numbers.⁶ This might have played in favour of Assad not only by “cleaning” his image in the Western imaginary, but, according to Henin (2015), also by providing Assad with a window of opportunity to carry out attacks against civilians with less exposure whenever a beheading video was published or an attack attributed to ISIS. Ultimately, then, this may have damaged the safety of Syrian civilians.

b. ISIS as the ultimate evil and Syria through moral dichotomies

While ISIS’s visibility allowed it to be the very focus of Western perceptions of the Syrian conflict, analysing the main characteristics through which ISIS was framed, and the implied consequences of this characterizations, helps to further understand the interpretative frame in which ISIS was successfully constructed as an enemy against which military action was mandated by the British parliament.

Firstly, the “terrorist” label, which holds one of the strongest pejorative connotations in adversarial framing (Merz, 2015), was not mobilized in the framing of Assad in 2013; while there is a rather undisputable agreement that ISIS is a terrorist organization. In the analyzed parliamentary debates on ISIS, the words “terror” or “terrorism” appear 36 times in 2014 and 53 times in 2015 (House of Commons, 2014 and 2015). More importantly, ISIS is portrayed as a terrorist organization that directly threatens the U.K. and the West as a whole: in Cameron’s words we face a fundamental threat to our security” (House of Commons, 2015), “not a threat on the far side of the world [but one that has] a declared and proven determination to attack our country and our people” (House of Commons, 2014). In the context of the militarized understanding of terrorism of the “war on terror”, characterising ISIS as a terrorist threat implies giving it a military solution (Dam, 2015).

On the one hand, the perception of ISIS as a direct threat is fostered by the previously discussed visibility granted to ISIS’ attacks on Western targets (which by 2015 also included the Paris attacks). On the other hand, it hides an assumption of ISIS’ strength, of a capability to threaten “the streets of Britain” (House of Commons, 2014). This perceived strength is twofold: it is the ability to conquer territory (and thus military strength on the ground), and the ability to “radicalise” Western youth with a “poisonous ideology” (ibid).

Estimating ISIS’ strength, however, can prove a difficult task. As fewer and fewer journalists report from Syria and Iraq, much of what we know about ISIS is based on the repetition of

⁶ Estimates of the number of deaths caused by the Assad regime and by ISIS vary greatly, also because of the objective difficulty of carrying out such a count. However, even the most conservative estimates would find that the deaths caused by the Assad regime exceed those caused by the ISIS (e.g. Henin, 2015, p.110).

information, at times coming from ISIS' own propaganda (Williams, 2016). In this context, the inherent risk is that rumours can be presented as facts (Dam, 2015) and the threat posed by ISIS can be exaggerated along with ISIS' exaggeration of its own strength in its victory narratives. For example, ISIS has been reported to be close to taking the cities of Erbil and Baghdad (Henin, 2015), or to have conquered the Libyan city of Derna (Williams, 2016). While this information was later debunked, it is the repetition of the initial news that often stayed in the public imaginary. Similarly, ISIS' threat "in the street of Britain" may be exaggerated by ISIS' visibility in news media that call out for ISIS whenever a criminal act is committed (Henin, 2015, p.229).

ISIS is not only framed as a growing terrorist threat; it is an "evil organization" of a "uniquely evil nature" committing "evil acts" on the basis of "an evil death cult" (e.g. House of Commons, 2014 and 2015). This labelling goes well beyond the condemnatory potential of the word "terrorist" in the construction of an adversarial framework; it qualifies the enemy in absolute moral terms. Central to this framing is, again, the act of beheading, which comes to symbolise a violence that is unnecessarily "gruesome", "barbaric", "horrendous" (House of Commons, 2014). Further exemplifying these views, an American journalist goes as far as arguing how beheading is the most immoral way of killing (Brooks, 4 September 2014). In addition, with the destruction of ancient cultural heritage at the hand of ISIS, moral condemnation was paired with a portrayal of ISIS as a force against civilisation in the most general terms.

This use of moral condemnatory frames constructed dichotomies of evil/good, barbaric/civilized, inhuman/human, which contribute to the moral justification and legitimisation of military intervention: when what is fought is the ultimate evil, military intervention becomes a "moral duty." Moreover, the "evil" frame put on ISIS can foster a reading of the whole situation on the ground in terms of evil/good dichotomies. In the context of a military intervention in which the interveners look for a side to support, this risks to favour a simplistic view of forces on the grounds in terms of good/bad, moderates/extremists, friends/enemies. When Cameron talks about "70,000 Syrian opposition fighters who do not belong to extremist groups and with whom we can co-ordinate", he is interpreting local struggles in purely ideological terms. The risk of oversimplification becomes evident when a former American captive in Syria tells how he was given by the Free Syrian Army (which would classify among the moderates in Cameron's classification) to the Al-Nusra front (the equivalent of Al-Qaida in Syria, which would certainly fall under the "extremist" category), which was in turn fighting ISIS over the control of local oil resources (Padnos, 2014). In other words, as exemplified by Gopal's book "No good man among the living" (2014), friends/enemy categories are much less clear cut than military strategies of picking sides tend to assume.

The framing of ISIS in terms of "evil" is also associated to its characterisation as an organisation "made up of murderous psychopaths", who kill for "perversion" in name of a "nihilistic" ideology (House of Commons, 2014 and 2015). In this interpretation, ISIS' violence is seen in isolation from the context of armed conflict in which it is perpetrated, and thus presented as purely

irrational. In this context, Friis (2015) points at how mainstream Western media only show excerpts of ISIS' beheading videos, taking out the retaliation theme that would attribute a political rationale of purposeful violence to the beheading (Friis, 2015).

The risk of confining ISIS to an "inexplicable evil" is that it can prevent attempts at gaining an in-depth understanding of the conflict, which is indispensable for elaborating sound responses (ibid). This can become even more problematic when this perceived inexplicability, paired with moral condemnations, creates an atmosphere in which proposing alternative interpretations can be dismissed as apologetic for terrorism (Zizek, 2002, p.38; Jones, 2015). The public debate preceding the U.K. vote on military action in Syria is symptomatic of this: as the Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn described Cameron's motion as a "bomb now, talk later" approach; Cameron responded by labelling him as a "terrorist sympathiser" (Watt, 2 December 2015).

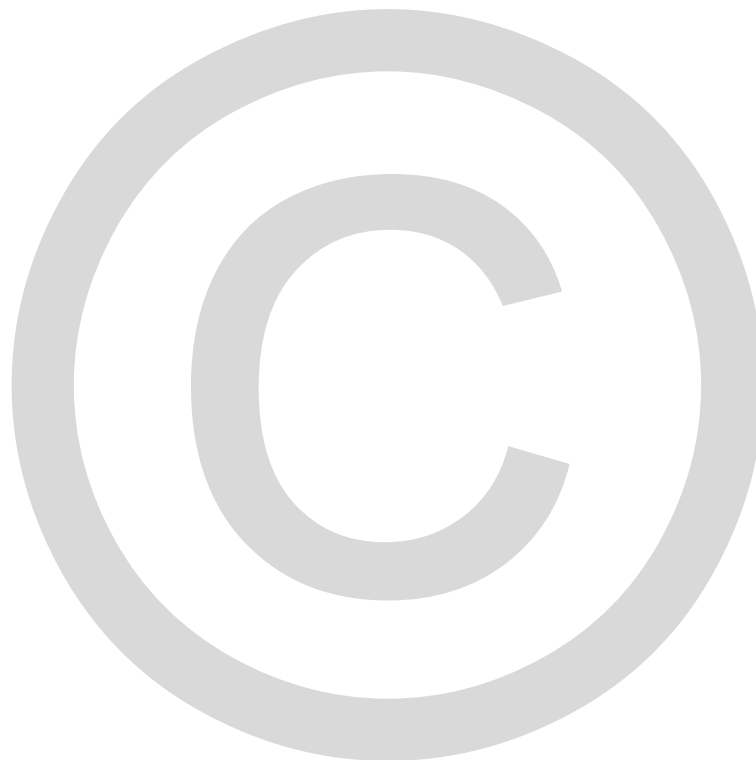
Overall, the frames through which ISIS is depicted in British and western discourse, some of which have been analysed in this paper, colour the interpretative framework through which ISIS is seen with emotional understanding and extreme moral judgments. This emotionally charged interpretative scheme, in turn, presents military intervention not only as morally mandated, but also as the only option.

V. Conclusion

All in all, this essay has analysed some of the main narratives that permeated the discourse on the possibility of military intervention in the form of air strikes by the U.K. in Syria, first against Assad and then against ISIS. While the use of chemical weapons by Assad was seen through the interpretative framework of a humanitarian crisis, the conflict was later reframed through the lens of ISIS' terror. Indeed, the resonance of ISIS' propaganda in Western cultural references and the "public grievability" of his targets granted it a major visibility in Western discourse. In the context of the militarized understanding of terror that characterises the ongoing "war on terror", military action became seen as the main solution to counter ISIS. Additionally, ISIS' interpretative scheme featured the strongest condemnatory frames which fostered a highly emotional understanding of the issue. The repetition of elements derived from ISIS' own propaganda meant, for example, that the perceived strength of the organization may have been exaggerated. Lastly, moral dichotomies may have resulted in a simplified view of the situation on the ground, as well as a limitation on the space for alternative framings and corresponding alternative solutions.

Needless to say, the partial deconstruction of the discourse on ISIS presented in this analysis does not legitimise in any way ISIS' actions, nor does it imply that its threat is fully imagined. This paper by no means meant to cover the ensemble of the innumerable images used to portray Assad or ISIS, nor does it argue that the analysis of such narratives suffices to provide a causal explanation for the changing approach towards Syria in British politics. However, analysing why some narratives

become dominant and what these narratives may obscure enables to look beyond an interpretative scheme that is based on the continuous re-iteration of narratives that ISIS itself wants to propagate. In fact, functioning as an amplifier for ISIS' propaganda, Western discourse empowers the organization, fulfilling the prophecy of its growing influence and strength. Moreover, by "look[ing] too much through the lens of terror" we may lose sight of the many times when "there is no terror but local power struggles" (Dam, 2015). Understanding such local struggles, and the everyday struggle of civilians who find themselves bombed from all sides, may offer alternative solutions that fall outside the array of what is made possible by a terror-centred understanding of Syria.



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