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Research Proposal

**Imagining the Enemy**

The Islamic State and the Construction of the 'Other' *(working title)*

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1. Starting Point

World politics is currently marked by troubling events associated with terrorism, conflicts and insecurity. Regional wars, such as the conflict in Syria which started as civil war within the state, affect people and policymakers around the globe. The European Union, for instance, is supposed to deal with a refugee crisis as a direct consequence of events and political developments on Syrian soil. Without falling short of regional peculiarities, it is safe to claim that the Middle East currently represents a hotspot of conflicts and due to phenomena associated with globalisation, the world is affected by these developments. Globalisation also alters the ways in which academics study war and the importance of states in conflicts. War has changed from inter-state to intra-state conflicts to conflicts including more hybrid and less concrete enemies, such as the so-called ‘war on terror.’ A way of approaching terrorism is to understand it as resistance movement from the ‘global South’ against the ‘global North’ (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). The ‘global North,’ which encompasses mostly European and North American states, is dominating the global geopolitical system, for instance when it comes to the capitalist world economy or ‘global networks of inclusion and exclusion (Flint, 2003: 57). These resistance movements against Northern domination of the international system, such as the so-called Islamic State, not only recruit young people within regions that would be associated with the ‘global South’, they also attract young Westerners to fight for their cause. Now why is that the case? One might approach this question by looking at the ways in which the Islamic State is appealing to the imagination of its recruits.

This is where the study of terrorism can benefit from geographical enquiry in form of the concept of imaginative geographies. These encompass collective imaginations that are deeply rooted in colonialism and fused with values. According to Driver (2005: 235), imaginative geographies can cover questions of identity and the sense people have of their place in the world. Said (2003) firstly coined the term ‘imaginative geographies’ by arguing that non-Western cultures, especially those associated with the ‘Orient’ are imagined and constructed by the West as backward, exotic and inferior. This contrast helps to stabilise the identity and image of Europe, or the West in general, as superior. Within this binary opposition, the so-called ‘Other’ is imagined and constructed. The academic
discipline which deals with these issues, Orientalism, can be viewed from a whole host of different angles. Malreddy (2015: 7), for instance, provides an overview of different ‘Orientalisms,’ such as Military Orientalism or Traveling Orientalism. A contrary view is ‘Occidentalism’ (Buruma and Margalit: 2004). What all these different variations of Orientalism have in common is the fact that they represent stereotypes and attitudes which form imagined constructs of a certain reality. These constructs might by imagined but they do have real consequences: they influence people’s understandings, assumptions, attitudes and they can shape actions, such as joining the jihad. Which type of Orientalism, if at all, terrorist groups like the Islamic State use to enforce their world view is yet to be determined, but a short glimpse at Dabiq, the magazine published by the Islamic state, suffices to argue binary oppositions are at work, for example depicted in Fig. 1.

![Fig. 1: ‘The world has divided into two camps’ taken from Dabiq 1 (p. 6)](image)

The Islamic State also tries to construct a certain idea of space when it comes to the establishment of the so-called ‘Khilafah’, the territory of their envisioned state.
2. Purpose of This Paper

This academic paper sets out to explore the benefits of geographical enquiry for approaching global terrorism and conflicts. The aim is to study the concepts of imaginative geographies and different types of Orientalism to understand the ways in which terrorist groups, like the Islamic State, imagine and construct their world view and ideas about their enemies, the West. The research questions will be the following: In which ways are binary constructions, such as the ones associated with Orientalism, important for concepts like imaginative geographies? In how far can they be detected in the study of the international system when it comes to terrorism? What are possible links between terrorist groups and such imaginative constructs? Does the Islamic State, as an example for others, use constructs to convince possible recruits? What kinds of images and ideas are being used to develop a world view that favours their ideology?

These questions will mainly be tackled by employing two methods: (1) the study of academic publications on concepts, like imaginative geographies and Orientalism, and their connection to terrorism; and (2) an exploration of the Islamic State’s own propaganda. This will be accessed through their own publications in the magazine *Dabiq* and comments on social media, especially the use of twitter accounts to distribute their world views.

3. Potential Structure

1. Introduction
2. Imagining and Constructing the ‘Other’ as the Enemy
   2.1 Imaginative Geographies
   2.2 Orientalism
   2.3 Link to Terrorism
3. Constructions by the Islamic State
   3.1 Magazine *Dabiq*
   3.2 Use of Social Media/Twitter
4. Conclusion
4. Working Bibliography


**Islamic State (2014-2016) Dabiq.**

Issue 1, ‘The Return of Khilafah’ (05/07/14)

Issue 2, ‘The Flood’ (27/07/14)

Issue 3, ‘A Call to Hijrah’ (10/09/14)

Issue 4, ‘The Failed Crusade’ (11/10/14)

Issue 5, ‘Remaining and Expanding’ (21/11/14)

Issue 6, ‘Al Qa’idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within’ (29/12/14)

Issue 7, ‘From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone’ (12/02/15)

Issue 8, ‘Shari’ah Alone Will Rule Africa’ (30/03/15)

Issue 9, ‘They Plot and Allah Plots’ (21/05/15)


Issue 11, ‘From the Battles of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions’ (09/08/15)

Issue 12, ‘Just Terror’ (18/11/15)

Issue 13, ‘The Rafidah from Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjal’ (19/01/16)