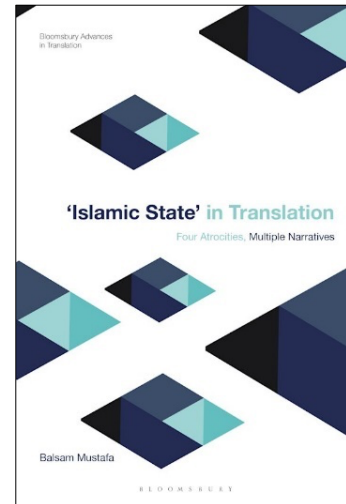


Balsam Mustafa, **'Islamic State' in Translation: Four Atrocities, Multiple Narratives**, London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2022, 214 pp., \$105.31 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Jared Ahmad
University of Sheffield

Since declaring itself a worldwide “caliphate” in June 2014, research on the so-called Islamic State (IS) has proliferated. A search of leading social sciences journal databases reveals over 345 individual articles on IS, with around 100 books dealing with the broader social, political, and religious origins of the group. While this production of knowledge offers a timely reminder that academic scholarship continues to focus overwhelmingly on “Islamic” terror at the expense of other forms of political violence (see Schuurman, 2020), it also shows that, despite recent territorial setbacks, there is an ongoing academic and popular interest in the IS phenomenon.



Balsam Mustafa’s **'Islamic State' in Translation: Four Atrocities, Multiple Narratives** offers a unique contribution to this existing literature by focusing on the way the group’s propaganda has been translated into different languages, formats, and genres. Writing from the perspective of a “scholar-activist,” the author weaves together her own personal reflections as an Iraqi citizen alongside narrative, multimodal, and multilanguage analyses of IS propaganda. Indeed, it is here where the book’s originality becomes apparent in that much of the existing literature has tended to focus on English-language materials, a focus that neglects over 90% of material produced for local, Arabic-speaking audiences. In bringing together analysis of IS multilanguage propaganda texts and their translations into Arabic and English-language news media, alongside personal testimonies of its victims, *'Islamic State' in Translation* sheds much-needed light on the way propaganda narratives spread, and at times stall, across today’s fractured media landscape.

The book is divided into five main chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the conceptual framework. From the onset, Mustafa explains how conventional understandings of narrative as a linear, fully configured sequence of events are inadequate in the context of today’s polyphonic media environment. She draws upon David Boje’s (2001) work on “antenarratives” to help explain how fragments of a narrative can trigger a series of narrative “splinters” that each differ according to the audience or medium in which they reappear. As Boje (2001) himself notes, a “story floats in the chaotic soup of bits and pieces of story fragments . . . it lives and breathes its meaning in a web of other stories . . . [and] is embedded in the changing meaning contexts of multiple stories” (p. 18). While not cited in the book, this approach appears to add to Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin’s (2011) earlier work on the translation and remediation of terrorist propaganda videos by Western media, where the authors uncovered “an apparently simple, settled gatekeeping model that produces systematic patterns of translation, selection and omission” (p. 199). Crucially, Mustafa goes beyond this earlier work to consider the precise politics and processes of how terrorist propaganda narratives change within different linguistic, cultural, and media settings.

Chapter 2 begins the empirical analysis with a focus on the June 2014 Camp Speicher Massacre, an event that involved the systematic slaughter of over a thousand Iraqi Shi'a and non-Muslim military cadets. Analyzing Iraqi and Western news media coverage, alongside subsequent eyewitness accounts, Mustafa argues that IS "failed to establish a fully coherent narrative" surrounding the event (p. 39; emphasis added), something that could be later picked up and developed by international news media. For Mustafa, this was, in part, due to the group's overreliance on Twitter for disseminating news of the killings, as content could be easily taken down by social media companies and thus slow the spread of the narrative. She also suggests that the failure was also due to the IS's lack of a single feature article or propaganda video that could be disseminated to international audiences via its al-Hayat media organization. These findings are particularly significant, as they suggest that IS propagandists quickly learned from their mistakes to improve subsequent communications.

Chapter 3 turns to the narratives that circulated the capture and enslavement of Yazidi women by IS, a practice known as *sabi* or *sabiya*. Analyzing IS's source texts, alongside Arabic and English-language news coverage and personal accounts of survivors, Mustafa questions these competing narratives and how they shifted during the process of translation. In particular, she highlights the difficulties in translating the term *sabi*, due to its antiquated origin (the term can be translated as "concubine," "spoils of war," or "sex slave") and shows how Western journalists sometimes "domesticated" the term to suit target audiences in the West. Notably, while Mustafa suggests that this was often a result of Orientalist assumptions about Islam, the analysis shows how Arabic-language news also struggled to fully explain and contextualize the concept for Middle Eastern audiences due to lack of consensus around the practice among Islamic scholars. Indeed, this second case study is particularly revealing, as it shows us how successful IS propaganda can be in the absence of effective counternarratives.

Chapter 4 turns to IS's widely publicized execution and beheading videos. Mustafa argues that these productions helped IS to "consolidate its narratives" (p. 107), since the group's videos had strong intertextual links back to al-Qaeda's earlier use of such imagery. Despite being quickly and easily shared across the digital media landscape, these narratives were also challenged by Western media, where the sequence of moving images were fragmented, cropped, and often heavily censored by journalists and editors. In this regard, IS's preferred narrative of retaliation and humiliation was transformed by Western media into an Orientalist-inspired "clash of civilizations" that helped legitimize military action against the group. These attempts to "other" IS were further exacerbated by efforts to "personalize" the victims and call attention to their heroic sacrifice. Within Arabic and Iranian media, moreover, Mustafa argues that different ideological positions led to uneven editorial approaches to IS's propaganda narratives. In contrast to Western sources, Arabic news media often included links to the entire videos. Here, she specifically criticizes Arabic media for not adopting robust counternarratives to such violent spectacles (p. 126). That is, until the immolation of Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh. As she points out, "Al-Kasasbeh's immolation was a turning point in the Arab world, urging political and religious figures to react for the first time" (p. 127). Part of the reason for this shift was because the majority of the group's victims prior to his killing were either Western or Shi'a. The abrupt change in victim prompted a counternarrative to quickly emerge in Arab mainstream and social media, with *Al Jazeera* in particular citing prominent religious scholars on the irreligious nature of the killing.

Finally, chapter 5 analyzes videos released to publicize IS's destruction of religious, cultural, and historical landmarks and treasures in Iraq in 2014. Mustafa argues that the aim of such "symbolic sectarianism" was to eradicate Iraqi citizens' sense of belonging and thus enable IS to write their own history (p. 134). Interestingly, while her findings suggest that the group failed to produce a coherent or compelling narrative to this event, in her view, Western media inadvertently contributed to strengthening the group's religious narratives by translating quotes into English verbatim. These findings are particularly significant for those interested in the changing dynamics of the media–terrorism relationship. Despite unprecedented levels of access to news media, much of the existing scholarship on IS shows that the group rarely speak for themselves, with UK reporting, in particular, kept within tight, "elite-legitimated" boundaries (see Ahmad, 2020, p. 585). The fact that many of the news sources analyzed for Mustafa's book translated the group's statements verbatim is interesting, as it suggests a loosening of the boundaries of acceptability in the coverage of IS, with events such as the destruction of historical landmarks providing greater space for the analysis of its aims and motives.

Taken together *'Islamic State' in Translation* is an excellent book that will be of relevance to scholars and practitioners alike. Mustafa's focus on the ways propaganda narratives adapt and change within different linguistic, cultural, and media contexts provides a rich contribution to the growing literature on IS and the media–terrorism relationship. Her development of Boje's (2001) antenarrative further complements recent work on the way digital media practices are radically changing the way groups campaign and communicate (see Sadler, 2021). Finally, the book will also be of use to policy makers interested in countering violent extremist narratives.

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