

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Securitisation Theory and ISIS

Written by Clara Eroukhanoff

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CLARA EROUKHMANOFF, JUL 16 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

Following attacks in a range of European cities, the Islamic State group (also known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL) became a high priority on security agendas from 2015 onwards. The group has been presented as a threat to the security of the state, to the security of individuals in Western Europe and more broadly as a threat to the Western way of life. This means that the securitisation of the Islamic State group affects at least three sectors: the societal, the military and the political. Securitisation theory observes that sometimes in a democracy the government must justify the suspension of normal politics to the public. Hence, if the Islamic State group is securitised in European states, which are regarded as democratic, we should be seeing securitising moves from government officials – a rhetorical justification of why intervention, for instance, is the only way to remove the threat of the Islamic State.

It is important to note that securitising actors are not limited to politicians. Security professionals like the police, intelligence services, customs, immigration services, border guards and the military all play an important role in defining the security landscape. They operate within a field of security characterised by competition over the 'right' knowledge over the threat and other risks associated, as well as competition over the 'right' solution. Although disagreements and confrontation occur between security professionals, Bigo, Bonditti and Olsson (2010, 75–78) argue that they are still guided by a set of common beliefs and practices. Securitising actors take security threats objectively and seek to solve them by undertaking various missions. In addition, there are also functional actors who can influence the dynamic of the field of security but who do not have the power to move an issue above politics. Functional actors are paramount since they help frame storylines about the existentially threatening nature of the issue, often creating divides between 'us' and 'them' – and often implicated in 'othering' processes. Examples of functional actors can be the media, academia, non-governmental agencies and think tanks. It can also include individuals themselves, by telling and sharing stories between friends, families and colleagues. For example, extreme claims made in tabloid newspapers across Europe create a narrative in which the Islamic State group is infiltrating society and working to bring on the demise of the democratic state.

Barry Buzan Explains Threat Construction

Noticeable examples of securitising moves in the United Kingdom can be found during the House of Commons debate on the motion for British military action in Syria on 2 December 2015. British Prime Minister David Cameron argued that 'we face a fundamental threat to our security' from the threat of the Islamic State group, who 'attack us because of who we are, and not because of what we do' (this was the presentation of the nature of the threat and establishment of a regime of truth). He then said that 'we should not wait any longer' to reduce the threat (this was the point of no return). Finally, he pointed out that it is 'not about whether we want to fight terrorism but about how best we do that' (this was the solution provided).

It is more evident in France, when, after the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, President Francois Hollande declared that 'France is at war' against an army of jihadists that 'has attacked France because France is a country of

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liberty' (again, focus on 'what and who we are'). In this framing, the French people are 'a people that is fierce, valiant and courageous' and are victims of such attacks for simply 'being alive'. At the other end of the spectrum is 'them', 'an army of jihadists', of 'coward murderers' who constitute an 'abomination' and 'vile attack' that can only be characterised by 'horror'. A point of no return is invoked when Hollande claims that the Islamic State group is an organisation that 'threatens the whole world' and that this 'is the reason why the destruction of Daesh is a *necessity* for the international community'. Finally, the solution, lifting the issue 'above politics' is offered: 'immediate border controls and a state of emergency have been commanded' (Hollande 2015).

Francois Hollande's Address After the Paris Attacks

The grammar of the security speech act is discernible. The speech points to the existentially threatening nature of the Islamic State group, a point of no return and a solution which breaks free of the normal democratic processes. In the months after the Paris attacks, Hollande increased French military strikes in Syria and ordered a state of emergency that gave French security forces controversial domestic powers. Hence, we have a case of successful securitisation. It is important to note that when arguing that the Islamic State group is securitised, securitisation theorists do not challenge the existence of the group, or that the group has indeed coordinated attacks in Europe.

France After the Attacks

Instead, securitisation questions the processes by which this group has come to be viewed as a threat and argues that by naming the group a threat, leaders of European states such as France and the United Kingdom are also implicated in the making of war. In that sense, securitisation highlights how Hollande's securitising speech act does not merely describe a state of affairs 'out there', but constitutes the attacks as an act of war and by doing so, brings war into being. Describing the threat of the Islamic State group is thus not impartial or objective, rather it is in an action in and of itself, and one that should be viewed as a political act.

Anniversary Edition of Security Dialogue on the Uses of Securitisation Theory

<https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/SDI/Securitization%20Theory-1517307797467.pdf>

Using securitisation theory shows that the politics of terrorism and counterterrorism is about threat magnification and that the symbolic violence caused by attacks is out of proportion to the number of deaths it is responsible for. For example, the number of victims in Western Europe was higher in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of groups such as the IRA than the number that can be attributed to Islamic terrorists in recent times. Yet leaders of European countries claim that the world has never faced such 'barbarity', 'horror' and 'atrocities'. This threat magnification demonstrates the exceptionality of the threat, which, in turn, requires urgent and extraordinary responses. Thinking of terrorism in this way is not only detrimental to the deliberative process but also limits our understanding of terrorism more generally.

What's the Difference between Securitisation Theory and other Approaches?

Duck of Minerva

Securitization Forum: Do we need a theory of securitization?

About the author:

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Clara Eroukhmanoff is a Lecturer in International Relations at London South Bank University, UK. She is co-editor of *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations* (2017).