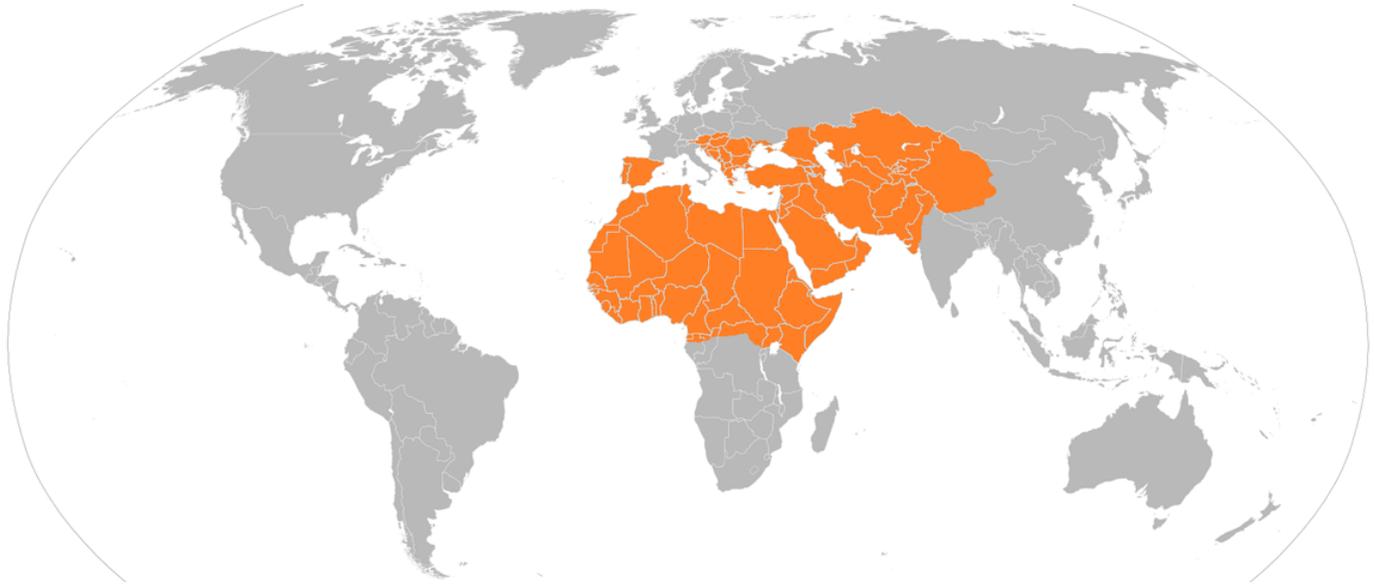


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Who decides ISIS is a terrorist group?



Social Forces

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Recent surmounting media coverage of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has evoked fear of impending terrorist threats in the minds of many. I spoke with Colin Beck, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Pomona College, to gain his thoughts on the group, as well as the designations and motivations of terrorism. Beck is the author of [“Who Gets Designated a Terrorist and Why,”](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/page/5766/3) (<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/page/5766/3>) recently published in *Social Forces*. His article examines formal terrorism designations by governments through the lens of organization studies research on categorization processes.

Why are we so concerned with ISIS now, relative to other terrorist groups and terrorist threats?

While there are a number of militant groups in Syria that foreign governments could focus on, ISIS has three things that makes it appear as a pressing threat. First, ISIS’s sudden advances in Iraq were an unanticipated event, and consequently created a media spectacle. No one really expected the Iraqi central government or Kurdish authorities to lose control of major cities and sites so quickly. Once they did, there was a major story there. Second, and related, the group has territorial control. While ISIS had controlled territory in Syria and Iraq previously, the declaration of an Islamic State in late June creates a clear target. There is little evidence that the Islamic State intends to directly attack outside of Iraq and Syria, but territorial control signals capability and threat, in the same way that aviation attacks do, as Miner and I argued in our study. Finally, ISIS engages in classically “terrorist” behavior—beheadings of captives and attacks on civilian populations. In essence, it’s the combination of sudden success, territorial control, and markers of terrorism that bring attention to the Islamic State.

None of these are sufficient explanations by themselves. For instance, compare ISIS to the recent reports about the Khorasan militant group located in Syria; in the media and even government accounts it takes on a secondary importance even though it has been suggested that Khorasan was planning direct attacks against Euro-American targets. And other Syrian Islamist groups, like al-Nusra Front, control territory but have not expanded their area so dramatically.

To what extent does the release of videos showing the beheading of victims help define ISIS as a terrorist group in the eyes of Americans?

Even before the video-taped beheadings, the attacks on Yezidis and other religious minorities seemed to signify international terrorism to the American public. There’s a seemingly odd confusion here in public opinion. While the Taliban in Afghanistan never carried out international terrorism, they were the target of the American response to September 11th just as much as Al-Qaeda was. Similarly, in Iraq, various militant groups were seen as international terrorists even without action beyond the context of the Iraqi Insurgency. Americans have thus learned to think of any militant Islamic group as terrorists; all the group needs to do is reveal its Islamicness. Attacks on religious minorities certainly do that. In this environment, beheading hostages is just another marker, especially as it echoes the acts of previously militants defined as terrorists—Al Qaeda’s beheading of Daniel Pearl in 2002 or the frequent beheadings of captives by Al Qaeda in Iraq during the Insurgency.



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Why do you think that ISIS beheaded Americans so publicly? To what extent is this attempt to consolidate their strength in their region?

I am speculating here, but I wonder if the beheadings are actually more a product of cross-militant competition than a message to the outside world. The Islamic State's leadership is not imprudent, so they must have known that attacking the citizens of western countries would create a response. (This, in fact, was one of the non-surprising results of our study of terrorism designations.) So why do it? The Islamic State could believe that the response will not actually imperil their organization and its gains. Or, possibly, that beheadings would encourage other governments to pay for hostages which have been a lucrative source of funding in recent years. More importantly, I think it is also likely that the Islamic State was trying to prove its bonafides. ISIS has been fighting with other Islamist groups among the Syrian rebels, and, in 2013, struggled with Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda over who best represents Islamist interests in the Syrian conflict. This sort of cross-Islamist conflict is quite typical, as Charles Kurzman discusses in his book *The Missing Martyrs*. So, perhaps, beheading hostages is a way to establish their credibility with other militants.

Is there anything else you think we can learn about terrorism from the case of ISIS?

ISIS really demonstrates the large amount of variation there is among "terrorist" groups. There are lots of different ideologies, lots of different goals, and lots of different types of groups among militants. While policymakers and the public tend to view certain forms, such as transnational networks of Islamists, as threatening, organizational forms might be best seen as different ways of solving resource dilemmas and meeting goals. I take this point up extensively in my book *Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Terrorists* that will be published next year by Polity Press. Also, ISIS illustrates that groups might strategically seek to conform to, or avoid, perceptions of what constitutes terrorism for various reasons. I am exploring how this might work for media labeling of terrorism in my next project.

Headline image credit: Map of the claim to power of the organization Islamic State. Created by Fiver, der Hellseher. CC BY-SA 4.0 via [Wikimedia Commons \(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claim_to_power_of_ISIS.png\)](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claim_to_power_of_ISIS.png).

Colin Beck is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Pomona College, and a faculty affiliate of the International Relations Program. His research lies in the areas of political and global-transnational sociology with quantitative and comparative-historical approaches. He is the author of "[Who Gets Designated a Terrorist and Why](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/page/5766/3)" (<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/page/5766/3>) (available to read for free for a limited time) in *Social Forces*.

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