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AFTER ORLANDO AND NICE, WE MUST CHANGE OUR APPROACH TO ISLAMIC STATE

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While some were announcing the imminent death of the self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) organisation's terrorism agenda was not only stepped up, it also spread into a number of countries. During the month of Ramadan (June 6th - July 6th 2016), IS directed or inspired terrorist attacks in 17 countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, France, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Turkey, the United States and Yemen.

Various analysts saw a direct relationship between Islamic State losing territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria due to international coalition attacks and the upsurge in acts of terrorism claimed by the group. According to this view, IS is beginning a transition: abandoning its project of territorial expansion and consolidation to become a mere terrorist organisation. To illustrate this, the possibility is highlighted of IS going back into hiding, as the organisation's spokesperson, **Abu Mohammed al-Adnani**, announced in May 2016. In other words, the proximity of the clinical death of the proto-state may result in its leaders turning IS into an organisation similar to Al-Qaeda before it controlled territories: a global terrorist network.

Although this scenario seems more desirable than the current situation, this approach ignores a fundamental characteristic of IS: as well as being a territorial organisation established in Syria, Iraq, Libya and other territories, Islamic State is also a movement. Alongside its project of territorial consolidation, IS has been developing a programme of terrorism outside the Levant since 2014, as much to destabilise any state actor involved in the coalition as to establish itself as the ideological reference point for non-state groups and individuals.

In contrast to Al-Qaeda over the years, IS refers not just to the hierarchical organisation ruling the proto-state while at the same time organising attacks all over the globe, it is also something like a label that various types of actors can resort to under particular conditions. These actors may be non-state groups or individuals who are required to pledge allegiance and share IS ideology and goals (basically, the establishment of the caliphate). At a later stage, Islamic State confirms (or denies) this affiliation, as has been the case with certain groups – Boko Haram, Majilis Shura Shabab al-Islam in Libya and Abu Ayyad in the Philippines, among oth-

ers – and individuals: Amedy Coulibaly (Paris, January 2015), Seifeddine Rezgui (Sousse, July 2015) and Omar Mateen (Orlando, June 2016). In this last case, IS may “claim” the attack – if a relationship exists with a member of the organisation – or “hail” it, if the only relationship between the attacker and IS comes down to pledging allegiance or responding to its calls for attacks.

Thus, Islamic State has dimensions that are territorial (Syria and Iraq), decentralised (IS branches) and *deterritorialised*. This last aspect allows the losses inflicted on the proto-state to be disconnected from the potency of the ideology or, at least, the idea of IS. The *movement* serves both the IS *organisation* and its supporters. On the one hand it allows the organisation to spread its ideas across any territory, to gather new recruits for *jihad* and to create the feeling that it is able to hit any actor/individual opposed to its caliphate project. Reciprocally, it allows non-state groups to gain legitimacy and increase their power of attraction by swearing allegiance to the designated global public enemy no.1. In terms of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks or acts of violence, the “IS” label gives them a global dimension and can make a hero (martyr) of any individual that carries out an attack by turning an act of extreme violence – generally rooted in personal life stories and motivations – into an honourable gesture in the service of the noble cause of Islamic State.

What implications does this dual approach – *organisation* and *movement* – have for the analysis of past and future attacks? The case of the fatal lorry attack in Nice (July 14th 2016) provides an extreme example of the danger for both politics and the media of ignoring this unpredictable side of IS. The next day, in spite of the unprecedented nature of the attack and the scarcity of information, President François Hollande made the link with “Islamic terrorism” and proposed intensifying the bombings of Syria and Iraq by way of retaliation. Though the investigation had yet to reveal the reasons for the attack, both the political and media discourses had already connected Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel with the Islamic State organisation based first on his origins and then on the attack’s modus operandi and timing (during a national celebration).

Aside from the criticism of the political and media handling of the issue, the almost systematic link between various types of terrorist attacks and IS illustrates the lack of distinction between the organisation and the label. As has been shown in various cases (Saint-Quentin-Fallavier in June 2015 and Orlando in June 2016) – and possibly in the case of Nice – individuals unrelated to IS use it as a label to gain maximum media impact. Studies of these specific cases of terrorism – just like the investigations into foreign fighters – tend to reveal the extreme diversity of factors that push individuals to commit terrorist acts. The factors go beyond mere “religious radicalisation” and may be psychological (mental health problems), familial, linked to personal history (experience of police abuse), or a feeling of injustice, among others. Above all what stands out in the vast majority of cases is that the causes are personal.

The political and media reflex consists of minimising the real reasons, factors and motives behind these attacks under the pretext that their perpetrators declared themselves to be members of IS or that IS claimed/hailed their acts. Paradoxically, this tendency to put various acts of terrorism into the same category ends up serving the objectives of IS for at least two reasons: on the one hand, it gives the feeling that IS is omnipresent, even outside its fields of military operation, and that it constitutes a permanent threat to any society; on the other, it leads the media and political leaders to place individual acts (with diverse motivations) within the context of the more global framework of the supposed war on Islamic State. This vision ends up providing evidence – albeit in an inverse manner – that supports the IS discourse according to which the **West has declared war on Islam**.

In the same way, linking any individual act to the IS organisation prevents us from moving beyond the ideological convergence in which violent extremism is exclusively linked to Islamic terrorism. This convergence means the debate on violent extremism takes place in direct relation to IS, as if the physical destruction of the caliphate could put an end to the attacks. It insists on the primacy of the individuals' origins or religion and proposes only short-term security measures to fight the phenomenon. In other words, the public debate is an exact fit with IS objectives in the West: perpetrating attacks to create confusion between terrorism and Islam, exacerbating tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims ("incompatibility between Islam and democracy" and "failure of integration") to encourage governments to take measures that stigmatise Muslims and, ultimately, manage to make individuals of Muslim faith/culture radicalise in this setting.

To explore solutions to the transnational phenomenon of violent extremism reflection on our approach to Islamic State is necessary. Understanding that IS is also a label that actors and individuals can fall back on for personal/strategic reasons radically changes the ways we deal with the attacks and those responsible for them and helps us think about means of prevention. Going beyond the symbols to which IS makes reference (Islam, violence, etc.), this focus would allow the real motives behind a particular terrorist attack to be analysed along with its connection (or not) to the agenda of the Islamic State organisation; the profile of the attacker could be explored in depth and long-term solutions could be conceived that act on the push and pull factors that lead individuals to turn to violent extremism.

From this perspective, it will be shown that the reasons diverse individuals join IS (physically or virtually) or commit attacks in its name are not exclusively ideological or religious: in many cases, they are connected to personal life histories and specific contexts. This shift from the focus on ideology and its promoters towards the study of the individuals who turn to the ideology is essential if we are to prevent violent extremism in the future.