

# The Naming of Evil: Sovereignty, Security and Unlawful Warfare

*Nombrar al mal: soberanía, seguridad y guerra ilegal*

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**Abstract:** This article argues for the fundamental importance of ‘evil-naming’ as a constitutive operation of modern political discourse. To achieve this goal the article first draws attention to how global, and seemingly consensual, institutional and public discourses have defined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a contemporary form of ‘evil’ and how the international community has conceived of its engagement with this entity. Based on this analysis and on insights from the history of early-modern struggles against pirates and ‘enemies of mankind’, the article shows that political modernity has less failed to erase the ‘archaic’ practice of evil-naming than constantly relied on it. To make this claim, the article identifies discursive patterns and practical effects of evil-naming and draws out the ambivalent relationship between evil-naming and sovereignty and security as cornerstones of political modernity. The article concludes by engaging with the question of whether and to what extent the concept of evil can be critiqued and dismissed as some scholars have argued.

**Keywords:** evil, war, terrorism, ISIS, Islamic State, international law, politics, philosophy.

**Resumen:** Este artículo defiende la importancia fundamental del “nombrar al mal” como operación constitutiva del discurso político moderno. Para lograr este objetivo, el artículo llama primero la atención sobre cómo los discursos institucionales y públicos globales, y aparentemente consensuados, han definido al Estado Islámico de Irak y Siria (ISIS) como una forma contemporánea del “mal” y cómo la comunidad internacional ha concebido su posicionamiento de cara a esta entidad. Basándose en este análisis y en la historia de las luchas de los primeros tiempos de la modernidad contra los piratas y los “enemigos de la humanidad”, el artículo muestra que la modernidad política no ha logrado borrar la práctica “arcaica” de nombrar al mal, sino que se ha apoyado constantemente en ella. Para fundar esta afirmación, el artículo identifica los patrones discursivos y los efectos prácticos de la nominación del mal, y destaca la relación ambivalente entre la nominación del mal y la soberanía y la seguridad como piedras

angulares de la modernidad política. El artículo concluye abordando la cuestión de si, y hasta qué punto, el concepto del mal puede ser criticado y descartado, como han argumentado algunos estudiosos.

**Palabras clave:** mal, guerra, terrorismo, ISIS, Estado islámico, derecho internacional, política, filosofía.

## I. Introduction

From early-modern pirates through to nineteenth-century anarchists and contemporary terrorists, outsider figures have constantly loomed large in self-representations of what appeared as a growingly institutionalized and interdependent international community (Simpson 2006; Simpson 2007a; Heller-Roazen 2009; Kempe and Gänswain 2010; Rech 2013). If something like the international community can be conceived at all, it seems that, as any community, it is affected by an original lack of its own (Esposito 2006) and thus becomes visible especially when confronted with perceived universal enemies and threats. As French and British representatives to the United Nations put it during the anti-ISIS campaign, a renewed sense of ‘shared humanity’ and the ‘unity of the world’ has emerged precisely through the struggle against such an enemy of mankind (S/PV.7565; S/PV.7587). Although ‘humanity’ or ‘mankind’ may not acquire political existence as a genuinely unified entity (Schmitt 2007, 53), that does not prevent political actors from constructing a sense of moral unity of mankind by identifying and addressing global threats or evils.

What has been rather impressive in the common fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the extent to which a large number of leaders and representatives of countries from all continents have described ISIS as a barbaric threat. The perceived universal need to fight ISIS has thus contributed to an unprecedented image of consensus within the international community despite deep disagreements over actual policies to be implemented in Iraq and Syria. This official consensus was formalized by the establishment of a global anti-ISIS coalition backed by the United Nations Security Council. In addition to nearly-universal consensus, a further key characteristic of the representation of ISIS as an evil is the way this representation has been facilitated by ISIS itself. ISIS has showed a strong agency in shaping its global image as a ‘barbaric’ organization by advertising and implementing its ideology through the media and abhorrent means of warfare, including systematic sexual violence and slavery (Ahram 2015). ISIS has promoted a view of Islam which seemed too radical even to al-Qaeda and shun any alliances with other Sunni groups beyond short-term strategic

collaboration (Blanchard and Humud 2017, 28). From a military perspective, ISIS unlike al-Qaeda has pursued a project of territorial acquisition and expansion that alienated several players in the Middle East, including those that initially favored the rise of ISIS as a means to promote their own agendas (Cockburn 2015, 7). ISIS has also attracted increasing international hostility by promoting attacks in countries beyond Syria and Iraq, especially in the West. In terms of media communication, the mediatization of brutal acts such as beheadings led a number of world leaders to depict ISIS as the incarnation of evil. This confirms the paradox, common to ISIS and other terrorist organizations, that terror appears to turn into an absolute evil when it is widely publicized and seems to be threatening everyone globally through local and transnational fighters, but at the same time the very practice of advertising and mediatizing evil reveals it as merely strategic, not an end in itself, or as a sheer 'simulacrum' of violence (Baudrillard 1990, 82).

ISIS encouraged this portrayal of itself as a global enemy as a way of increasing polarization, appealing to new recruits and thus also developing franchises outside the Middle East, but the stigma attached to the organization simultaneously paved the way for intensified coalition efforts resulting in its weakening in Syria and Iraq. This shows that the question of the practical consequences of evil-naming has several layers. At the most immediate level, evil-naming certainly establishes or reinforces a political boundary between the speaker, who claims some kind of legitimacy, and a disqualified opponent. But evil-naming may also allow the opponent to pose as an exceptional, apocalyptic force that can successfully appeal to the radically-minded. Further, evil-naming has indirect effects: it allows the speaker to target not only the actual evil-doers, here meaning ISIS, but also other like-minded groups as well as the facilitators of evil, e.g. authoritarian regimes and foreign powers with a political, economic and militarily stake in the conflict.

Evil-naming is a strategy for simplifying political reality, and the aim of this article is precisely to make a reverse move to disentangle the complexity of this process. The article highlights the main rhetorical patterns through which evil-naming occurs, the way evil contributes to shaping the parallel discourses of sovereignty and security, and the consequences that evil-naming may have as well as the effects it cannot possibly have, notably contributing to the genuine 'constitution' of the international community in any substantial ontological and political sense. The article opens by showing the discursive forms that states, institutions and media have elaborated to frame the fight against ISIS: the narrative of terrorist exceptionality (narrative 1), the narrative of

terrorist commonality (narrative 2) and the narrative of generalized state and non-state terrorism (narrative 3). It continues by describing evil as a modern political vocabulary involved in the construction of sovereignty, a vocabulary that can take on explicit or implicit forms depending on the actual target and the intensity of the struggle. Further, the article examines the relation between the concept of evil and arguments for security in the context of anti-ISIS interventions, thus confirming the topical nature of the concept in present international politics. The final section of the article engages with the question of whether and to what extent it is possible or desirable to abandon the language of evil in international affairs.

## **II. Three narratives and the international community**

A splinter of al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS asserted itself as a major political force in the summer of 2014 as it took Iraq's northern capital, Mosul, and turned into a self-proclaimed caliphate (Cockburn 2015; Byman 2016). This rise can be explained by a combination of several factors, including the overall instability of the region following the Iraq War; the spread of Sunni dissent following the sectarian policies of the Maliki government in Iraq; the structural internal weakness of the Iraqi state and security forces; the West's, the Gulf states' and Turkey's direct or indirect assistance to radical Sunni opposition in the context of the Syrian civil war; and increasing fragmentation in the region due to local struggles and competition between foreign powers (Haykel 2016; Perra 2016). During the first phase of its military campaign, ISIS managed e.g. to smuggle oil into Turkish territory without major obstacles, to benefit from private donations from the Gulf countries, and to get its hold on US-made weaponry allegedly meant for use by 'moderate' Syrian opposition forces. Thus ISIS has often been described as a creature of regional and international powers that was not countered until its oversized growth had become a liability to those powers.

At some point or another, ISIS has been defined as a 'barbaric', 'monstrous' or 'inhuman' organization and thus a global scourge by virtually all diplomats and policymakers in domestic and international institutions, in particular the UN.<sup>1</sup> It has been brought within different narratives based on its supposed degree of 'evilness' and analogies with other political actors in the region and beyond. Upon examination of UN documents and public statements by state officials, the main ISIS narratives can be categorized as follows: 1) ISIS constitutes an absolute evil and a unique threat to the region and mankind (narrative of terrorist exceptionality);<sup>2</sup> 2) ISIS is not an exceptional entity but rather a terrorist group *among others* (narrative of terrorist

commonality);<sup>3</sup> 3) ISIS' criminal behavior is essentially comparable with that of *public authorities* responsible for grave breaches of international norms, in particular the Syrian government or, alternatively, the foreign governments allegedly facilitating or allowing the rise of ISIS (narrative of generalized state and non-state terror).<sup>4</sup>

The above narratives can be viewed as long-standing and widespread topoi even beyond the issue of ISIS and the Syrian civil war. Modern international politics and international law have constantly oscillated between attributing evil to non-sovereign outsiders, as in narratives 1 and 2, and daring to criminalize governmental conduct – or at least the conduct of lesser or defeated sovereigns – as in narrative 3. Still, depending on the political circumstances, these narratives can overlap, and their mutual links may become more or less visible. Presently, when states and the international society face traditional threats posed by countries such as North Korea, narrative 3 becomes prevalent (S/RES/2397). Yet when the threat is constituted by 'rogue states' supposedly harboring and supporting terrorists, such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria in the eyes of former US president G.W. Bush (2002), narrative 3 can be combined with narrative 1. Here the exceptionality of the terrorist menace contributes to constructing and reinforcing the image of the rogue or failed state as a major evil to be eradicated, as still assumed by the Trump administration in the United States (Trump 2017a) and also by governments in the Global South – such as, ironically, the Iraqi government itself – which have adopted the discourse of evil in their fight against terrorism (A/71/PV.14).

In the post-9/11 world, major powers from the United States through to Russia, China and Turkey have increasingly reoriented their security discourse to asymmetric warfare and the fight against terrorists, rebels, traffickers and other outsiders. As they seek international solidarity and wish to legitimate counterterrorism operations, states frequently link foreign terrorist phenomena abroad with homeland threats – now including foreign fighters – thus extending narrative 1 into narrative 2 (S/RES/2258). This merging also has consequences beyond terrorism, since narrative 2 tends to expand to cover non-violent supposed threats such as immigration. The Security Council itself has greatly expanded its scope of action since the 1990s precisely on the basis of a link between humanitarian crises on the one hand, and refugee flows and terrorist threats on the other (Mills 1998). While political discourse has often constructed ISIS as an exceptional evil, at the same time it has established connections and analogies between the terrorist, the refugee and the migrant as figures of threat originating from rogue, fragile or failed states.

With respect to the situation in Syria and Iraq, narratives 1, 2 and 3 have been deployed flexibly by different actors and sometimes in combination with each other. The most important expression of a large consensus on narrative 1 has been Resolution 2249 (2015), which authorized the use of force against ISIS and defined this organization as an exceptional and unprecedented threat. Narrative 2 has typically been articulated in a number of other resolutions that simultaneously denounced ISIS and other terrorist groups, most often Jabhat al-Nusra. This narrative has been championed e.g. by Israel, which has used it to assimilate ISIS behavior with the conduct of Hamas and Hezbollah, and by Turkey in its attempt to delegitimize the Kurdish YPG by comparing it to ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Narrative 3 similarly denies ISIS' exceptionality but makes an explicit analogy between the gravity of ISIS' conduct and the behavior of governments, or at least condemns ISIS and governments in analogous ways, without demonizing either party in a particular way. This narrative underlies e.g. the resolutions dealing with the use of chemical weapons and other war crimes in Syria and Iraq (S/RES/2209; S/RES/2235; S/RES/2314; S/RES/2319), as well as statements by diplomats stressing the analogy between the terrorist threat posed by ISIS and the purported tyranny of the Syrian regime.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia has been a vocal speaker of this narrative, which avoids drawing a neat distinction between crimes committed by non-state actors and those committed by certain public authorities (S/2014/703; S/2014/902).

Within the United Nations, official reports on the situation in Syria and Iraq have typically resorted to narratives 2 and 3 simultaneously. This has been visible in the language of the Secretary-General, the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and the Human Rights Council, the Committee on the Rights of the Child or the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) Concerning Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities.<sup>6</sup> As reports by these actors have focused on ISIS' actual conduct and human rights violations, they have constantly refrained from defining the organization as an exceptional or unprecedented threat. These reports have still conveyed an image of ISIS as a barbaric entity but have not stressed any substantive distinction between ISIS and other belligerent forces responsible for grave human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, Iraq or other theatres of war (S/2014/770).

In official discourse, the United States and its partners have resorted to each single narrative to delegitimize ISIS and Bashar al-Assad, simultaneously or at different points in time. In November 2016 Samantha Power, the United States' ambassador to the

United Nations, stressed the exceptionality of ISIS as she claimed that ‘ISIL atrocities are in a category unto themselves, which is why the United States leads a 67-member coalition to defeat that terrorist organization’ (S/PV.7817).<sup>7</sup> This statement, an instance of narrative 1 on the uniqueness of ISIS, interestingly came at the time of the siege of Aleppo, when public critique was increasingly targeting the Syrian government and its allies rather than ISIS. Yet in December of the same year – precisely when the siege was drawing to a close and loyalist forces could claim victory – Power redefined this military outcome as a moral defeat for the victors as she remarked that ‘the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, Russia, Iran and their affiliated militias are the ones responsible for what the United Nations calls a complete meltdown of humanity [in Aleppo]. ... Aleppo will join the ranks of those events in world history that define modern evil and stain our conscience decades later: Halabja, Rwanda, Srebrenica and now Aleppo’ (S/PV.7834).

Unlike the United States, Russia has promoted narratives 1 and 2, thus stressing both the unprecedented nature of ISIS and its analogies with other terrorist groups. This has been argued to delegitimize this organization as well as contest anti-Assad forces for failing to combat the global threat of terrorism. In an address to the United Nations General Assembly delivered soon before the Russian intervention in Syria, Vladimir Putin blamed western powers and ‘so-called’ democratic revolutions for ‘the power vacuum that has appeared in a number of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa [and that] has led to the emergence of areas of anarchy that immediately began to fill with extremists and terrorists.’ He implied that western powers were responsible for the fact that ‘tens of thousands of militants are now fighting under the banners of the so-called Islamic State’ (A/70/PV.13). Putin thus called for a global anti-ISIS coalition which, ‘like the coalition against Hitler, ... could unite all the diverse forces willing to resolutely resist those who, like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind.’ Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov also argued that ‘we [Russia and the United States] all agree that Islamic State is the common threat, common evil’ (Brunnstrom and Baczynska 2015). Though Russia and America had troubles finding a common approach to the matter, Lavrov (2016) stated that ‘[i]t is with the purpose of fighting terrorism that we hope to establish closer and much more efficient cooperation on Syria with the Trump Administration, considering the US President’s clear approach to terrorism as an absolute evil. This is the criterion, the linchpin that unites us’.

The above Russian and American positions exemplify a widespread rhetorical pattern replicated by other states involved in the conflict, including Saudi Arabia, the

United Kingdom, France and the Syrian government. This is especially visible at Security Council meetings, which allow for highly rhetorical and stylized argumentation. The discursive pattern typically develops in two directions, with speakers defining ISIS as an exceptional evil (narrative 1) as well as condemning other terrorist groups (narrative 2) and/or foreign governments (narrative 3) for their alleged complicity with this organization. What is peculiar to these narratives of evil is that they are deployed not only to marginalize, exclude or discipline a particular outsider and evildoer, as has historically been most common in domestic politics and in cases of open interstate conflict; rather, they shift from merely denouncing ISIS to disqualifying those who are allegedly responsible for the rise and thriving of evil but who cannot themselves be branded as evil. The instrumentality of such narratives thus comes to the fore, invalidating functionalist or scapegoat theories that explain the construction of violence and deviance through underlying social necessities and the urge to establish the identity of a communitarian self as opposed to an enemy. True, since Hegel scholars have been accustomed to thinking that identity is shaped by confrontation with otherness, and in public discourse there is no more radical otherness than the one embodied by ISIS and analogous terrorist entities. Yet Hegel (1988) also observed that the self must eventually come to terms with its active role in the production and sustenance of the other, as famously laid out in the master/slave dialectic and as now visible in the dialectic between the international community and its outsiders. Historians have noted the way in which quintessential symbols of evil, such as the pirate, have been produced and reproduced by the very empires that proclaimed to be fighting them, and the same dynamic has repeated in contemporary history, including since the 1980s as major powers have either supported or facilitated the rise of actors such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda and ISIS (Braudel 1949; Simpson 2007b, 223).

This shows that although the presence of evil may seem to contribute to ‘constituting’ the international community, it does so in a very particular way, and definitely not as part of a process of gradual constitutionalization of the global or transnational society. What is constituted by the presence of evil, or rather by the naming of evil, is not a progressive collective or global subject. Rather, what is constituted or conjured through evil-naming is a symbolic order resting on narratives of evil and dangerous otherness that are time and again repeated for the sake of normalizing specific security practices.

While any community is marked by its own lack, absence and artificiality, this seems especially striking in the kind of community that is constructed through evil-naming. To be sure, states may well integrate on the basis of shared institutions and normative



frameworks (Bull 2002; Hurrell 2007) that address global evils without naming evildoers. However, on the occasions in which evil is named, it operates as a tool for constituting a reactive unity and a powerful means of exclusion. As Anne Orford (2003, 179) has put it with reference to the international community's compulsion to intervene in the post-Cold War scenario, '[t]he creation or production of the self of the international community becomes an endlessly repetitive project' and '[t]he horror of such narratives is that they can be, indeed must be, retold over and over'. This discursive reiteration obscures the political and economic conditions at the roots of evil-naming and reinforces the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion inscribed in the symbolic order.

### III. The co-constitution of sovereignty and evil

Despite developments in human rights and international criminal law, modern international politics and international law still artificially produce a boundary between outsiders and lesser powers that can be named as evil and certain sovereigns who cannot, though the latter can be blamed for abetting the former and thus facilitating the spread of evil. This simultaneous acceptance/rejection of evil-naming is symptomatic of modernity's ambivalent attitude to evil. On the one hand, modern politics since its inception in the Renaissance emerged as a denial of evil-naming under the banner of the utter autonomy of politics vis-à-vis ethics; on the other hand, modern politics has retained the need to name evil, a typical component of medieval thought and just war theory (Russell 1975; Haggemacher 1983). The resulting paradox is that modern international political discourse constantly names evil while simultaneously blocking the avenues for addressing it. Modern institutions, most importantly sovereignty and property and the rights attached to them, including the right to make war, are the paradigmatic means used by political and economic actors to normalize certain evils instead of others (Veitch 2007, 17). These vocabularies cut through social reality and determine the limits of the speakable and the grievable (Butler 2004; Butler 2009).

In light of their relational ambivalence, sovereignty and evil can best be understood as co-constituted rather than antithetical or belonging to irreducibly different fields of discourse, e.g. 'ethics' and 'politics'. Sovereignty achieves legitimation and secures obedience both by neutralizing evil and evoking it. Sovereignty needs evil in order to overcome it, to make it disappear, if only in an illusory way. Only this projection of an external evil can validate the engendering of evil by sovereignty itself. Indeed, the sovereign authority that names evil as external to itself is at the same time an

active participant in the production and reproduction of the very phenomena that domestic and international discourse defines as evils, including wars, pandemics, famines and environmental crises.

As illustrated by the Syrian civil war, the ambivalences of sovereignty and evil-naming entail that those who claim to combat evil may be barely distinguishable from the evil they purportedly fight against. This knot becomes increasingly harder to unravel as armed conflict escalates and belligerents' will to self-preservation and self-assertion provides fertile ground for the systematic demonization of the adversary on all sides. Here the logic of security and the naming of evil go hand in hand, and the latter can no longer be reduced to a tool for furthering the former. Once evil is named and defined, it operates as a cognitive framework through which the parties tend to view the war and which frames their understanding of past, present and future relations with the enemy.

The modern laws of war and state-centered diplomacy have recurrently yet incoherently attempted to displace evil. They have done so by providing rules for restraining violence on the ground and breaking circles of vengeance at war by making higher status political leaders and lawful enemies largely unaccountable, as might be confirmed by the political destiny of Bashar al-Assad. The narrative of laws of war and diplomacy assumes that, given universal inability to stop evil, the second-best option is to prevent 'crime'. It is unclear whether contemporary international law, in particular international criminal law, has fundamentally changed the picture. The case of Assad might once again show that international politics has been able to create an artificial paradise of sovereign immunity and amnesty in which it is possible to re-name and re-label an evil that cannot be actually foreclosed or sublated. Diplomacy and the laws of war do not obliterate evil-naming across the board; they simply make it a matter of sovereign privilege, as per Hobbes' theory. This ambivalent attitude to evil is bound to re-start the very circles of vengeance that the laws of war and diplomacy endeavor to avert in the first place. The future of Syria may not be an exception to this dynamic.

Evil-naming in international discourse regarding Syria, as well as North Korea, confirms that 'evil' is as lively as ever and the strategies for neutralizing and displacing it only work so far. Evil has lost purchase, at least in some societies, as a theological concept for describing individual immoral conduct, but the vanishing of evil in ordinary conversations has actually increased popular fascination with this term when used as a label to designate exceptional enemies. At present the rhetorical

power of evil-naming rests on the very exceptionality of its use and declines as evil turns into an everyday label that is no longer able to highlight the moment of exception. Instead, evil thrives with increasing temporal, cognitive and geographical dissonance between the traditional settings in which the concept was deployed and its current users. Thus the revival of evil-naming does not come with more accurate philosophical comprehension and historical awareness of the meanings of evil. The ambiguity of evil is actually valued by political actors as allowing several sorts of responses while alluding to the politico-theological foundations of the power of the sovereign as a kind of *katechon* (Schmitt 2006; Cacciari 2013).

When political actors name evil, they typically posture as forces of the good. Philosophically, this relation between good and evil can be understood in two ways. First, from a Platonic and Augustinian perspective, it could be claimed that evil has no ontological autonomy; therefore the naming of evil presupposes the good as that which is negated by evil. Yet this classical idea of the ontological priority of the good has been sidelined by the cognitive and epistemological concerns of modern thinkers, most famously Kant, who have drawn attention to the way human agents actually get to know what is good. Kant reverses the Augustinian position by arguing that the moral law is only an empty form, and human agents can be said to act morally only when they react to something immoral and evil. It is only in reaction to evil that good can be brought to light. The alternative, which this article embraces, is to dismiss the question of priority altogether and view good and evil – or rather the perception of good and evil – as mutually and contextually shaped. These two terms co-determine each other within a complex semantic field that includes not only the terms ‘evil’ and ‘good’ but also those that stand for evil, such as ‘atrocities’, ‘war crimes’ and ‘crimes against humanity’, and those that stand for the good, such as ‘development’, ‘humanitarian assistance’ and ‘humanitarian intervention’. With respect to the discourse on ISIS, this reading allows us to see evil-naming as implicit good-naming. Authoritative speakers in this discourse strengthen their political legitimacy by defining the other as evil and implicitly claiming the status of protectors of the good. Evil-naming allows them to obscure the gravity of whatever pertains to purportedly peaceful politics and does not qualify as immediate physical evil, in particular structural and global forms of economic and social violence, as well as the responsibilities of the self-proclaimed forces of the good for such phenomena. Evil-naming is always a mechanism for displacing responsibility that acts as a condemnation of the other’s evil and a validation of one’s evil in the same breath.

#### **IV. Modalities of evil-naming: a spectrum from explicit to implicit targeting**

This article opened by showing that evil-naming can take on different shapes depending on its actual target. This section adds a layer of complexity by illustrating that the meaning of evil-naming depends not only on its actual target but also on the intensity of targeting. While the first section described who is targeted by evil-naming, this section is concerned with modality, with how evildoers and their abettors are targeted.

The intensity of targeting virtually moves across a spectrum from explicit and direct to implicit and indirect. This becomes visible when certain subjects are openly disqualified as evildoers while their abettors, who cannot be named as evil, are denounced in more moderate tones for allowing evil and barbaric acts to occur. Explicit and open targeting typically characterizes narratives 1 and 2, which take aim at political outsiders, whereas implicit targeting can mostly be associated with narrative 3, which assumes a substantial equivalence between state and non-state terror. For instance, while ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and political leaders such as Bashar al-Assad may explicitly be named as evil, those who support them may only implicitly be related to such evil. In the contexts of the fight against non-state actors, the 'real' target is the implicit target, in which case the explicit, terrorist target operates as a discursive Trojan horse. When the explicit target is an outsider, they may be evoked but not truly addressed, whereas the real yet implicit target is part of the recognized international community, which in this respect functions as the only meaningful community of speech.

Explicit and implicit targeting may occur simultaneously and either modality may become more or less visible depending on the status and goals of the actors involved. Explicit targeting is most apparent in times of open interstate and domestic war or when serious threats to national security occur (Jakobs 2004), while implicit targeting is predominant in times of relative interstate and domestic peace. In times of open interstate conflict, which political leaders contribute to constructing and defining, the rhetoric of evil is resorted to by these leaders as they aim to secure legitimacy as defenders of the nation. The perception of a threat both allows and forces leaders to take on this role as sovereign protectors and behave, or at least pose, as if they were taking action in response to the threat. When states instead are at peace with each other and/or do not face immediate and major threats, they tend to be more strategic in their use of the discourse of evil, as shown above. In such situations, states deploy narratives of evil mostly to position themselves vis-à-vis other powers before

the domestic and global audience rather than justify military commitment, which may be fairly low despite harsh public rhetoric, as illustrated by the West's reluctance to take action at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.

In general, the weaker the actual threat, the more the real target tends to shift away from it. As a consequence, evil-naming appears even more artificial and instrumental than it is in times of open warfare. This strategy is not novel by any means. In his 1758 masterpiece *The Law of Nations*, Emer de Vattel articulated one of the earliest theories of collective security by elaborating on the traditional notion of the 'enemy of mankind'. In his book the coeval reader could distinguish an explicit target, the Barbary corsairs, from an implicit, actual target, Frederick II of Prussia, who was then waging war against Vattel's employer, Frederick Augustus II of Saxony Poland (Rech 2013, 138). In the *Law of Nations* the war conduct of Frederick II of Prussia, an 'enlightened' European sovereign, was only indirectly and implicitly assimilated with that of notorious villains such as the Barbary corsairs. This historical instance additionally shows that there does not need to be any factual link between the explicit evildoer and the implicit evildoer. The attribution of evil to the implicit evildoer may be a matter of pure allusion and analogy with the explicit evildoer's conduct. At the extreme end of implicit targeting there are instances in which the actual target is not the military target named as evil but a target audience sitting in the background, an audience that is pressured to recognize the speaker's fight against evil and thus to meet certain demands. In the 1780s, when Thomas Jefferson, one of Vattel's most attentive readers, argued that the United States should 'totally destroy' the Barbary fleet, his target audience were Britain and France, which he hoped would acknowledge his country's standing in international politics in light of America's military annihilation of Barbary, a traditional yet now weakened enemy of all: 'We ought to begin a naval Power, if we mean to carry on our own commerce. Can we begin it on a more honorable occasion or with a weaker foe?' (Sofka 1997, 533).

Implicit targeting tends to turn explicit and concrete as military commitment grows and needs some form of domestic and international legitimation. Here again, security arguments and evil-naming go hand in hand. GW Bush regularly resorted to narratives of evil to justify American war efforts, and the Obama administration began to use the language of evil systematically as ISIS fighters beheaded American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. The same readiness to resort to the vocabulary of evil has been visible in the discourse of Donald Trump. Announcing his decision to raise troop levels in Afghanistan, a move contradicting his former isolationist stance, Trump

(2017a) has pointed out that '[i]n every generation, we have faced down evil, and we have always prevailed'. Later, in his first address to the UN General Assembly, Trump (2017b) resorted to both moralist and security registers to argue that, if forced to do so, the United States 'will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea' since '[i]f the righteous many do not confront the wicked few, then evil will triumph'. Such statements confirm the enduring fascination of western politics with clear-cut images of the world as divided into forces of evil and forces of the good.

## **V. The twofold narrative of evil and security in the language of intervention**

The link between moralist and security arguments in the naming of evil has openly emerged in the discursive patterns that have been articulated to justify military interventions against ISIS. These patterns are structured by the co-existence and co-constitution of the narrative of evil and the discourse of sovereignty. While sovereignty and modern statehood seem to be grounded on the very denial of evil as rooted in older theological and moral vocabularies, a more ambiguous relationship comes to light in what follows. The emerging picture is that ISIS has been targeted as an utmost evil only when it had become clear that it constituted a threat to *states* and wished to become itself *a state*. Only ISIS' project of modern statehood turned its evil into a global evil. This illustrates that narratives of evil and modern statehood are not mutually exclusive as secularization theories used to assume, but rather co-constitutive and perpetually linked by an underlying logic of security that still provides the core source of legitimation for the state. The modern state defines itself by denying evil, and the utmost evil is precisely embodied by external or internal entities that threaten the survival of that state. While evil has largely been overlooked by international relations scholarship as not fitting within established narratives of modern statehood (Rengger and Jeffery 2005, 3), it remains a fundamental and persistent concept through which practices of international politics are justified.

This has been manifest in international discourses articulated by all major powers advocating and conducting military interventions against ISIS, though this has occurred with different nuances depending on the political context. For instance, when ISIS fighters beheaded James Foley and Steven Sotloff in August and September 2014, the United States government reacted by advocating a military response short of troop deployment on the ground to increase the feeling of security among the American public while ruling out a deeper involvement that would be too costly in terms of casualties and expenditures. It is important to note that, soon after the videos became

public, the United States government and major technology companies managed to reconstruct the security threat in a way that partly neutralized the intention of the creators. Whereas the original videos included images and comments that presented the beheadings as acts of retaliation against the United States, the originals were soon replaced by selected screen-grabs that rather highlighted the brutality of the perpetrators (Molin Friis 2015). Thus, the image of ISIS as evil was the product both of ISIS' deliberate conduct and war strategy and of western political and media reconstruction of that behavior. Further, the novel designation of the organization as 'ISIL' instead of 'ISIS' was also meant to delegitimize the political ambitions of this entity (Sinifer and Lucas 2016).

The relative success of this relabeling of ISIS and the reconstruction of the organization's message through the media does not have to imply that the threat was fictitious, or that the Obama administration could have reacted in a different way. Rather, considering the beheadings of Foley and Sotloff on the one hand and the risk of counterproductive military engagement on the other, the 'degrade and destroy' strategy was a hardly surprising way of striking the middle ground. The strategy both asserted the evilness of the threat and the need to counter it by limited military response considering contextual factors. As mentioned above, times of perceived threat almost naturally induce leaders to deploy a language of evil, which is precisely what a large part of the public opinion would expect, but the concrete answer to that evil depends on concrete circumstances and must be balanced with various factors, e.g., for Obama, the American population's uneasiness about ground intervention given the experience of the Iraq War. In fact, the difference between exceptional times requiring a firm response to evil and times of relative peace is not a measurable or objective one. It is a state of affairs which the sovereign has to declare, and which is actively shaped and constructed by political leaders and the media. This again shows the mutual relationship between sovereignty and evil. On the one hand, the sovereign decides what counts as evil and how to respond to evil, thus acting as a secular priest and mediator between reality and transcendence; on the other, only the perception of extreme evil can provide legitimacy for the boldest acts of sovereignty, in particular the decision to make war when a country is not under direct attack.

The importance of evil in the American discourse on ISIS and its relation to the protection of national sovereignty and security became visible in President Obama's speech of August 7, 2014, at the beginning of the United States' anti-ISIS campaign. Obama (2014a) announced he had authorized two operations in Iraq, one to protect

American personnel and facilities, including the American consulate, since ISIS was advancing on Erbil, and one to save the Yazidi population under attack by ISIS on Mount Sinjar. Obama also mentioned that the Iraqi government had explicitly requested American assistance to counter the ISIS threat. Use of force was thus justified on three grounds, including humanitarian aspects: protection of nationals abroad, prevention of a potential genocide, and host country mandate for intervention.

The American discourse on evil became more assertive, both in terms of legal argumentation and moral tones, after James Foley and Steven Sotloff were beheaded. In his statement of September 10, 2014, Obama defined ISIS as a ‘cancer’ and ‘evil’ to be eradicated. Given the time of exception, though, he stressed self-defense as the central argument for the use of force as he addressed an American public that expected a clear governmental response in the aftermath of the murder of two American citizens. This forced Obama to come up with a strategy for defeating ISIS, i.e. the ‘degrade, and ultimately destroy’ strategy, which he presented to the public in that speech. At the close of his statement Obama made it clear that America ‘will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are. That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq. This is a core principle of my presidency: If you threaten America, you will find no safe haven’ (Obama 2014b).

From an international legal perspective, extending military operations from Iraq to Syria made all the difference, since the argument from host state consent could no longer apply. To compensate for this, the Obama administration turned its focus on the rather controversial ‘willing or unable’ argument, according to which the use of force against non-state actors on a foreign state’s territory is allowed whenever this state fails, deliberately or due to some impediment, to stop those actors from operating against foreign countries on its soil. In the United States’ notification to the United Nations of action against ISIL, ambassador Samantha Power explained that American operations in Syria were lawful since ISIL constituted a threat to the United States and the latter’s partners and allies, and ‘the Syrian regime has shown that it cannot and will not confront [ISIL’s] safe havens effectively itself’ (S/2014/695). Obama (2014c) similarly addressed the House of Representatives by stating that extending the strikes to Syria was ‘necessary to defend the United States and our partners and allies’. Along with this legal language, the Obama administration kept using a moral register showing the United States’ commitment to ‘destroying ISIS as an evil in the world’ (Biden 2016). President Trump similarly asserted a narrative of evil and punishment, including reference to God and justice, to legitimize action against both ISIS and the



Syrian government despite his pre-electoral call for America to abandon the role of the world's policeman. As Trump ordered an airstrike on a Syrian air base on 7 April 2017, he argued that 'no child of God should ever suffer such horror' as the one caused by Assad.

One of the United States' main allies in the fight against ISIS, France, resorted to arguments similar to those expounded by the Obama administration as French forces extended operations from Iraq into Syria. These arguments were also made public in a similar sequence as in the United States. Early on, in his announcement of 18 September 2014, President Hollande (2014) declared that France would initiate airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq based on a request by the Iraqi government and to protect France's 'own security'. He relied on the narrative of 'terrorist commonality', claiming that ISIS constituted a threat to international security of the same order as terrorist groups that France had already confronted, especially in Mali. This was meant to present the task of fighting ISIS as somehow less daunting.

On that early occasion Hollande explicitly mentioned that France would intervene in Iraq only. One year later, as France began operations in Syria, he made a public announcement stating that 'we will strike every time our national security will be at stake.' He stopped short of arguing, as Obama had, that strikes would hit terrorists 'wherever they are,' but Hollande's phrasing still allowed for broad interpretations and discretion of action (Hollande 2015). In the aftermath of the Bataclan attack of November 2015 Hollande also deployed moral language that came close to that used by Obama after the beheadings of Foley and Sotloff, and which characterized ISIS as a barbaric entity requiring a 'merciless' response (Anon. 2015). Immediately after the Bataclan events France promoted Security Council Resolution 2249 that called on 'Member States that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures ... to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIS' (S/RES/2249). Speaking at the Security Council on that occasion, France's ambassador to the United Nations, François Delattre, moved from the notion of terrorist commonality to the concept of ISIS exceptionality as he noted that the resolution 'recognizes the exceptional nature of the threat posed by Daesh' (S/PV.7565). He called for the 'broadest possible mobilization' and claimed that 'against Daesh, we have our common humanity [*face à Daesh, nous avons l'humanité en commun*].' The argument of the exceptional evil was then used by several countries to justify armed intervention in Syria lacking requests for assistance by the Syrian government.

British Premier Minister David Cameron also frequently combined security arguments with a discourse of ISIS as a both evil and exceptional menace. At a debate in the Commons on 2 December 2015 he welcomed resolution 2249 and the fact that it characterized ISIS as an ‘unprecedented threat’ to international security, which provided a ‘clear legal basis’ for Britain to extend military operations from Iraq into Syria (Cameron 2015). Indeed, despite the murders of British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning in September and October 2014, the United Kingdom had not followed the United States and France in initiating strikes in Syria prior to Resolution 2249 being adopted. This was partly due to Britain’s unwillingness to commit to yet another military intervention after the Iraq War and the unfortunate outcome of the toppling of Gaddafi in Libya, which in France had partly been obliterated by what Hollande called a ‘victorious’ engagement in Mali. Eventually the United Kingdom followed suit attacking loyalist Syrian forces, but the naming of Assad and ISIS as evil threats, a practice which began in the early stages of the civil war, had not determined that particular policy from the start. It only opened a discursive terrain in which Britain could take several courses of action, including, if needed, military intervention. This exemplifies, once again, that evil-naming is a performance that can have a variety of motives and consequences depending on the political contexts in which it takes place, and it may or may not be followed up by concrete action. Thus evil-naming does not necessarily and immediately lead to ‘absolute enmity’ on the ground, though it can provide a cognitive framework for justifying radical hostile action given the supposed gravity of the threat, as well as contribute to the international marginalization and sanctioning of those named as evil.

This has been visible not only in the discourse of state officials but also in scholarly debates in international law regarding the legitimacy of states’ intervention against ISIS (Bannellier-Christakis 2016; Corten 2016; Dunlap 2016; Gordon and Perugini 2016; Tesson 2016; Tsagourias 2016; Couzigou 2017). These debates have revolved around the applicability of specific legal doctrines, primarily that of self-defence, and certain controversial concepts such as the ‘unwilling or unable’ standard, based on which a state would be allowed to take military action against non-state actors operating on the territory of a third country if this country’s government fails to neutralize the threat on its own. However, the technicality of these discussions has not erased moral language from the field. Fernando Tesson (2016, 187), for instance, has argued that ISIS qualifies as an enemy of mankind whose atrocities are likely to become more heinous than those committed by the Syrian government. This would be an example of the narrative of exceptionality described above. Tesson is probably the most explicit defender of the

enemy of mankind thesis, though some other international lawyers similarly tend to frame the ISIS issue by constructing a dichotomy between forces of evil and forces of the good (Dunlap 2016) and taking at face value the anti-ISIS consensus within the international community (Bannellier-Christakis 2016).

## VI. Abandoning evil?

That the notion of evil appears to be undermined by deep ambivalences raises the question of whether and to what extent the notion might be dropped in political discourse. At first sight, abandoning the terminology of evil might be helpful to avert Manicheism, mitigate confrontational attitudes and clarify where the concrete stakes of particular political conflicts lie. Yet the risk might be that once essentialist notions such as ‘evil’ and ‘barbarism’ are erased from the vocabulary of international politics, novel notions will emerge to fill the gap since actors involved in political struggles will never cease seizing discursive opportunities to qualify their own action as legitimate and lawful and disqualify their opponents. If no such novel notions emerge, existing and popular notions, such as national security or national interest, may take on increasingly polemical overtones to compensate for the diminishing rhetorical effect of moral vocabularies. Political actors who wish to stick to a more secularized vocabulary may prefer to talk of e.g. ‘atrocities’, ‘cruelty’ or ‘malice’ instead of evil.

As a complex semantic field, evil cannot simply be made disappear as a remnant of older discourses. It remains present even in its absence, as an inherent possibility of the political that reemerges when political and social boundaries are activated and enemies identified. To mention but the western tradition since the Middle Ages, evil was a popular theme in just war theory and canon law at the time of the Crusades, was dismissed in fights for power in Renaissance Italy, returned during the Wars of Religion, and was again dropped in the ‘cabinet wars’ of the eighteenth century. Later on, secularized notions of evil reemerged during the French Revolution, were again rejected after the Congress of Vienna, and eventually returned as a way of characterizing total warfare and genocide in the twentieth century, from World War Two through Rwanda and the current fight against ISIS. Be it framed as a ‘sin’ or a ‘crime against humanity’, the vocabulary of evil seems to be an unavoidable presence in political discourse, not something that can be entirely redescribed (Rorty 1989). Here, again, what eternally returns is not the word evil but rather the semantic field of which it is part, and which allows international actors to categorize novel political manifestations such as ISIS according to well-known discursive patterns.

Thus the task of the scholar is not simply to craft new and non-moralistic vocabularies to replace obsolete and hegemonic ones but to critique the structural conditions underlying the use and abuse of hegemonic language (Topper 1995). That 'evil' should be subject to a political critique does not depend on the supposedly natural meaning of the concept or its philosophical weakness but on the way it contributes to shaping or consolidating power relationships under specific circumstances. For this reason, critiquing evil is not enough. Scholars and public intellectuals simultaneously need to uncover the social conditions and political projects that the rhetoric of evil is meant to entrench.

One of the most authoritative voices in the discussion of evil, Susan Neiman (2004), has suggested that the notion should be debated and used responsibly, not abandoned altogether.<sup>8</sup> According to her, evil is an ineradicable part of human existence, and extreme atrocities need to be conceptualized as morally puzzling evils, not as quantifiable harms, losses and collateral damages. For her, evil is what escapes any attempt to quantification. Addressing the question of Auschwitz, she argues that 'what makes Auschwitz a problem for thinking about evil cannot be a matter of *degree*, for at this level, there are no scales' (Neiman 2004, 256). Yet, even assuming that evil is a meaningful notion as Neiman claims, her position must be qualified further if it is to be relevant for politics. Humans may be cognitively unable to distinguish between extreme forms of evil, but if they wish to act politically they need to identify relevant evils to be addressed, which requires an assessment of the relative gravity of these evils compared with other evils. This does not entail the utilitarian weighing of 'greater' and 'lesser' evils, but simply acknowledging that views of evil are always contextual and even genuinely humanitarian political actors can take care of only a tiny fraction of global evil. Actors need to decide which kinds of evil they want to address, which is inevitably decided on the basis of situated considerations of what counts as threatening to them and others under particular circumstances. This seems to be an argument that could complement another important theory that resonates with Neiman's, Adriana Cavarero's theory of 'horrorism' (Cavarero 2009). Cavarero convincingly shows that it is hard to see how humanity could do without some moral notion that attempts to describe extreme suffering from the viewpoint of the victims. Although academics and experts may define radical violence as a means to an end and thereby de-emotionalize it, one must acknowledge that from the perspective of the defenseless 'the strategy that strikes them is, as violence unilaterally undergone, the entire substance. Neither means nor end, it consists in the unappealable actuality of mere destruction.' (Cavarero 2009, 74) Expert discourse cannot erase humanity's

need to name suffering. Cavarero recognizes that extreme violence has a strategic aspect but she stresses that public discourse cannot be content with describing that violence through expert or legalistic vocabularies. To be sure, this does not mean that critique should refrain from scrutinizing evil-naming, since all too often the voice of the victims is manipulated within political discourses that make actual suffering, just as actual violence, instrumental. In addition, the risk of resorting to moral vocabularies without simultaneously attempting to understand the political strategies behind violence would make us blind to the legitimacy claims made within specific contexts by terrorist organizations such as ISIS, which must be taken into consideration if responses to terror are to be effective in the long term (Denselow 2015).

This cautious approach seems to have been downplayed by Michael Ignatieff, one of the most vocal supporters of the language of evil in the fight against terror. He claims that harms connected to terrorism and the necessary responses to it 'should be spoken of only in the language of *evil*' (Ignatieff 2004, 18). He explains that his '[u]sing the word *evil* rather than the word *harm* is intended to highlight the elements of moral risk that a liberal theory of government believes are intrinsic to the maintenance of order in any society premised upon the dignity of individuals' (Ignatieff 2004, 18). In fact, these lines explain little and perhaps make the matter even more confused. In this they resemble Michael Walzer's attempt to single out terrorism as a peculiar form of evil, which may resonate with our moral consciousness but seems to fail as a philosophical argument. When Walzer (2004, 51) endeavors to clarify why terrorism is such an obnoxious evil compared with other crimes, he claims that 'this, then, is the peculiar evil of terrorism – not only the killing of innocent people but also the intrusion of fear into everyday life, the violation of private purposes, the insecurity of public spaces, the endless coerciveness of precaution.' This does not seem to provide a convincing answer to the question of why terrorism qualifies as an extreme evil compared with, say, systematic killings, child abuse and sexual slavery, all of which has been committed in ISIS-controlled territory but which does not always fit the label of terrorism. Authors such as Ignatieff and Walzer appear to be holding on to the concept of evil without being persuasive enough as they try to tell exactly why it should be helpful. This gives the impression the category has forfeited its analytical potential although it may retain an existential and subjective meaning. In a nutshell, these writers still want to speak about evil given their ethical commitment, but they do not seem able to overcome the challenges posed by situated critiques of the ambivalences of evil-naming. In a piece directly related to ISIS, Walzer (2016) has apparently moved away from his initial position by suggesting that ISIS fighters might need to be recognized

as lawful belligerents, yet this change of mind should not mislead the reader. Walzer is still reasoning under the classical assumption that public enemies should not be treated as terrorists, and he claims that ISIS might fit the bill of public enemy since this organization has established a quasi-state. This does not necessarily impact on Walzer's earlier statement that traditional terrorism committed by non-state actors features a peculiar degree of evilness (Walzer 2004, 51).

A different tack yet has been taken by authors who have openly attacked the rhetoric of the Axis of Evil during the so-called war on terror, a critique that has become topical again in light of Donald Trump's declarations on the need to combat rogue states. One of the most renowned versions of this critique has been provided by Richard Bernstein (2005; 2002), and two aspects in particular of his theory need to be mentioned here. First, Bernstein (2005) calls for questioning the 'abuse' of evil and the notion of absolute evil based on the notion of human contingency, finitude and moral disagreement. Bernstein notes that because human agents have no access to ultimate truth, clear-cut good/evil dichotomies do not stand critical scrutiny. Second, Bernstein advances the idea that although truth is inaccessible, rational and democratic debate can lead us to an increasingly better understanding of the world and allow us to make ethical choices more consciously. The latter claim is less obvious than the former. If, for instance, there is something wrong with the practices of ISIS, or with the intervention policies of external powers in Syria, this seems to be less a conclusion that can be drawn from a balanced analysis than a matter of situated and precarious judgement and feelings that may arise when atrocities are committed on the ground and relayed by media. It is at this point that evil and evil-naming seem to re-emerge as ineradicable presences in political discourse and decision-making, which typically operate on the basis of strong convictions, particular interests and scarce, selected and biased information. The problem in Bernstein's narrative is to assume that in between moral/political judgement and the law there is some field of rationality that helps us make good decisions, including by violating the law when necessary to promote a rational goal such as the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Yet this rationality is no autonomous sphere but rather an ideal that in concrete decision-making becomes imbricated with political strategies, religious beliefs and ethical intuitions. It is at this juncture that evil and evil-naming inevitably re-emerge, including by colonizing expert and technical vocabularies that are supposedly neutral and objective. In the current 'global civil war', the targeting of evildoers can indirectly occur through the expansion of, say, 'areas of active hostilities', a neologism indicating a situation in between war and peace in which the forces of the good pursuing their own security have the right to intervene. Here,

apparently well-reasoned arguments for security may have consequences that are not dissimilar from evil-naming.

Both Neiman's and Ignatieff's attempts to revive evil and Bernstein's denying evil a normative and ontological status run across difficulties. Neither can these approaches coherently demonstrate that the notion of evil is a helpful conceptual resource, nor that it should be obliterated. Examining these theories further would go beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to recognize here a potential dead end indicating that scholars may have to move away from the normative question of whether the concept of evil can be helpful to the epistemological issue of whether it might be obliterated at all, regardless of its supposed advantages and disadvantages. Narratives of evil are a constituent part of modern political discourse and cannot simply be justified or confuted in any ultimate way. They come with ambiguities and shortcomings that need to be scrutinized anew whenever and wherever evil is named.

## VII. The horizon of evil

Almost all authors after 9/11 have agreed that at least the abuse of evil-naming, if not the concept of evil as such, is problematic since it allows dubious representatives of mankind to demonize their particular enemies in an unwarranted and often hypocritical manner. It is now part of the common sense of critical scholars in the age of terror that there is something deeply unsettling about evil-naming. This article has shared this intuition but endeavored to dig deeper. This has been done by carrying out a fine-grained, situated analysis of evil-naming in the early sections to move on with a broader semantic inquiry into the relationality of the concept of evil in the core part of the article, based on which the question of the legitimacy of the uses of evil has been posed again in the last section of the piece.

Thus, to provide a far-reaching investigation of evil-naming the article has begun by unravelling the recurrent rhetorical patterns through which evil is named in concrete situations, in particular the fight against ISIS, thereby fleshing out the actual effects evil-naming may or may not have, and highlighting what actors actually 'do' when naming evil apart from demonizing (what appears to be) an explicit target. Building on this analysis and with reference to analogous cases in modern history the article has further re-read the interaction between narratives of evil and other fundamental discourses of political modernity such as sovereignty and security. It has been stressed that evil cannot be isolated as an object of study, and critiquing evil cannot succeed unless something else is critiqued in the same breath. Both a fine-grained, situated analysis of evil-naming

and a broader investigation of how evil narratives interact with parallel discourses are needed since we still lack insights into the question of what evil-naming is about in today's international law and politics and whether and in which ways the concept of evil might still be useful for an understanding or a practice of global politics. Therefore, while the article has focused on evil-naming with respect to ISIS and other actors involved in the Syrian conflict, it has underlined some long-standing mechanisms for the construction of evil that seem to be part of political modernity more broadly, such as the distinction between sovereign and non-sovereign evildoers, the differentiation between explicit and implicit targeting, the mutual relation between the construction of evil and the construction of sovereignty, and the interplay of narratives of evil and arguments for security in the justifications for military intervention.

The last section has posed the question of whether, given the deep ambivalences of evil-naming, the notion of evil actually ought to be erased from contemporary political language as a remnant of pre-modern discourse. However, the fact alone that the concept of evil is inextricably related to our conscious and unconscious representations of sovereignty and security warns that any attempt to get rid of evil from within the horizon of political modernity may be a delusive ambition. If the word 'evil' were dismissed as an archaic and unsuitable political tool for the present, as some authors suggest, other vocabularies may surface to sustain new political projects and desires, humanitarian and imperial alike. And even if one claimed that the vocabulary and the broader semantic field of evil can effectively be removed from public discourse, their vanishing would do little without a simultaneous effort to critique the social conditions for the production and reproduction of the same or analogous notions. Demystifying evil may be a necessary step, but remains inadequate when not accompanied by a critique of the particular symbolic order that evil-naming helps sustain.

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### **Notes**

- 1 S/PV.7316 (see especially the position of Iraq); S/PV.7360 (Pakistan); S/PV.7690 (United States and Djibouti); S/PV.7374 (Malaysia); S/PV.7736 (Pakistan); S/PV.7792 (Jordan); S/PV.7798 (United States); SC/11799; SC/11904. On domestic narratives, see the section on intervention below.
- 2 S/RES/2249 (this resolution also contains elements of narrative 2); S/PV.7271 (Australia and Canada); S/PV.7430 (Pakistan and Iraq); S.PV.7587 (Russia); S/PV.7623 (Iraq); S/PV.7817 (United States); S/2014/724 (Israel).
- 3 S/RES/2233; S/RES/2330; S/RES/2332; S/PV.7116 (United States); S/PV.7222 (Israel); S/PV.7585 (Russia); S/PV.7757 (Angola); S.PV.7785 (Syria); S/PV.7834 (Russia); S/PV.7839 (Russia).
- 4 S/PV.7116 (United States); S/PV.7316 (Syria); S/PV.7379 (United States); S.PV.7524 (Syria); S/PV.7744 (Venezuela); S/PV.7772 (United States); S/PV.7817 (Syria); S/PV.7834 (United Kingdom and United States); S/PV.7893 (United States). See also the letters addressed to the President of the Security Council on behalf of the Syrian Coalition: S/2014/224 (Saudi Arabia); S/2014/432 (France); S/2014/439 (Germany); S/2014/649 (Saudi Arabia); S/2016/816 (United Kingdom).
- 5 See footnote 4 above.
- 6 A/HRC/24/46; A/HRC/29/37; A/HRC/29/51; A/HRC/30/48; A/HRC/31/68; A/HRC/WG.6/20/IRQ/2; S/2014/31; S/2014/295; S/2014/339; S/2014/365; S/2014/427; S/2014/485; S/2016/92; S/2014/770; CRC/C/SR.1958; CRC/C/



SR.1960.

- 7 The United States' deputy representative to the United Nations, Michele J. Sison, similarly described ISIS as a 'monstrous group' (S/PV.7798).
- 8 For a positive reappraisal of the concept of evil, see also Jeffery (2005) and Rengger and Jeffery (2005).

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