



Words Are Weapons: Inside ISIS's Rhetoric of Terror by Philippe-Joseph Salazar.

Trans. Dorna Khazeni. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2017. Pp. viii, 242. ISBN 978-0-300-22322-4.

Review by Caleb Cage, Reno, NV (caleb.cage@gmail.com).

In May 2019, US-backed forces in Syria announced the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In August, evidence of the death of Hamza bin Laden, the son and presumed successor of the terror group's leader, led some to speculate that Al Qaeda's future was now in question as well. These events may mark a watershed moment in the global fight against terrorism, but they may equally well represent only a lull during which each side can learn, adapt, and evolve.

In *Words Are Weapons*, professor of rhetoric Philippe-Joseph Salazar (Univ. of Cape Town) seeks to clarify how ISIS communicated during its birth and rise. As a work of scholarship, his book complements those of Faisal Devji¹ and Laurie Brand² on the interactions between societies, rhetoric, and ideology within radical Islam and political Islam, respectively. Salazar concentrates specifically on the rise of ISIS and explains just how the study of rhetoric can help us appreciate the appeal of the organization's oratorical power.

The author argues that ISIS poses such a radical threat to its western and global enemies because its extreme hostility breaks with traditional forms of politics and warfare. ISIS and the Caliphate developed new ways of interpreting sources of power in order to advance their overall strategy. Salazar maintains that this change is manifested in their rhetoric and that western governments must recognize the potency of that rhetoric in order to counteract it effectively.

Salazar shows how ISIS's words and imagery weaponize language so as to force acceptance of the Caliphate on its terms; they justify violence and murderous actions not normally tolerated within Islam. We learn as well that Isis combines these efforts and distributes them through an online Caliphate as well. Most significantly, ISIS's language is delivered and received differently from the language of its enemies:

in the Caliphate's discourse, there is a logic at work that is disjunctive relative to what we think of as logical, reasonable, and persuasive in politics. A logic of another order, a logic that appears perverse or delusional to us. But it is a logic that contains, aside from the profession of faith and its evocative poetic force, dialectical rigor: the rigor of analogical reasoning. (9)

That is, for the followers of the Caliphate, it is not the logic of the argument as we would understand it that valorizes ISIS's imagery and language; it is more a matter of strong images repeated in a poetic manner.

Salazar warns us that western governments have failed to identify these rhetorical differences when attempting to combat extremist narratives. They thus lose the rhetorical battle not merely because they are making an argument of weakness, but also because they prefer to respect cultural differences. To defeat ISIS, the West must be willing to denounce the Caliphate and its methods in stronger, more resonant terms.

1. *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr. 2005).

2 *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria* (Stanford: Univ. Pr, 2014).

Salazar stresses that the Caliphate's rhetoric resembles that of other twenty-first-century populist movements. ISIS's language of strength appeals to society's underdogs, speaking to the many betrayals and indignities they have suffered at the hands of elites; it thus perpetuates a sense of grievance and injustice for many Muslims. The author astutely provides needed context by casting the rise of ISIS as one among many manifestations of the recent opposition to globalization.

Although *Words Are Weapons* cogently explains a challenging aspect of the fight against globalized terrorism, its concise, almost breezy prose style weakens some of its key propositions and conclusions. Since Salazar adopts a specifically rhetorical perspective rather than seeing his subject from the viewpoint of security or terrorism studies, he sometimes misses critical aspects of the larger academic dialogue. For example, at one point he laments the lack of an accepted formal definition of "terror," seemingly unaware of Bruce Hoffman's discerning study of this problem in his classic work, *Inside Terrorism*.³

Philippe-Joseph Salazar has built a solid foundation for understanding ISIS's rhetoric and the failure of its adversaries to counteract it. Scholars will find much here that suggests rich lines of inquiry for their own future research. Most important, *Words Are Weapons*, coming at a time when extremist Islam is in transition, provides keen insights into how it may evolve and how the West may best evolve to combat it.

3. New York: Columbia U Pr, 1998.