

The Islamic State lexical battleground: US foreign policy and the abstraction of threat

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The choice by a government of a label for an enemy group has significant consequences. As Robert Litwak assessed in his study of the shifting terminology of ‘rogue states’ in the first year of the George W. Bush administration: ‘Words shape and affect policy. The issue is not simply nomenclature; it is the policies that derive from the assumptions and concepts embedded in the term.’ Similarly, Croft’s study of America’s war on terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 suggests that ‘words, ideas, language matter to the policy world’, and Jackson’s analysis of the same period confirms that ‘The enactment of any large-scale project of political violence—such as war or counter-terrorism—requires a significant degree of political consensus and consensus is not possible without language ... [words] don’t just describe the world, they actually help to make the world.’¹

The most recent example of the importance of language in the shaping of foreign policy concerns the Obama administration’s designation of the extremist Sunni group that calls itself ‘the Islamic State’ as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), rather than as the Islamic State, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or Daesh. However, in contrast to the process described by Croft and Jackson, by which language gives definition to strategy and a political, economic and military approach, this embrace of ISIL can be viewed as an evasion—in strategic, policy and operational terms. By rhetorically detaching ISIL from Syria, where the Islamic State has gained further ground and has established areas of governance, the Obama administration has distanced itself from the imperative of a coherent response to the group in its local setting.

Far from encouraging coherence and understanding, ‘ISIL’ has been a term of dissonance. It is dissonant from the Islamic State’s self-definition of its ideology and system, embodied in the declaration of a caliphate in July 2014. It is dissonant from public consideration of the militants, with mainstream media using Islamic State or ISIS or, especially in the Arabic-speaking world, Daesh. And it is dissonant from public conceptions: a Google search reveals that ISIL is a far less popular

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¹ Robert S. Litwak, ‘What’s in a name? The changing foreign policy lexicon’, *Journal of International Affairs* 54: 2, 2001, p. 376; Stuart Croft, *Culture, crisis and America’s war on terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 43; Richard Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism: language, politics and counter-terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 1, 21.

term for the group (19,100,000 hits) than either Islamic State (72,200,000) or ISIS (208,000,000).

Why does the Obama administration set itself at odds with the prevailing discursive presentation of the Islamic State, at home and abroad? We suggest that recognition of the Islamic State by name involves engagement with its political, economic and military as well as ideological force. That engagement in turn sets the task of a response to this force. However, the Obama administration—from either a lack of will or a fear of the consequences—does not wish to pursue engagement. Instead, it dislocates ‘ISIL’ and abstracts it as a ‘terrorist’ threat, setting it within a post-2001 discursive framework wherein anti-terrorism is preferred over confrontation of local issues.

From the Islamic State to Daesh to ‘ISIL’

The Islamic State (IS) started out in 1999 as Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Unity and Jihad). Five years later Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, its leader and founder, pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda, changing the group’s name to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (Al-Qaeda in Iraq). Following territorial conquests in northern Iraq and Zarqawi’s death in 2006, the group re-presented itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). In April 2013, during intervention in the Syrian conflict, the group’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi changed the group’s name to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. The Arabic translation of ISIS is Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa’al-Sham or, as an acronym, Daesh/Daesh. The territorial designation of al-Sham can be interpreted as specifically as Damascus or as loosely as Syria and the surrounding area, which historically has been referred to as the Levant, comprising what are now Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.² In July 2014, after a rapid offensive had taken much of Iraq, including the country’s second city, Mosul, and Tikrit, and threatened to close on Baghdad, Al-Baghdadi rebranded the group one more time. He declared the territory under its control as part of a caliphate, or an Islamic state.³ This laid the foundation for the group’s claim to legitimacy as a governing religious and political authority while not limiting itself to a territorial definition set by others: in a subsequent video, IS said it had erased the border between Iraq and Syria.

The combination of territorial advance and Al-Baghdadi’s declaration pushed other actors into a response. For those in the region, the organization could not be treated only as an abstract ‘terrorist’ threat, given that it was claiming a specific right to rule in Iraqi and Syrian cities and towns as well as a general religious mandate. The first to anticipate this challenge was a group of Syrian activists facing the expansion of IS into the civil war, usurping their fight against

² Aaron Zelin, *Al-Qaeda in Syria: a closer look at ISIS (Part I)* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), 10 Sept. 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³ ‘France is ditching the “Islamic State” name—and replacing it with a label the group hates’, *Washington Post*, 17 Sept. 2014; ‘What’s in a name? The media headache over ISIS, Islamic State, ISIL and Daesh’, *Al Bawaba*, 16 Feb. 2015, <http://www.albawaba.com/news/what%E2%80%99s-name-media-headache-over-isis-islamic-state-isil-and-daesh-657612>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

the Assad regime from March 2011. One of these activists, Khaled al-Haj Salih, had circulated the acronym 'Daesh' as a colloquial reference for IS. While Salih later said there was no pejorative intent, others attached the label to the satirical derogation of IS in statements and videos. The acronym bore a similarity to 'daes', meaning one who crushes and is not crushed. However, 'Daesh' was not a term of empowerment but an empty acronym with no meaning. It was increasingly used as a word ascribing emptiness and a lack of meaning to the 'Islamic State', at the same time as the 'caliphate' was proclaiming that it was giving political as well as religious significance to people's lives. By October 2013, as IS was taking over the city of Raqqa in northern Syria, 'Daesh' had become a common marker for residents and opposition activists who denounced the group. In an alternative disparagement, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki framed IS as the 'so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham [Syria]', foreshadowing the much later western usage of the phrase 'so-called Islamic State'.

Linguistic and political dynamics operated differently in other parts of the Middle East and neighbouring countries. In Israel, 'Daesh' was the most common label, but primarily because of the term's familiarity in Hebrew rather than in any attempt to stigmatize IS. Turkish President Recep Erdogan also referred to the group as Daesh, declaring in November 2014: 'Be careful; I am not using ISIL, I am using Daesh as they are a terrorist group.'⁴ In Iran, there was a transition from the umbrella term 'Takfiri', for all Islamic groups opposed by the Islamic Republic, to IS-specific variations according to audience. If the regime was speaking to domestic or Middle Eastern audiences, it would use 'Daesh'. If it was projecting to the English-speaking world, it would mirror the Obama administration with 'ISIL'. In the West, the IS beheadings of American, British and Israeli hostages—promoted through widely circulated, high-quality videos—spurred some leaders to adopt the derogatory Daesh. In September 2014, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius asked the media to adopt the term, explaining: 'This is a terrorist group and not a state. I do not recommend using the term Islamic State because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists. The Arabs call it "Daesh" and I will be calling them the "Daesh cutthroats".'⁵ The term was also picked up by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot: 'Daesh hates being referred to by this term, and what they don't like has an instinctive appeal to me ... I absolutely refuse to refer to it by the title that it claims for itself [the Islamic State], because I think this is a perversion of religion and a travesty of governance.'⁶

However, in other countries, confusion persisted. In Britain, the BBC accepted the group's self-designation of 'the Islamic State', but the Cameron government used 'ISIL'. In July 2015, a cross-party group of MPs demanded that the BBC stop using 'Islamic State', claiming that the label conferred legitimacy and credibility, and suggested the adoption of 'Daesh'. The BBC compromised with 'the Islamic State group' and then 'the so-called Islamic State', maintaining that adopting the

⁴ 'Turkey's Erdogan to refer to ISIS by its Arabic acronym "Daesh"', *Haaretz*, 3 Nov. 2014.

⁵ 'French govt to use Arabic "Daesh" for Islamic State group', *France24*, 18 Sept. 2014, <http://www.france24.com/en/20140917-france-switches-arabic-daesh-acronym-islamic-state>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁶ 'Australian PM says he'll now use Daesh instead of Isil for "death cult"—but why?', *Guardian*, 12 Jan. 2015.

derogatory ‘Daesh’ would jeopardize the corporation’s impartiality.⁷ The Associated Press first used the same rationale to call the group ISIL, explaining that ‘this is the most accurate translation of the group’s name and reflects its aspirations to rule over a broad swath of the Middle East’, though in July 2014 it switched to the term ‘the Islamic State group’, to deny any suggestions of international legitimacy.⁸

In the US, the Obama administration maintained the acronym ‘ISIL’—initially pronounced by the President to rhyme with ‘whistle’—never even acknowledging the full ‘Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant’, let alone ‘the Islamic State’. However, this did not necessarily lead to clarity in the public presentation of the group. Most of the US media used ‘Islamic State’ or the other acronym, ‘ISIS’ (‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’). The decision appeared to be one of familiarity for readers—‘ISIS’ is by far the most common search term used for the militants, especially after May 2014; in online searches in autumn 2015, the term is up to 30 times as popular as the alternatives.⁹

Far from offering a clear designation for US policy—for example, after the decision for aerial intervention in Iraq in August 2014 and for air strikes inside Syria six weeks later—the label led to uncertainty and even derision, typified by the right-wing commentator Liz Peek:

Why would Obama prefer ISIL? An ‘army’ of that territorial magnitude takes the focus off the two countries that many believe define Obama’s continued failure in the Middle East. Most likely, he would rather eliminate the connection between the chaos in Iraq with his inaction in Syria. Better that the upheaval in a country to which we committed so much blood and treasure remain the fault of George W. Bush.¹⁰

And Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* focused on the ‘L’ to ponder:

It’s a bit odd that the administration is using “the Levant,” given that it conjures up a colonial association from the early 20th century, when Britain and France drew their maps, carving up Mesopotamia guided by economic gain rather than tribal allegiances. Unless it’s a nostalgic nod to a time when puppets were more malleable and grateful to their imperial overlords.¹¹

So was ‘ISIL’ simply an unfortunate choice for a carefully defined approach to the growing threat of the Islamic State? Or could its invocation signify the failure of the administration to establish a coherent response, from mid-2014 to

⁷ ‘BBC rejects MPs’ calls to refer to Islamic State as Daesh’, *Guardian*, 2 July 2015.

⁸ ‘Inside the Beltway: seeking the big prize—a Republican majority’, *Washington Times*, 18 June 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/18/inside-the-beltway-seeking-the-big-prize-a-republi/?page=all>; ‘Is it IS, ISIS, ISIL or maybe Daesh?’, *Ynetnews*, 9 Dec. 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4570385,00.html> (both accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

⁹ Google Trends search of news headlines comparing ‘ISIS’, ‘ISIL’, ‘Islamic State’ and ‘Daesh’, Sept. 2015, <https://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=ISIS%2C%20ISIL%2C%20DAESH%2C%20Islamic%20State&cmpt=q&tz=Etc%2FGMT-1>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

¹⁰ Liz Peek, ‘Obama’s use of ISIL, not ISIS, tells another story’, *Fiscal Times*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.thefiscal-times.com/Blogs/Peek-POV/2014/06/23/Obamas-Use-ISIL-Not-ISIS-Tells-Another-Story>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

¹¹ Maureen Dowd, ‘Back to Iraq’, *New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/opinion/sunday/maureen-dowd-back-to-iraq.html?_r=0, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

today? Could the choice of 'ISIL', far from addressing the conditions in the region, including Iraq and Syria, have more to do with detaching the Obama administration from both the troubled recent history of US policy and the necessity of acknowledging the Islamic State as an established—whether legitimate or not—local force?

The abstraction of threat: from Bush to Obama

How we term the 'enemy' is intertwined with our perception of the context within which it operates across national, regional and international levels of analysis. This may include the historical and geographical contexts, the ideological and declaratory policies of the leadership, and the level of popular support it enjoys. The frame of discourse thus dictates the terms of the debate, and subsequently provides the basis for policy preference. As others have noted, America's change in policy after 9/11 'followed a dramatic change in perception and debate ... Policy practice was to change in dramatic ways, but through a change in language and ideas. Such discursive practices are archetypical: they seek to create new meaning out of socially constructed crisis.'¹²

Since 9/11, the discursive formation has often been an abstract depiction of conflict, rather than any definition of a specific campaign. The George W. Bush administration created the label of the 'war on terror' to cover not only the response to Al-Qaeda's attacks but also wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and covert and military operations throughout the world. The term was later recast as the 'long war' or a 'global war on terror'. The Obama administration ostensibly renounced the term 'war on terror', but it has continued to prefer the depiction of its political and military operations as campaigns against 'terrorism', 'jihadism' and 'extremism' rather than as defined strategies in specific countries. The abstract labels have covered drone strikes from Pakistan to Yemen to Somalia to Libya, covert operations in central Asia and the Middle East, and a range of economic sanctions, as well as policies concerning Iraq and Syria.¹³

There is a key difference between the two administrations, however. The Bush team's abstraction of threat delineated a carefully constructed, if wholly erroneous, agenda for the pursuit of US hegemony in vital areas of the world. It did so primarily by linking Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the 9/11 attacks and using it as a demonstration case for American power. As Vice-President Dick Cheney said on the afternoon of 9/11: 'To the extent we define our task broadly, including

¹² Henrik Larsen, 'British and Danish European policies in the 1990s: a discourse approach', *European Journal of International Relations* 5: 4, 1999, p. 453; Croft, *Culture, crisis and America's war on terror*, pp. 38–9.

¹³ Obama declared the end of a 'global war on terror' in an address of May 2013. However, by September 2014—in large part because of 'ISIL'—he was asking Congress to renew the mandate for that war, the 'authorization for use of military force'. In February 2015, the White House convened a summit on 'Countering violent extremism' to consider a global approach. See Paul D. Shinkman, 'Obama: "global war on terror" is over', *US News and World Report*, 23 May 2013; Jessica Schulberg, 'The forever war was supposed to end in 2014. Instead, Obama doubled down', *New Republic*, 29 Dec. 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/120643/isis-made-obama-continue-war-terror-new-aumf>; Andrew Hammond, 'Why the flawed "war on terror" needs a reboot', CNN, 17 Feb. 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/17/opinion/war-on-terror-reboot/> (both accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

those who support terrorism, then we get states. And it's easier to find them than bin Laden.'¹⁴

In the following days, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, unsupported by intelligence, claimed a 10–50 per cent chance that Iraq was involved in the attack. Under-Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, complaining about the lack of quality 'Al Qa'eda targets' for US strikes in Afghanistan, suggested the bombing of Iraq or even targets in South America and south Asia to 'surprise the terrorists'.¹⁵ Feith later explained that the administration's decision to launch a 'war' on terrorism meant that the enemy 'could not be thought of as a set of individuals who had perpetrated a particular crime ... Nor was the enemy necessarily a single distinct organization.'¹⁶

The elastic definition of the threat allowed the Bush administration not only to go after whatever individuals, organizations or states it chose to define as a threat, but also to allow itself maximum geographical and political flexibility to *justify* this abstraction of threat. The linchpin of the administration's maximalist rhetoric and subsequent policy was President Bush's State of the Union address of 29 January 2002, in which he identified the threat to US national security as coming not from Al-Qaeda, which he mentioned only once, but from 'terrorism' (mentioned 36 times), 'regimes/states' (14 times) and 'weapons of mass destruction' (seven times).¹⁷ He embodied those threats in the specific characterization of the 'Axis of Evil', defined as Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

In this narration of the war, first came the construction of the enemy image, then came the 'absence of blame within'. The third step was the '(re)construction of American values'. Then, as the war aims against Afghanistan and later Iraq began to take shape, the American struggle became an international fight to 'protect values against an absolute enemy'.¹⁸ Thus the 'war on terror', rather than Al-Qaeda, both defined and shaped US foreign policy. Fighting the war against an amorphous enemy, the United States sought a multinational coalition in support of the alleged battle against terrorism, while conflating that battle with the administration's other policy goals, thus extending the geographical and discursive justification of the war to a long list of 'rogue states'—including Cuba, Syria and Sudan as well as Iran, Iraq and North Korea—and subsequently justifying the long military occupation of Iraq.¹⁹ But the Bush administration's strategy of a US 'preponderance' dissolved with the descent of the occupation of Iraq into

¹⁴ Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsey, *America unbound: the Bush revolution in foreign policy* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2003), pp. 99–100.

¹⁵ *The 9/11 Commission report: final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 559.

¹⁶ Douglas Feith, 'A war plan that cast a wide net', *Washington Post*, 7 Aug. 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46898-2004Aug6.html>, accessed 22 Nov. 2015.

¹⁷ President George W. Bush, State of the Union address, 29 Jan. 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>, accessed 22 Nov. 2015.

¹⁸ Croft, *Culture, crisis and America's war on terror*, pp. 101–103.

¹⁹ John E. Wilson and John W. Dumbrell, eds, *America's 'war on terrorism': new dimensions in US government and national security* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008), pp. 1–24; Douglas Kellner, 'Bushspeak and the politics of lying: presidential rhetoric in the "war on terror"', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37: 4, 2007, pp. 622–45; Richard Falk, 'Identifying limits on a borderless map in the first post-modern war', in Bulet Gokay and R. B. J. Walker, eds, *11 September 2001: war, terror and judgment* (London: Cass, 2003), pp. 46–61.

violence, insurgency and civil war. So the ‘war on terror’ was detached from the geographic specificity of Iraq and Afghanistan, where American troops were facing a resurgent challenge from factions such as the Taliban.

That detachment complicated the presentation of US foreign policy and of the targeted territory, as one approach was replaced by another in a short period of time. The traditional counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda (September 2001 to mid-2002) was succeeded by a pre-emption and pre-eminence doctrine designed to target state-sponsored terrorism, justifying the Iraq invasion (articulated in Bush’s June 2002 address at West Point and culminating in Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003). In 2005, faced with the disaster of post-invasion Iraq, Bush proclaimed a ‘forward strategy of democratization of the Middle East’, aimed at tackling the root causes of and finding long-term solutions to the terrorist threat, beyond the military dimension.²⁰ This congeries of responses did not mesh well and resulted in a wholly ineffective, if not counterproductive, foreign policy, one of its legacies being the rise of the Islamic State and a new challenge to US foreign policy in the region—not only how to *fight* the ‘enemy’, but how to *define* it.

Yet if the Bush administration struggled in the pursuit of its ‘preponderance of power’ in the Middle East, the Obama team did not even set out a coherent strategy to deal with the Islamic State or the regional issues and conflicts surrounding the movement. If post-9/11 US foreign policy was initially determined by an abstract label—‘the war on terror’—to link Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein in the pursuit of a flawed strategy, then its counterpart under the Obama administration was an abstract label to avoid engagement with the necessary strategy and tactics to deal with the political, economic and military complications in Iraq and Syria.²¹

US foreign policy and the Islamic State

According to Jackson, ‘the act of naming things is always a highly charged process that can have serious political and social consequences . . . Because language affects perception, cognition and emotion, it inevitably also affects concrete action.’²² The Obama administration reversed the process: it established—or rather, failed to establish—a response to the Islamic State and then named that group as ISIL as part of the evasion of a strategic approach. The designation of ISIL avoided specific questions about targets and aims while refusing to confer legitimacy upon the Islamic State’s political ambitions and establishment of governance. Perhaps most importantly, the Obama administration—either as an intentional process or as an outcome of indecision and uncertainty—buried the legacies of the Iraq War by rejecting ‘ISIS’, with its inclusion of Iraq and Syria, and by adopting ‘ISIL’ with a ‘Levant’ that is not a recognized geographic term for many Americans.²³

²⁰ David Hastings Dunn, ‘Bush, 11 September and the conflicting strategies of the “war on terrorism”’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 161, 2005, pp. 11–33.

²¹ ‘Obama: US does not have “complete strategy” to halt ISIS’, CBS News, 8 June 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-u-s-does-not-have-complete-strategy-to-halt-isis/>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

²² Jackson, *Writing the war on terrorism*, p. 23.

²³ Barack Obama, ‘Weekly address: honoring those who served in Iraq’, 17 Dec. 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/12/17/weekly-address-honoring-those-who-served-iraq>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

The definition of the threatening group as 'ISIL' had begun a day earlier, when the White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest—presumably acting on instructions from the President and his advisers—said: 'The deterioration in security is rapidly becoming a humanitarian issue and requires a coordinated response by Iraqi leaders from across the country to halt the advances ISIL has made and regain control of territory currently in ISIL's hands.'²⁴

In the following days, White House spokesman Jay Carney repeated: 'The President knows that the situation in Iraq is serious and that there needs to be action taken quickly in order to confront the challenge posed by the ISIL.' At the same time, he carried out an important linguistic shift, labelling the Islamic State as a 'common enemy' outside the country and apart from the Iraqi people:

There is no side in Iraq that ISIL is fighting for. This is a jihadist, extremist group that is bent on death and destruction within Iraq. And it is absolutely necessary for the various factions within Iraqi politics and ethnic and religious groups to come together united by the threat posed to the Iraqi sovereign state here to rebuff the challenge.²⁵

By his next press conference on 19 June, Obama had taken on both the 'ISIL' designation and the presentation of an alien, 'terrorist' force. Announcing that he met with his national security team 'regularly to review the situation since ISIL, a terrorist organization that operates in Iraq and Syria [and has] made advances inside of Iraq', he asserted: 'ISIL poses a threat to the Iraqi people, to the region, and to US interests.' In line with the 'war on terror' approach of the Bush administration, Obama quickly brought the Islamic State from Iraq to 'the homeland':

We also have an interest in making sure that we don't have a safe haven that continues to grow for ISIL and other extremist jihadist groups who could use that as a base of operations for planning and targeting ourselves, our personnel overseas, and eventually the homeland ... Groups like ISIL ... [have] attracted more and more jihadists or would-be jihadists, some of them from Europe. They then start traveling back to Europe, and that, over time, can create a cadre of terrorists that could harm us.²⁶

But the President's framing did not illuminate an American strategy. Instead, the rhetorical presentation, returning to the 'terrorists' beyond any country, pointed to the lack of one. White House spokesman Carney tried to fend off such questions on 18 June:

Q: It sounds like you're saying he has not made any decisions ... does that situation on the ground get harder the longer it takes for the US to provide some type of assistance?

CARNEY: The right way to go about this is to assess—is to develop an approach that is inclusive of the three elements I just mentioned. The ultimate objective here is to protect the national security interests of the United States, to prevent portions of Iraq, portions

²⁴ 'Press gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Worcester, MA', 11 June 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/11/press-gaggle-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-en-route-worc>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

²⁵ 'Press briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney', 12 June 2014, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=105515>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

²⁶ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President on the situation in Iraq', 19 June 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

of the region from becoming a safe haven for ISIL—extremists who may ultimately pose a threat to the United States or to our interests abroad and our allies ...

The only thing the President has ruled out—and I want to be clear here—is sending US troops back into combat in Iraq. But he continues to consider other options.²⁷

Without a defined approach, the administration could give only vague answers, even on its choice of name for the Islamic State. Pushed by reporters on 30 June, spokesman Josh Earnest fell back on the formula put out by Secretary of State John Kerry a week earlier, during a visit to Baghdad: 'ISIL is not fighting for a stronger Iraq; quite the contrary. ISIL is fighting to divide Iraq and to destroy Iraq.'

Q: ISIL, or ISIS, has declared, effectively, a state. I'm sure the administration doesn't recognize that, but I wanted to get its impression of the broader ambitions of ISIL to represent itself as representing not only territory but a way of life and an ideology ...

MR. EARNEST: ISIL is not, as it claims, fighting on behalf of Sunnis. ISIL is not fighting for a stronger Iraq; ISIL is fighting to destroy Iraq ...

In fact, ISIL's name suggests that they desire to form a caliphate in the region. But what we would like to do is to make sure that after more than a decade of sacrifice that was made by American military personnel and others who served in that region to give the Iraqi people the opportunity to determine their own future, to play a stake in deciding who should lead their country and what their country should look like. And that's why it's so important for Iraq's political leaders to pursue this inclusive governing agenda. That's what's going to be required to defeat ISIL, it's also what's going to be required to make sure that every citizen in that country has a stake in that country's future.²⁸

The vagueness continued through June and July, even after the Islamic State's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—in his one and only public appearance—formally declared the caliphate in a Friday prayer sermon in Mosul. Obama's only statement, made at an Iftar breaking the Ramadan fast on 14 July, was the brief remark: 'In Iraq, where ISIL's attacks on civilians and destruction of religious sites seek to inflame sectarian tensions, we continue to call for a new government that can unite Iraqis and show all communities in Iraq that they can advance their aspirations through the political process.'²⁹

Finding a strategy for 'ISIL'?

The administration only began to shape its intervention in early August 2014, when the Islamic State moved through Iraqi Kurdistan, taking territory in the north-west and even threatening to move on the Iraqi Kurdish capital Irbil.

²⁷ 'Press briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney', 18 June 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/18/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-6182014>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

²⁸ US Embassy, London, 'ISIL is fighting to divide, destroy Iraq, Kerry says', 23 June 2014, <http://london.usembassy.gov/iraq050.html>; 'Press briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest', 30 June 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/30/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-6302014> (both accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

²⁹ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President at the annual Iftar dinner', 14 July 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/14/remarks-president-annual-iftar-dinner-july-14-2014>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

Publicly basing the response on the Islamic State's threat to adherents of the Yazidi faith, forced to flee the town of Sinjar and facing starvation and thirst on a nearby mountain, the President authorized American military flights to provide aid and evacuate people from the area. He also 'directed [the] military to take action to protect our American diplomats and military advisors serving in the city of Erbil' and warned that further Islamic State advances would be met with air strikes.³⁰

Yet, talking about the measures in a radio address on 9 August, Obama again refrained from giving the Islamic State any label—they were only called 'terrorist forces' threatening 'our people' and 'genocide' of the Yazidis. It was only at a press conference on the same day—where reporters used both 'ISIS' and 'ISIL' in their questions—that the President occasionally gave the label 'ISIL' to the terrorist enemy (and once slipped into calling it 'ISIS'). Three statements in the following nine days repeated the declaration of a 'limited mission ... protecting our people and facilities inside of Iraq, and a humanitarian operation to help save thousands of Iraqi civilians stranded on a mountain', with Obama only once referring to 'ISIL'.³¹

If 'ISIL' was halted in Kurdistan, with the Americans providing arms to Kurdish forces, it was far from checked elsewhere. On 20 August it beheaded American journalist James Foley in northern Syria, prompting Obama once more to deny its legitimacy—interestingly, with a focus on the region, rather than on the threat to 'America':

ISIL speaks for no religion ... ISIL has no ideology of any value to human beings ... They may claim out of expediency that they are at war with the United States or the West, but the fact is they terrorize their neighbors and offer them nothing but an endless slavery to their empty vision, and the collapse of any definition of civilized behavior.³²

Eight days later, Obama announced for the first time that 'our military action in Iraq has to be part of a broader, comprehensive strategy to protect our people and to support our partners who are taking the fight to ISIL'. However, the President then immediately turned back on that objective:

Well, first of all, I want to make sure everybody is clear on what we're doing now, because it is limited. Our focus right now is to protect American personnel on the ground in Iraq; to protect our embassy, to protect our consulates, to make sure that critical infrastructure ... is protected.

Where we see an opportunity that allows us with very modest risk to help the humanitarian situation there as we did in Sinjar Mountain, we will take those opportunities after having consulted with Congress. But our core priority right now is just to make sure that our folks are safe and to do an effective assessment of Iraqi and Kurdish capabilities.

Instead of promulgating a strategy turning on a defined set of American actions, the President said that the process was to begin 'with Iraq's leaders ... forming an

³⁰ Barack Obama, 'Weekly address: American operations in Iraq', 9 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/weekly-address-american-operations-iraq>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³¹ Obama, 'Weekly address: American operations in Iraq'; Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President', 14 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/14/statement-president>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³² Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President', 20 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/20/statement-president>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

inclusive government that will unite their country and strengthen their security forces to confront ISIL'. He was even less specific when asked about the Islamic State in Syria, reverting to the general invocation of the 'Levant' and the Middle East: 'It's ... an issue that involves all the Sunni states in the region and Sunni leadership recognizing that this cancer that has developed is one that they have to be just as invested in defeating as we are.'³³

On 22 September, after the Islamic State had beheaded more American, Israeli and British hostages in northern Syria, Obama authorized the first air strikes by a US-led coalition inside that country. Beyond the attacks, his only reference to a political and military approach was the promise: 'We will move forward with our plans, supported by bipartisan majorities in Congress, to ramp up our effort to train and equip the Syrian opposition, who are the best counterweight to ISIL and the Assad regime.' In November, 'senior US officials' told CNN that a review of strategy had been ordered.³⁴

A year later, even that general proposal is unfulfilled. The first group of 54 US-trained fighters entered Syria from Turkey in late July 2015, after protracted bureaucratic and logistic delays; within days, many of the force had been killed, wounded or captured by the Islamist faction Jabhat al-Nusra. A second group of between 50 and 75 men, inserted in September 2015, immediately turned over its weapons to Al-Nusra. The support of other troops among the 15,000 who applied has been blocked by the US insistence that operations can be mounted only against the Islamic State and not against the Assad regime. Washington has also refused to work with rebel blocs, despite their advance across much of northern Syria and part of the south, because of restrictions on action against Assad and fears of 'extremists' among the opposition.³⁵

The prospect of 'strategy' against the Islamic State in Iraq has also been beset by uncertainty and delay. Two days after the intervention in Syria, Obama stood with the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi and promised a coherent plan:

We are committed to working in support of Iraq regaining territory that ISIL has currently taken over, and making sure that an inclusive Iraqi government is able to control its territory and push ISIL back. In doing that, we are coordinating closely in our military campaign. And the airstrikes and air support that we're able to provide, as well as the training and assistance, I think will be critical in partnership with Iraqi forces on the ground.³⁶

³³ Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President', 28 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³⁴ Scott Lucas, 'Syria analysis: Obama calls for review of US strategy—and heads for a dead end', *EA WorldView*, 13 Nov. 2014, <http://eaworldview.com/2014/11/syria-analysis-obama-calls-review-us-strategy-heads-dead-end/>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³⁵ Scott Lucas, 'Syria daily, July 31: did the US abandon its 54 trained rebels?', *EA WorldView*, 31 July 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/07/syria-daily-did-the-us-abandon-its-54-trained-rebels/>; Michael Weiss, 'Did a US-trained Syrian rebel commander defect to al Qaeda?', *Daily Beast*, 23 Sept. 2015; Frederic Hof, 'Syria analysis: Obama administration's rhetoric on Assad excuses its inaction', *EA WorldView*, 22 March 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/03/syria-analysis-obama-administrations-rhetoric-on-assad-excuses-its-inaction/> (both accessed 17 Nov. 2015).

³⁶ Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abadi of the Republic of Iraq after bilateral meeting', 24 Sept. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abadi-republic-iraq-after-bil>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

Yet despite regular US air attacks in parts of Iraq and Syria over the next 13 months, these were never considered or operationalized as part of a ‘partnership on the ground’. The recapture of territory by Iraqi forces, such as Tikrit in spring 2015, owed more to the role of Iraqi militia with Iranian command, advice and supply. Even this ‘success’ was limited: the Islamic State is still firmly in control of Mosul; it has made further advances in Anbar; and it continues to challenge the Iraqi government in and near the Baiji oil refinery, one of three in the country.³⁷

Since a call in his State of the Union address of January 2015 for a congressional resolution ‘to authorize the use of force against ISIL’, Obama has rarely returned to the subject. He made a statement at a February conference on ‘violent extremism’, and he put out a statement when he saw Al-Abadi in April.³⁸ In contrast, the Iranian regime has regularly featured its conferences with Al-Abadi and Iraqi leaders in its campaign against ‘Daesh’ for its domestic and Arab audiences and ‘ISIL’ for English-speakers.

How ‘ISIL’ and ‘terrorists’ replace strategy

Obama first used the term ‘terrorist organization’ for the Islamic State on 19 June 2014, nine days after the sudden fall of Mosul. He also invoked the post-9/11 spectre of ‘a base of operations for planning and targeting ourselves, our personnel overseas, and eventually the homeland’.³⁹

But the most significant shift linking rhetoric and strategy, or rather the lack of strategy, came in late August after the Islamic State’s beheading of James Foley. On the day of Foley’s murder, Obama had situated the act within the Islamic State’s ‘terrorizing’ of the region, rather than the United States. However, on 26 August, he told the American Legion, as he assured the veterans that ‘American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq’:

The blows we’ve struck against al Qaeda’s leadership don’t mean the end to the terrorist threat. Al Qaeda affiliates still target our homeland—we’ve seen that in Yemen. Other extremists threaten our citizens abroad, as we’ve seen most recently in Iraq and Syria. As Commander-in-Chief, the security of the American people is my highest priority, and that’s why, with the brutal terrorist group ISIL advancing in Iraq, I have authorized targeted strikes to protect our diplomats and military advisors who are there.⁴⁰

The Islamic State had split from Al-Qaeda in February 2014, with specific differences over Syria backing Al-Baghdadi’s challenge for leadership against Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had taken over as head of Al-Qaeda following Osama bin

³⁷ Peter Harris, ‘Obama’s ISIL strategy: success or a giant failure?’, *The National Interest*, 14 Sept. 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/obamas-isil-strategy-success-or-giant-failure-13832>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³⁸ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address’, 20 Jan. 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

³⁹ Obama, ‘Remarks by the President on the situation in Iraq’.

⁴⁰ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President to the American Legion National Convention’, 26 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/26/remarks-president-american-legion-national-convention>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

Laden's death in 2011.⁴¹ But Obama pushed this aside as he linked the two organizations to invoke the terrorist threat to America. On 28 August, while saying that 'ISIL poses an immediate threat to the people of Iraq and to people throughout the region', the President opened his press conference promising a 'comprehensive strategy' with this assurance: 'As Commander-in-Chief, I will always do what is necessary to protect the American people and defend against evolving threats to our homeland.'⁴² Between 10 June and 10 September, the White House had given no explanation for the choice of 'ISIL'. Instead, it put out a denotation which abstracted ISIL as 'terrorist', moving any political issue from Iraq and Syria to the US homeland. On the eve of the 13th anniversary of 9/11, Obama finally issued a statement which purported to define 'ISIL'. Yet both the timing and the content, with a brief reference to location, only reinforced the abstraction:

ISIL is certainly not a state. It was formerly al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, and has taken advantage of sectarian strife and Syria's civil war to gain territory on both sides of the Iraq–Syrian border. It is recognized by no government, nor by the people it subjugates. ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple.

The Islamic State was being confronted not as a distinct entity which had taken advantage of the specific local dynamics but as another variant of the global terrorist menace:

Over the last several years, we have consistently taken the fight to terrorists who threaten our country. We took out Osama bin Laden and much of al Qaeda's leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We've targeted al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, and recently eliminated the top commander of its affiliate in Somalia. We've done so while bringing more than 140,000 American troops home from Iraq, and drawing down our forces in Afghanistan, where our combat mission will end later this year. Thanks to our military and counterterrorism professionals, America is safer.

Still, we continue to face a terrorist threat. We can't erase every trace of evil from the world, and small groups of killers have the capacity to do great harm. That was the case before 9/11, and that remains true today. And that's why we must remain vigilant as threats emerge. At this moment, the greatest threats come from the Middle East and North Africa, where radical groups exploit grievances for their own gain. And one of those groups is ISIL—which calls itself the 'Islamic State'.⁴³

This abstraction immediately affected operations. For example, on the first day of the US-led air strikes inside Syria on 22 September, in addition to striking the Islamic State, American warplanes and missiles hit positions of the Islamist faction Jabhat al-Nusra. The claim—fed by a briefing by the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper—days before the intervention was that a unit called the

⁴¹ Liz Sly, 'Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq', *Washington Post*, 3 Feb. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁴² Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President', 28 Aug. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president-0>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁴³ Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on ISIL', 10 Sept. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

'Khorasan Group' was operating inside Jabhat al-Nusra to plan attacks in Europe and the United States. Announcing the attacks, Obama echoed George W. Bush's address to Congress of 20 September 2011:

Last night, we also took strikes to disrupt plotting against the United States and our allies by seasoned al Qaeda operatives in Syria who are known as the Khorasan Group. And once again, it must be clear to anyone who would plot against America and try to do Americans harm that we will not tolerate safe havens for terrorists who threaten our people.⁴⁴

While his references to 'ISIL' diminished in 2015, Obama made sure to maintain the 'war on terror' framework. In his State of the Union address in January, he linked post-9/11 language with the renunciation of its outcome in Iraq in 2003: 'Instead of sending large ground forces overseas, we're partnering with nations from South Asia to North Africa to deny safe haven to terrorists who threaten America.'⁴⁵

An abstraction covering failure?

In June 2015, a year after the Islamic State's offensive that took Mosul and Tikrit—and ten months after his promise of a 'comprehensive strategy'—President Obama said his administration still had no plan for Iraq and Syria: 'When a finalized plan is presented to me by the Pentagon, then I will share it with the American people. We don't yet have a complete strategy because it requires commitments on the part of the Iraqis as well.'⁴⁶ The following month, the President 'summarize[d] briefly where we stand' after the review by his officials. The statement would be the most explicit connection between 'ISIL' and the local setting, with extensive references to Iraq and Syria. However, the speech was soon a litany of supposed victories—'In Iraq, ISIL lost at the Mosul Dam. ISIL lost at Mount Sinjar. ISIL has lost repeatedly across Kirkuk Province. ISIL lost at Tikrit ... In Syria, ISIL lost at Kobani'—with no reference to the Islamic State's continuing hold on territory in both countries, including the capture of the historic city of Palmyra in central Syria in May.

To establish his claim to success, the President upheld the US-led air strikes and efforts to interdict Islamic State finances. However, his declaration that 'we continue to ramp up our training and support of local forces that are fighting ISIL on the ground' made no reference either to the general issue of Iraqi 'commitments' or to failed US train-and-equip operations for Syria. He did not give detail to the claim that 'we're working with Iraq and the United Nations to help communities rebuild the security, services and governance that they need' or

⁴⁴ Scott Lucas, 'Syria special: how the US lost its war within hours', *EA WorldView*, 29 Sept. 2014, <http://eaworldview.com/2014/09/syria-analysis-us-lost-war-within-hours/>; Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on the airstrikes in Syria', 23 Sept. 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/statement-president-airstrikes-syria>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁵ Obama, 'Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address', 20 Jan. 2015.

⁴⁶ 'Remarks by President Obama in press conference after G7 summit', 8 June 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/08/remarks-president-obama-press-conference-after-g7-summit>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

acknowledge the difficulties—possibly insuperable—in meeting the hope for ‘an inclusive political transition to a new government, without Bashar Assad’. Instead, he fell back on the removal of ‘ISIL’ from the region, once more presenting it as an abstract threat: ‘The good news is that because of extraordinary efforts from law enforcement as well as our military intelligence, we are doing a better job at preventing any large-scale attacks on the homeland.’⁴⁷

Subsequent statements offered little illumination of measures, beyond the periodic air strikes, which could defeat the group. Addressing the press after meeting Saudi Arabia’s King Salman on 4 September, Obama spoke vaguely about Syria and then again put ‘ISIL’ within the framework not of regional concerns but of ‘terrorism’:

We share concerns about the crisis in Syria, and we’ll have the opportunity to discuss how we can arrive at a political transition process within Syria that can finally end the horrific conflict there. We continue to cooperate extremely closely in countering terrorist activity in the region and around the world, including our battle against ISIL.⁴⁸

With little strategic progress being made and uncertainty about tactics, some of Obama’s own personnel cut through the rhetoric to blame the executive. More than 50 intelligence officers in US Central Command submitted a written complaint to the Defense Department’s Inspector General claiming that, rather than developing a plan based on a realistic assessment of the Islamic State, the administration was demanding the skewing of reports to show a weakened ‘ISIL’ and Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁹ Congressional critics took apart the Syrian operations, forcing admissions from the head of US Central Command, General Lloyd Austin, that ‘only 4 or 5’ of the US-trained rebels remained on the battlefield and that there was no prospect of a ‘buffer zone’ protecting civilians and stemming the flow of refugees and displaced persons.⁵⁰

Yet, if valid, those criticisms could never engage the administration. The White House effort, despite Obama’s repeated promises of a ‘comprehensive’ strategy, was not to present that strategy for critique and implementation against ‘ISIL’. It was to maintain legitimacy amid the difficulties of ever establishing that strategy.

Reviewing Obama’s approach on 14 September, Peter Harris of *The National Interest* got to the heart of the naming and framing of ‘ISIL’:

First, the President boasted a respectable track record when it came to counter-terrorism—his killing of Osama Bin Laden and his muscular policy of drone warfare being just two examples. This meant that Obama could reasonably expect that his audience would be

⁴⁷ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by the President on progress in the fight against ISIL’, 6 July 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/06/remarks-president-progress-fight-against-isil>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁸ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and His Majesty King Salman bin Abd alAziz of Saudi Arabia before bilateral meeting’, 4 Sept. 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/remarks-president-obama-and-his-majesty-king-salman-bin-abd-alaziz-saudi>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁹ Eli Lake and Josh Rogin, ‘Investigations into Islamic State intel scandal expand’, *Bloomberg View*, 24 Sept. 2015, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-09-24/congress-investigating-whether-centcom-skewed-isis-intel>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁰ Scott Lucas, ‘Syria daily, Sept 17: does the US know what it’s doing?’, *EA WorldView*, 17 Sept. 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/09/syria-daily-does-the-us-know-what-its-doing/>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

reassured to hear that their president—the self-styled scourge of terrorists the world over—was ‘taking charge’ in a tried and tested manner.

Second, portraying ISIL as a terrorist organization was a subtle way of defining the threat in terms of US national security. Success against ISIL would mean eliminating the militant group’s capacity to strike US targets, he seemed to be suggesting. The goal was not to restore order and security—let alone democracy—to war-riven Iraq and Syria, but rather to neutralize a discrete group of militants who might harm American interests.

Third, Obama needed a way to prevent ISIL’s growing strength becoming a domestic political issue—that is, a stick with which his adversaries at home could beat him. Obama needed to appear tough enough on ISIL to ward off criticism from Republican hawks while not going so far as to embolden his Democratic supporters who chafed at the very thought of another foreign entanglement.

‘Promising airstrikes, refusing to commit ground troops, and offering a believable plan to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIL appeared to meet these domestic-political objectives,’ Harris assessed. But, he concluded, ‘the only problem is that, one year on, the strategy appears to have failed on the ground.’⁵¹

Conclusion

In his work on language and the construction of the ‘war on terrorism’, Richard Jackson argued:

The process of inducing consent—of normalising the practice of counter-terrorist war—requires more than just propaganda or so-called ‘public diplomacy’; it actually requires the construction of a whole new language, or a kind of public narrative, that manufactures approval while simultaneously suppressing individual doubts and wider political protest.⁵²

Jackson’s analysis is valuable in understanding the proactive definition of a ‘war’, such as the Bush administration’s attempt in launching the ‘war on terror’ to project America’s power both in Iraq and beyond it—using the demonstration case of ‘shock and awe’—as a global hegemon. However, it is not adequate when language is a reactive device to evade the difficulties of defining strategy and operations. Indeed, it may be unintentionally counterproductive: the focus on the language of the ‘war on terror’ may serve the Obama administration’s attempt to present the globally terrorist ISIL as the issue, distracting from its own strategic failure in local terrains.

How does one recognize and address that vital difference between language in support of a clearly defined political strategy and language covering up the lack of that strategy? The answer lies in returning from the abstraction of ‘ISIL’ back to the actuality of the Islamic State. The displacement of the group, with the vagueness of an acronym referring to a ‘Levant’ which is itself already vague for many Americans, may be a salvation for strategic incoherence: as long as the

⁵¹ Harris, ‘Obama’s ISIL strategy’.

⁵² Richard Jackson, ‘Language power and politics: critical discourse analysis and the war on terrorism’, *49th Parallel*, Spring 2005, <https://fortyninthparalleljournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/1-jackson-language-power-and-politics.pdf>, accessed 17 Nov. 2015.

priority is set as the fight against ‘terrorism’, and the ‘homeland’ is not attacked, then success can be claimed. However, that offers no prospect of redress for the terror, destruction, abuse and killing that are being perpetrated each day in the actual location of ‘Iraq and Syria’, not only by the Islamic State but by entities such as the Assad regime.⁵³

To acknowledge the Islamic State and its governance, as well as its armed forces, is not to confer legitimacy on it. Rather, it is a precondition of mounting a challenge to ‘legitimacy’, confronting the claims of IS with the evidence of its often brutal behaviour and policies, and its misreading of Islamic texts. By doing so, it meets the challenge of Obama’s declaration, issued as part of his July 2015 attempt to explain the review of strategy: ‘[The] broader challenge of countering violent extremism is not simply a military effort. Ideologies are not defeated with guns. They’re defeated by better ideas—a more attractive and more compelling vision.’⁵⁴

The naming of the Islamic State as ‘Daesh’ by Syrian and then Iraqi opponents was a linguistic engagement with the issue of legitimacy, mocking the group’s projection of its rule. At the same time, that naming raises a second issue of the ‘actual’ and the ‘local’. Ideology, or ‘better ideas’, cannot be imposed from outside. They have to come from within. That means a recognition not only of the local terrains of ‘Iraq’ and ‘Syria’ but also of the groups within those countries—groups which in many cases are not identified by even a vague acronym but are tagged as ‘moderate’, ‘extremist’ or ‘jihadist’ with no further interaction.

⁵³ Lucas, ‘Syria analysis: Obama calls for review of US strategy’.

⁵⁴ Obama, ‘Remarks by the President on progress in the fight against ISIL’.

