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Understanding Your Enemy: Donald Trump and IS

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One of the concerns of Oxford Research Group over more than thirty years has been to explore conflicts and tensions as viewed by the parties directly involved. If seeking to do so involves areas of fundamental disagreement this can be subject to considerable criticism, a case in point being any attempt to see the world from an al-Qaida or Islamic State (IS) perspective. Even so, ORG would argue that it is a necessary task, and there are a number of ways of going about it.

One is to use a degree of fiction, and one recent attempt to do so has been the series of “Letters from Raqqa”. Ten of these have been published in the *Open Democracy* web journal and cover a period of a little over two years, the most recent one being on 8 December last, reflecting on the Trump election phenomenon and looking forward to further advances for anti-Muslim populist parties in Europe in 2017. As I have written elsewhere, for IS these are both the worst of times and the best of times.

The letters are written as if coming from an IS supporter working in Raqqa and therefore give an entirely different view of the conflict when compared with the typical analysis from western perspectives. In doing so, they use a wide variety of sources, both published and oral, to try and get inside the thinking of a well-educated, intelligent but utterly committed IS supporter.

Using such a “writer” has a particular problem in that the very idea of an intelligent western-educated person being in such a position does not fit with the common need to see IS supporters as essentially insane. There is, though, abundant evidence that plenty of them are at least tri-lingual and with postgraduate qualifications. They may have motives that are difficult to understand and they may be considered unbalanced but that makes it even more important to attempt to do just that.

There is a particular need to assess and understand the motives of IS at present for two quite different reasons. One is that there is growing evidence that IS has already factored into its strategy the loss of Mosul some time in the next few months and is even considering moving on beyond its previously core emphasis on the creation of the Caliphate based in Raqqa. It now intends to go “underground” engaging in long-term disruption, both in Iraq and the immediate region and also in the western countries of the “far enemy” including the UK.

The second is that the incoming US President Donald J Trump has made it clear since taking office that destroying IS and other extreme Islamist paramilitary movements will be a priority for his administration, should be a key mission for the other 27 member states of NATO, and may be the basis for a closer strategic relationship with Russia. This is an approach that is also demonstrated by the appointment of three hawkish retired generals to his cabinet (Pentagon, Homeland Security and National Security Advisor) and by the intention to increase military spending.

Moreover, his actions in the first few days in office are confirming that much of his campaign rhetoric will be followed through into office. Obamacare will be rescinded, a wall will be built on the Mexican border, the Trans Pacific Partnership will be ended and the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines will go ahead. Perhaps most significant in the current context will be plans to implement further entry restrictions on people from the Middle East, not least refugees from several conflicts in which the US is as an active participant.

As my letter-writer (an imagined IS analyst of Western politics) puts it in one of his letters a year ago, as the US primary elections got under way:

"As far as the contenders are concerned, what we would like most would obviously be a Trump victory – even better than having Farage sharing power with Cameron in London! [...]"

So put it together – America goes more hardline, the wars intensify, the refugee flows grow, Europe turns its back as anti-Muslim feelings increase, and community disorder and violence become the order of the day. The end result? Many thousands more recruits to our cause.

Perhaps you can understand why someone like me is quietly optimistic."

All of Trump's actions indicate a high level of personal self-belief with most if not all of his hardline campaign 'proposals' likely to be put into effect given the make-up of both of the Houses of Congress. In this context it is therefore reasonable to conclude that the war against IS will be intensified abroad, and the marginalisation of Muslims (chief among many other groups) within the US homeland will be exacerbated.

It may seem an appropriate way forward from the point of view of the US military and the Trump administration, yet the war against "extreme Islam" has now been under way for more than fifteen years, has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the displacement of millions of people and multiple failed or failing states. Any idea that defeating IS and other movements though relying on military action should be treated with great caution – it has not worked so far and there are few signs that this will change.

In such circumstances it is even more important to make the effort to understand the motives and attitudes within IS. The letters with a brief introduction to each, mainly concerned with putting them in the context of when they were written as they frequently refer to contemporary events, have been published as a single document recently on [Open Democracy](#) and may be of interest to ORG's readers.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '[Monthly Global Security Briefings](#)' are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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