

# Transnational Language, Transient Identities, and the Crisis of the State in the Arab Region

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## PROJECT NARRATIVE

**T**his project has three levels of analysis in its attempt to explore the causes and consequences of the collapse of MENA regional order for its interstate and social relations. The Middle East is a competitive, fragmented and penetrated regional system. This subsystem lacks a security system and it is unique in the international system for the absence of a region-wide architecture. While in the cause of peace and security the Arab League – the region’s largest IGO – has been mobilized on numerous occasions, for a number of structural, political and ideological reasons these efforts have failed. The region is dominated by authoritarian regime types, and yet is also bereft of a hegemonic power able to impose its own will on the subsystem and therefore awash with rivalries. It is characterized by inter-state rivalries and increasingly exposed to identity politics which is manifesting itself in inter-confessional and inter-communal conflicts.

As a consequence, the region exhibits signs of deep social trauma and crisis of identity at both state and society levels. Sub-communalization is taking place across the region, thus gradually eroding the hard-won century-old national societies that independent states forcefully but carefully have put together. The region’s ‘contested’ states seem to be unravelling into smaller communities of sects, religious affiliations, tribal groups and ethnicities. The MENA region is suffering from an imbalance in the forces pushing for change – the peaceful mass mobilizations and the violent nihilistic ones. This is a region which is at once both post-modern and pre-modern. Both post- and pre-modern forces compete for power.

Modernity as the norm for much of the twentieth century – in terms of rationality as a driver of decisions, transparent institutions of governance, rule of law, reliable public services (education, health, etc.), accountable public servants, functioning state institutions, enhancement of opportunity – has been taking a back seat in driving change in the region. The regional system is vulnerable to the behaviour of sub-state and non-state actors and many of its states are suffering at the hands of violent jihadi groups who have stepped into the vacuum created by the weakening of the iron grip of central government in several Arab countries. Power is fluid, unevenly distributed, and does not necessarily manifest itself in terms of such traditional indicators as the size of population, territory, economy (GNP), or geography; nor does the size of military budgets, of the armed forces, or military hardware provide sufficient indicators of power and influence. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, it seems to be the smaller Arab states outperforming their larger counterparts; and non-state actors making waves.

**S**o, a perfect illustration of the disorder of the Arab-region-order is the rise of the Islamic State or Daesh in Iraq and Syria in 2014. The group emerged after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, albeit in different acronyms. We argue that the occupation of Baghdad is the third catastrophe, Nakba (after the defeat of 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of Beirut, Arab's capital of culture, in 1982) for the pan-Arab and revolutionary forces in the region. Hence, the region is still lacking alternative political forces to fulfil the expectations of the people and achieve development and security. Eventually, the Islamic radical groups, such as the Islamic State, seem to have become the substitute for the past political forces for doing the mission.

The Islamic state, though, is one of a kind. Unlike some other Islamic movements, such the Muslim Brotherhood or Hezbollah, which believe in political engagement method such as elections, democracy, parliamentary accountability, etc., Daesh does not intend to engage in this political life or contribute towards building such an order. It exclusively uses violence to achieve its utopian ideals including the utopian caliphate.

Language is a visual production of power. It is a 'system of thoughts' and a form of power exercise (Foucault, 1996) that is related to sociocultural context (Halliday, 1993) and institutionalizes the regular ways of talking, thinking and acting (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Hence, we believe that to follow the discourse of Daesh is one of the ways for understanding the rise of this group in the region. Along with the use of armed violence, Daesh has also employed a discourse power in several languages to promote its cause and ideology. Through such a powerful tool, Daesh has succeeded not only to convince thousands of Muslims, locals and foreigners, to join its metaphorical 'war for true Islam', but it has also succeeded to redistribute power in the region by reshaping existing socio-political, cultural and historical regional features, reconfiguring the geographical borders, and disrupting the regional economy. The project will use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodology to decode the political discourse of Daesh. CDA uses language to explain other socio-cultural and political phenomena, or as Halliday calls it 'instrumental linguistic'. We define narrative as a story, and discourse as the way the story is told. The narrative of the utopian state, for example, is a significant element of Daesh's knowledge dissemination, but the way it is told is what drives our interest.

We therefore concentrate our efforts on trying to understand Daesh's media outlets. This includes their magazines such as Dabiq (ceased in 2016), Rumiya and al-Naba'. We decode them and attempt to extract the meaning of the utterances used and that is by putting the text into a religious and a political context. Since our research is about Arab politics, we pay particular attention to the al-Naba' magazine because it targets the Arab audiences. We argue that al-Naba' can reveal plenty about Daesh and its political views. Further, Arabs in the region are familiar with political discourse. The Arabic language and poetry are important in the Arab tradition, they were used as a tool for political propaganda and political communication in the Arab peninsula. Hence, the Arabic language is one of the weapons that Daesh has perfectly employed to promote its cause. Hence, Daesh's Arabic and English discourse is one of the ways to tell the story of the evolving realities in the Middle East regarding this phenomenon.

**D**espite the centrality of Islamic State's discourse in strategic communication approaches to counterterrorism (Weimann, 2014), there have been few efforts to establish an analytical framework that rigorously explains the role of the language – framed into a discourse – in the development of violent extremism as a concrete phenomenon of Daesh since its emergence in 2014. Few have investigated the group's message and even fewer have examined its discursive power; that is whether and how the message effectively succeeded to shape the perception of its audiences on their environment in line with the group's interests. However, language is not only as a channel of communication but as a 'meaning-making machine', which produces knowledge, forms of behaviour and regime of truth (Foucault, 1975) and, in fine, which constitutes the world (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In this respect, we offer an analysis of the formation and recontextualization of Daesh's discourse as it is received and disseminated by Middle Eastern populations at several levels. For this study, a discourse network will be created around IS' message. In addition to IS's media production, this network will include state-level official positions and counter-messaging, local media outlet, academic analysis and local population opinions. Every event from those five sets of data will be coded according to several variables (date, country, location, language) to provide a holistic snapshot on how Daesh's discourse is constructed and recontextualized along time, space and across different settings such as military and political events. The data will be collected in four countries which will provide our four case studies for this research: Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. We believe that these cases provide both the conditions to conduct field research and a heterogeneous group which will allow the researcher to test Daesh's discursive power on diverse spaces, political systems, ethnic and religious units, languages and audiences.

We argue that there are constant interactions between Daesh's discourse and other regional discourses, which leads to the creation of a dialectic relationship between discursive actors and the continuing evolution of those actors' perception of their environment. We also put the emphasis on the active role of the audiences in the selection of the information and in its interpretation. Therefore, we suggest the hypothesis that those different discourses are cumulative; building on each other constantly over time.

Finally, multimodal analysis will be used as it approaches representation, communication and interaction as something more than language, extending the study of the social interpretation of language to the whole domain of meanings, which are made through visual, sonic, and other semiotic resources and their interactions in multimodal texts (O'Halloran et al., 2016: 2-3). To this end, we adopt a mixed approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Doing so, it involves integrating multimodal discourse analysis with data mining and information visualization. A particular attention will be given to intertextual and interdiscursive devices (Kristeva, 1969; Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Becker, 1995). Through this, we investigate whether Daesh's discourse is reproduced and lifted from one setting and reinserted into another context (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). SPSS t-test will be used to investigate the variance that might occur between Daesh's discourse and other regional discourses.

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