

Ontological Security beyond Binaries: Islamic State's brOthering of Jihadist Competitors through Genocide

JACK HOLLAND 
The University of Leeds, UK

HARRISON SWINHOE
University of Nottingham, UK

Ontological Security Theory has established that states pursue stable identities through autobiographical stories. Likewise, Genocide Studies has shown the importance of narrative for identity construction prior to instances of existential violence. However, these literatures have tended to focus on the narration of binary relations between Self and Other. Instead, we develop a novel account of non-state, and non-Western, ontological security-seeking behavior with a focus on Third figures, between Self and Other. Combining and contributing to research on Ontological Security, genocide, and brotherhood, we explore the importance of the figure of the “brOther.” Specifically, we are the first to theorize “brOthering” behavior, as the deliberate scripting of proximal alterity. Mobilizing a theory of the purposeful storying of in-group differentiation, our analysis reveals how Islamic State pursued a stable identity through relational alterity with proximal Others, brOthering groups such as Al Qaeda. We reveal that the pursuit of ontological security through brOthering motivated existential violence. In a crowded jihadist marketplace, genocide acted as a form of “Public Relations,” helping to produce a stable, coherent identity premised upon juxtaposition with proximal Third groups, between Self and Other.

La Teoría de la Seguridad Ontológica ha establecido que los Estados buscan identidades estables a través de historias autobiográficas. Asimismo, los estudios sobre el Genocidio han mostrado la importancia de la narrativa para la construcción de la identidad antes de que se produzcan casos de violencia existencial. Sin embargo, ha existido una tendencia por parte de las literaturas de estos dos ámbitos a centrarse en la narración de relaciones binarias entre el Yo y el Otro. En cambio, desarrollamos una explicación novedosa, que no es ni estatal ni occidental, del comportamiento en materia de búsqueda de seguridad ontológica, con un enfoque en otros actores, situadas entre el Yo y el Otro. Analizamos la importancia de la figura del *brOther* (entendido como un «otro» próximo construido relacionamente). Para ello, combinamos la investigación sobre la seguridad ontológica, el genocidio y la fraternidad, y también contribuimos a ella. Específicamente, somos los primeros en teorizar el comportamiento de *brOthering* como la programación deliberada de la alteridad proximal. Nuestro análisis utiliza una teoría de la narración intencionada de la diferenciación dentro del grupo con el fin de revelar cómo el Estado Islámico buscó una identidad estable a través de la otredad relacional con Otros próximos, mediante la construcción de grupos como Al Qaeda como *brOthers*. Revelamos que la búsqueda de seguridad ontológica a través del *brOthering* motivó la violencia existencial. En un sector como el yihadista que estaba muy concurrido, el genocidio actuaba como una forma de «relaciones públicas» que ayudaba a producir una identidad estable y coherente basada en la juxtaposición con grupos terceros próximos, entre el Yo y el Otro.

La théorie de sécurité ontologique a établi que les États poursuivaient des identités stables en utilisant des récits autobiographiques. De même, les études sur le génocide ont montré l'importance du récit pour la construction identitaire avant les instances de violence existentielle. Cependant, ces littératures ont eu tendance à se concentrer sur la narration de relations binaires entre le Moi et l'Autre. Nous développons plutôt un récit inédit du comportement de recherche de sécurité ontologique non étatique et non occidental se concentrant sur les personnalités tierces, entre le Moi et l'Autre. Combinant la recherche sur la sécurité ontologique, le génocide et la fraternité, et y contribuant, nous explorons l'importance du « frère-autre ». Plus précisément, nous sommes les premiers à théoriser le comportement de « frère-autre », comme l'écriture intentionnelle d'une altérité proche. Mobilisant une théorie de narration intentionnelle de différenciation interne au groupe, notre analyse révèle comment l'État islamique a poursuivi une identité stable par le biais d'une altérité relationnelle avec des Autres proches, des groupes de « frères-autres » comme Al-Qaïda. Nous révélons que la quête de sécurité ontologique par l'aliénation de frères a motivé une violence existentielle. Sur un marché djihadiste bondé, le génocide faisait office de « relations publiques », contribuant à produire une identité stable et cohérente, fondée sur la juxtaposition de groupes tiers, entre le Moi et l'Autre.

Key words: ontological security; brOthering; identity; genocide; Islamic State; Syria.

*Corresponding author: The University of Leeds, UK. Email: J.Holland@leeds.ac.uk

Jack Holland is a Professor of Global Security Challenges at the University of Leeds, where he currently serves as Pro-Dean for Research and Innovation in the Faculty of Social Sciences. His research focuses on the politics, security, and foreign policy of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (i.e., the Anglosphere, now AUKUS). He is also Editor of *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

Harrison Swinhoe is a Teaching Associate in International Relations at the University of Nottingham and a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Global Security Challenges (based in the University of Leeds). He has previously worked as a Teaching Fellow at University College Dublin and as a Lecturer at the University of Exeter. He is an expert on Islamic State and other jihadist organizations, as well as strategic narratives.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda are hardly renowned for their compassion or squeamishness. Yet, it is this that Islamic State (IS) have emphasized in a deliberate effort to demarcate the groups through contradistinction and create a hierarchy of jihadist organizations. This pursuit of a pure and most violent identity—vis-à-vis jihadist competitors—has, we argue, inspired mass atrocities and acts of genocide. The physical acts of IS mass atrocities and the related narration of spectacular routinized violence are the twin arms of a troubling embrace: the attempt to pursue ontological security—a stable identity produced through autobiographical narrative—and a Public Relations exercise designed to secure support and resources amidst a crowded jihadist marketplace. That this violence and its storytelling were motivated in significant part by relations to Third figures—competitors, rivals, and we suggest, “brOthers”—is important for two principal reasons: the need to nuance and supplement ontological security theory and the complementary potential benefit to Genocide Studies as mass atrocity scholars set out to design more effective interventions.

We develop the concept, and theorize the (strategic) process of, “brOthering” to highlight the role of Third figures—beyond binaries—in the pursuit of ontological security. We build on efforts (e.g., Innes 2023; Rosedale 2015) to nuance the identities of actors within Ontological Security Theory’s (OST) analysis, moving beyond binaries and eschewing a prevalent State-centric focus. To do so, we draw on Holland and Staunton (2024), extending their category of “brOther” to capture and conceptualize the *strategic process* of “brOthering” (a term Holland and Staunton 2024 do not use). We are the first to theorize *how* two or more groups *become* brOthers, with a focus on the contingent *agency* of actors. Ours, then, is the processual explanation of the heuristic/condition they identify, within which we inject a greater and key focus on instrumentality. This strategic agency is an important rejoinder and supplement to Holland and Staunton’s (2024) more structural and cultural account. To achieve this, we infuse work in Ontological Security and Genocide Studies with the instrumentality of Strategic Narrative approaches. This enables us to develop a theoretically precise understanding of “brOthering” through exploration of the relationship between IS and its competitors, which we argue is produced by—and motivating of—genocidal violence and its narration. In turn, this enables the article to develop three novel contributions.

First, this article contributes to research in Ontological Security Theory by conceptualizing how actors attempt to secure themselves through relational alterity to proximal Others. We develop a theorization of “brOthering,” whereby actors seek ontological security through the development of stable narrative scripts which are populated with a range of distinct characters. Alongside the Other, foremost amongst these characters is a Third figure—the “brOther”—who is simultaneously recognizable and known through *both* similarity and difference. This tension is politically productive through its continuous biographing of the Self and its political implications for resonance, coercion, and resource allocation in contested contexts. Developing this contribution, the article heeds the call to move Ontological Security Theory beyond its predominant focus on Western contexts and state actors (Lerner 2023; see also Ille and Mansour 2015, 21–22; Hall 2022; de Raismes Combes 2017; Friedrichs and Sommer 2025; Deacon 2023).

Second, the paper develops two related contributions to research in Genocide Studies. It does so, initially, by demonstrating the need for a broader conception of the types of relationship that both enable and are produced through genocide. In line with broader research in Genocide Studies, extant literature on IS focuses on the identities of the organization and its victims—in binary terms—as well as under-theorizing the constitutive role of violence (e.g., Badar 2016, 392, 393; Whiteside 2015; Moradi and Anderson 2016; Ille and Mansour 2015). Building on research on brotherhood (Clawson 1989), ontological security (Giddens 1991; Laing 2010; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2020), and practice, we re-focus strategic narrative approaches to include action as well as text. This is particularly important when considering spectacular and existential acts of violence that imbue meaning at a deep, somatic level. Extending our first (OST) contribution into Genocide Studies, we theorize mass atrocities as a form of “Public Relations”—a mode of communication and identity formation instrumentally deployed by IS, as an actor seeking ontological security through contradistinction to (ideologically) proximal groups. In short, IS used genocidal violence and associated propaganda to construct the group’s identity *vis-à-vis* its competitors. The significance of this original finding is high: it illustrates that a broader range of motivations for genocide is evident than previously acknowledged. Developing this contribution, the article furthers efforts to move beyond Orientalist depictions of IS’s spectacular violence as irrational (Üngör 2019) to better understand and resist it, as (despicable but) volitional and calculated behavior.

Third, the article develops a substantial empirical contribution to (Critical) Terrorism Studies through its analysis of a novel dataset on the case of IS. The article employs a predicate-focused discourse analysis (see Online Appendix 1b) of eighty-five texts across seven outlets, including *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, *Islamic State News*, *Islamic State Report*, *Arakan*, *Sawt al-Hind*, and *Voice of Khurasan* (see Online Appendix 1a for data selection rationale and timeframe). These texts cover, IS and its affiliates, Islamic State Hind Province and Islamic State Khurasan Province. This textual discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Doty 1993, 38) is complemented through triangulation with a visual analysis of IS’s practice—genocidal acts of violence across nine key events (see Online Appendices 2a and 2b). As an organization, al-Qaeda have not generally been seen as particularly merciful or uncomfortable with violence (e.g., Bush 2001), killing 8,500 and injuring 12,100 people between 2000 and 2013 (Statista 2014), and being directly implicated in the “Sunni Islamist genocide of Muslims” (Rajan 2015, 1, 7, 15). However, we show that IS propaganda portrays leniency as a key failing of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other “jihadist” organizations, especially towards Muslims who have failed to meet ordained standards of piety (Swinhoe 2021a). For IS, refusal to commit to genocidal violence demonstrates these groups’ impiety, and deviance from a correct understanding of Islam. In contrast, IS’s commitment to genocide—in both text and act—evidences piousness, adherence to Shari’a, and subordination to the sovereignty of God. Through this deliberate juxtaposition, IS’s identity—and ontological security—is produced in direct but partial antagonism with al-Qaeda, as brOther.

The article proceeds in two parts. First, in turn, we map the Ontological Security and Genocide Studies literatures, to which the article contributes, and from which we develop a theoretical conceptualization of brOthering. Second, we

deliver our empirical analysis of the IS case, demonstrating how brOthering works in a vital contemporary case study. We conclude by reflecting on the intellectual and policy implications for future research, noting the need to nuance and complicate analyses of identity construction in OST and re-think understandings of existential violence in Genocide Studies.

Ontological Security beyond Binaries

From Brotherhood to “BrOthering”

Discourses of brotherhood are a longstanding feature of modern political life, from the rallying of union workers (Clawson 1989), via the identity contestations around Soviet-era Eastern Europe (Merrill 2012; Pierzynska 2020), to the contemporary ubiquity of the term “broligarchy” (Antelava 2024; Cadwalladr 2024). Yet, in International Relations (IR) and proximal disciplines, remarkably, the concept remains “an unrecognised social fact ... uninteresting ... trivial” (Clawson 1989, 5). This article responds to Clawson's (1989) call to better theorize and conceptualize the notion of brother and Starkman's (2013) urging to nuance understanding, by highlighting the variegated complexities of the way in which brotherhood is invoked, mobilized, and to what political effect. Our analysis, therefore, is catalyzed by a lacuna: the concepts of brother, brotherhood, and brothering are understudied despite their complexity, prevalence, and political significance.

Kinship premised constructions of solidarity are powerful, enabling the achievement of political ends by imparting “specific roles in social orders” that bring expectation, obligation, and responsibility (Starkman 2013; Karatas 2021; Wadham 2013; see also Berenskoetter 2007 on friendship and the “significant power potentials” of “intimate relations”). Existing work has shown the power of fraternal association to provide “the ritualized means by which” group members “could define one another as brothers,” through appeals to collectivism (corporate idiom), hierarchy (proprietaryship), and an emphasis on masculinity (Clawson 1989, 4, 24–25). Even more than appeals to class, industry, and shared interest, it is race and religion that feature as prominent markers of fraternal group identity—for example, common geographical ancestry (e.g., Ulster Scots), religious unifiers (e.g., the Orange Order), and ethnic markers (most notoriously, the Ku Klux Klan). For our purposes, here, it is important to note that the concept of brotherhood is particularly important within Islam, where it has been framed as a “Qur'anic duty” (Al-Ghazali 2010), with the Verse of Brotherhood bestowing the unity of Muslims—as brothers—on the basis of shared faith.

Karatas (2021), Starkman (2013), and Duhé (2024) have all shown, in different ways, how communitarian configurations of “brethren” layer, overlap, and *compete*. It is this *intra-brotherhood rivalry*—and a specific articulation and management of brotherly competition—that we analyze and theorize. Our focus, therefore, narrows from broader political discourses of brotherhood to the specific and strategic process of brOthering that operates within them. We explore how and why actors instrumentally manage intra-group competition in this way, furthering our understanding of both genocide and ontological security seeking behavior in usefully complementary ways.

Ontological Security and BrOthers as Thirds, between Self and Other

Extant theorization of “brothering” in allied disciplines is inadequate and incomplete. The possibility of inclusion (through exclusion) has been mobilized in interdisciplinary research which conceptualizes the concept of “brothering” as a process whereby “the other can become the self” through “blurring distinction and drawing large enough boundaries” (Thomases 2016, 923). In effect, this process shifts the cut-off of Self-Other demarcation along a spectral understanding of identity. Yet, identity formation in complex global contexts is far more nuanced. To help grasp this complexity, we advance a theoretical account of “brOthering,” wherein actors strive for ontological security by crafting stable narrative scripts populated with distinct figures. Beyond the figure of the Other—familiar in IR research—a pivotal role is occupied by less-well-known Third figures. Specifically, we foreground the importance of the “brOther,” who is constructed and differentiated through a dynamic interplay of resemblance and dissimilarity.

Drawing on Laing (2010) and Giddens (1991), influential research in IR has theorized Ontological security is the pursuit of—and need for—a coherent and sustained sense of Self, achieved through the narration of identity vis-à-vis Others, amidst complex and changing interactions and circumstances (e.g., Mitzen 2006a, 273–74; Mitzen 2006b, 342; Steele 2008, 20). In the search for ontological security, interactions and identities are firmly embedded in and constitutive of this process of self-narration (see Zarakol 2010a, 6; Kinnvall 2004, 749 on the necessary combination of interaction and self-reflexive narration). Disjuncture between story and identity, or the emergence of challenging events or counter-narratives, can generate unease or anxiety. Thus, while full ontological security may be ultimately and inexorably elusive (Cash 2020; Connolly 2002), given the challenges of everyday and global politics, the storying—and biographing—of identity is a key quest for any given actor or group. Such stories provide the coordinates to live by, telling Others who the Self is and placing their future actions in line with past behaviors and associated values. This storying is strategic as much as it is intuitive and habitual (Swinhoe 2021b, 54–56; Subotić 2016; Miskimmon et al 2014; Roselle et al 2014). The pursuit of ontological security through stable and sustained stories of the Self can and should be thought of as instrumental—these are strategic narratives, developed for continued existence and the reduction of fear (on structural approaches to narratology and the power of stories, see Considine 2022; Holland and Matthieu 2023; Shepherd 2012).

The pursuit of ontological security through group biographies that characterize the Self in particular ways more-often-than-not involves a simultaneous writing of Otherness (e.g., Deacon 2023). This is well understood in poststructural and constructivist literatures (e.g., Campbell 1998; Jackson 2018; Walker 1993). What is far less well noted or conceptualized is the role played by Third figures, betwixt Self and Other (e.g., Holland and Matthieu 2023). While the range of Others that actors construct has been noted (e.g., Murray 2014), this has often focused on diametrically opposed groups, known and narrated through full negation. Where more nuanced Third figures have featured in constructivist, poststructural, or ontological security theory, they have tended to remain a relatively marginalized feature of the literature. Berenskoetter and Nymalm (2020), for instance, re-introduce Huysman's (and Bauman's) concept of the “Stranger”—neither Self nor Other, and thus episte-

mologically disquieting in their unknown-ness—noting that discussion of this analytical figure “thus far is missing.” Other work—on friendship, liminality and queer theory, for example—has also explored hybridity, nuance, and Third figures: the “betwixt and between” of global politics, with the potential to undo more rigid categorizations (Berenskoetter 2007; Malksoo 2012; Weber 2015).

We further resist the inclination to binaries here, suggesting that a range of Thirds play vital roles in the narrative pursuit of ontological security and foregrounding one specific—and crucial—Third figure, the brOther. In contrast to the Stranger, this figure is known intimately. We stress the vital role of such proximal Others, different but close—whether in values, geographies, allegiances, interests, or something else. In relation to proximal Others, the desire for ontological security may at various points necessitate emphasizing their alterity, their similitude, or—crucially—an attempt to recognize *both* simultaneously (Holland and Staunton 2024, 714–15). Holland and Staunton (2024) mobilize “brOthers in arms” as a heuristic device designed to capture this double inscription, which enables the simultaneous holding of two seemingly oppositional terms, such that another group “can at once be both and neither, occupying a third category” between Self and Other, and/or in some combination. For them, it is the cultural narratives of exceptionalism that sustain this fraught relationship between allies as brOthers. Theirs, then, is a structural explanation of long-standing relations between France and the Anglosphere—spearheaded by the United States and the United Kingdom. Competing visions of world leadership and global relevance build upon similar and overlapping liberal philosophies to engender parallel but clashing (hi)stories of world politics, driven by different protagonists. These competing visions of history project forward (into the future), backwards (in telling a particular history) and *sideways*, as they serve to simultaneously undermine and reinforce each other’s preferred narrative project. These narratives are sufficiently embedded and resonant that political leaders do not have to work hard to sell them—they are already well known and paying homage to them can be a political shibboleth for aspiring political elites.

This figure of the “brOther” developed by Holland and Staunton (2024) is a powerful and useful addition to IR’s constructivist toolkit. Our focus, here, is to complement and supplement this analytical concept with an understanding of the manner of its production: actors pursue brOthering as a *process of strategic narration*, scripting their relationship to proximal groups instrumentally, so as to benefit from clear but nuanced demarcations with like-minded actors. In analyzing a non-state, non-Western case process, our take centers the *processual and volitional* to a far greater extent than Holland and Staunton’s (2024) more cultural and structural account. There are parallels here to research on status and branding in IR (e.g., Steele 2008; Steele and Subotić 2024; Browning 2015; Zarakol 2010b; Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum 2017 on the strategic branding of liminality, with different audiences in mind). Moreover, in seeking to conceptualize how actors construct “brOthers,” we emphasise the role of ritual and action—particularly the power of violence—alongside language (see Edkins 2003; Innes and Steele 2013 on trauma, narrative, and ontological security). While ontological security theory has long analyzed routine practices and narratives, we incorporate a focus on spectacular violent practices to capture a particularly terrible but affective form of brOthering action that works in conjunction with its narration. Here, there are obvious parallels (and extensions) to (Critical) Terrorism Studies’ focus on political violence as a form

of communication (Davidson, 1990; Jackson 2018). Act and word operate together in the pursuit of ontological security, and, for IS, these acts and their narration were strategically genocidal.

Genocide Studies

Binaries and Teleology

In this section, we trace two antecedent tendencies in Genocide Studies research—binary identity conceptualization and teleological thinking—which circumvent a more nuanced analysis, recognizing the co-constitutive role of violence and importance of Third figures. The roots of this binarism and teleology extend to genocide’s legal demarcations. The definition of genocide in International Law centers on one or a combination of five specified acts of violence carried out with “the intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (UN General Assembly 1948, 277). This definition necessitates the identification and targeting of one group by another actor—a binary genocide-identity relationship that is well summarized by Moshman (2007, 116):

“Genocides are perpetrated by individuals acting collectively on behalf of what they perceive to be their own group against what they perceive to be a different group. At the heart of any genocide, then, are individuals who see themselves in ways that enable them to act collectively on behalf of their own group against another. At the heart of any genocide, in other words, is identity”.

Given the rejection of primordialism by most Genocide Studies scholars, the focus is generally on the construction of these identities (Nagengast 2002, 325–26; Appadurai 1998; Owen 1996, 4). And, following a legal definition of genocide that emphasises the collective identity of victims and perpetrators, it is perhaps unsurprising that research has focused on binary identity construction, with a special emphasis on the victim as Other. This literature, therefore, has sought to answer an important question: how could it “be possible to know a person’s identity with certainty enough to kill” (Malkki, cited in Appadurai 1998, 909). It has done this by exploring how perpetrators construct victims’ identities, in relation to themselves, in such a way as to not only enable genocide but to render it necessary.

Building on a proclivity to analyze identity in binary terms, a second flaw mars Genocide Studies research: a teleological view of the identity-violence relationship. Efforts to prevent future violence center on an analysis of previous genocides, which focus on processes of identity construction as a facilitating condition. This assumption of identity construction as a process exclusively *preceding* violence is limiting and problematic; it conceives of genocide in teleological terms with violence as the logical endpoint to a standard temporal pattern. This focus on the process of identity construction *prior* to the occurrence of genocide is widespread in the literature (e.g., McDoom 2012; Powell 2007; Galustyan 2023; Chalk and Jonassohn 1990, 27–28). Moshman (2007) argues that this begins with “dichotomization,” followed by “dehumanization”—the construction of existentially threatening outsiders (also Hiebert 2008, 5), who can (it is argued) legitimately be killed. Hintjens (2001, 27) expresses this in the bluntest terms, referring to identity as a “knife that severs social relations and disembowels entire countries.”

Violence and Identity

Alternative research in Genocide Studies has explored how genocidal violence itself constructs identity. Bergholz (2016, 6), for example, asks:

"Does ethnicity and nationalism lead to violence, as many would assume? Or can violence on an ethnic axis actually produce profoundly antagonistic waves of ethnic identification and nationalism?"

In answer, Bergholz (2016, 15–16, 309–11) argues that genocidal violence is a "generative force" which produces and reconstructs new and existing identities and that this understanding can better explain both why violence occurred (or not) and its long-term implications. Illustrating this, Bergholz's (2016, 6) analysis shows how, in fact, it is the acts of violence themselves that can forge "new communities, new forms and configurations." Similarly, for Appadurai (1998, 919), violence reifies categories of identity by embodying the abstract, rendering the inherent explicit—visual, and somatic. This "tangibility" grafts a "reality" onto previously more abstract ideas of identity in an exceptionally resonant way; "the most horrible forms of ethnocidal violence are mechanisms for producing persons out of what are otherwise diffuse, large-scale labels that have effects but no locations" (Appadurai 1998, 919). In this sense, the answer to Malkki's question (cited in Appadurai 1998, 909)—how could it "be possible to know a person's identity with certainty enough to kill?"—is: by killing them. Furthering Terrorism Studies' understanding of political violence as a form of communication, we stress that the *act of violence itself articulates* a message to key audiences, as the ritual of one body harming another literally *embodies* the identities of perpetrator and victim.

Behavior and events are, of course, inevitably discursive, as their meaning forms at the intersection where words meet things—particular peoples, weapons, harms (see, for example, Nagengast 2002, 326; as well as Westphal 2018; and Jackson 2005). Friis (2017, 249; see also Zech and Kelly 2015, 87), for instance, analyzes IS executions *as executions*—a ritualistic method of violent punishment conveying moral superiority and political authority, whereby the group *become* judge, jury, and executioner. Likewise, Nanninga (2019) has extended these insights to IS's genocidal violence, understood as a means of "purification." Drawing on anthropology, Nanninga (2019) explores the relationship between conceptions of purity and acts of violence to argue that genocide and ethnic cleansing serve as a means of decontaminating the new "Caliphate." This operates (utterly horrifically) through the simultaneous elimination of religious minorities and increasing the Muslim population through forced conversion and sexual enslavement (Nanninga 2019, 141–43).

Yet, while this strand of Genocide Studies scholarship is useful and distinct in its emphasis on the generative force of violence, understandings of identity remain premised upon a binary conceptualization of "Self" and "Other," through a focus on the identities of victims and perpetrators. The violence carried out by perpetrators serves to construct their identity in relation to their victims, articulating and reproducing the division between them. Even where research considers the multiplicity of Others that may face threat from a genocidal actor (e.g., Murray 2014), it does not consider the possibility that this violence constructs the identities of Third parties which do not occupy either category but are nonetheless vital to the storying and practice of genocide. Our analysis reveals that it is necessary to conceptualize how genocidal violence relates to *and is motivated by* identity construction beyond perpetrator and victim. We show that this centers on

the figure of the brOther and strategic narratives of brOthering in pursuit of ontological security.

Islamic State

In 2014, against the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War, IS expanded into several areas containing religious minority groups and began to use mass violence against these communities, particularly the Yazidis. There has been a growing body of literature analyzing this violence as genocide. Between 2015 and 2017, a range of scholars within Terrorism Studies, International Legal Studies, and Genocide Studies argued that IS's violence against religious minorities constituted genocide under international law (Whiteside 2015; Moradi and Anderson 2016; Badar 2016; Porkka 2017; Dakhil et al. 2017; Hawley 2017). Within this body of work, there is important research exploring the impact of violence targeted at the Yazidi community specifically, including Barazi's (2023) gender-based analysis of IS's mass killing of Yazidi men, Cheterian 2021 exploration of how Yazidi persecution fits into broader historical context, and Smith's (2019) analysis of how the genocide has impacted Yazidi Self-identity. Moreover, and parallel, Rajan (2015, 5–6) has framed both al-Qaeda and IS's violence against fellow Muslims, including Sunni Muslims, as genocidal on the basis that Muslims constitute the overwhelming proportion of those killed and their being purposefully targeted due to the centrality of *takfirist* discourse, within the logic of which victims fall short of requisite standards of piety and/or devotion to Islam.

The broader theoretical and policy implications of these empirical accounts remain underexplored. This includes lessons for how genocide should be conceived. Whiteside (2015, 233–35), for example, has critiqued the academic literature and the UN Genocide Convention for focusing on states and overlooking the genocidal violence of non-state actors. However, none of these works engages with theoretical debates pertaining to identity construction, including the importance of the construction of Third figures as a driver of genocidal violence. The relevance of such an approach is clear. IS's identity is bound up in relational antagonisms with proximal groups; IS's constitution of itself is inexorably imbricated with constructions of other proximal Salafi-Jihadist and Islamist organizations. These are actors that share a great deal in terms of history, ideology, and objectives (e.g., Bacon and Arsenault 2019; Turner 2015). And, yet, deliberate demarcation and distinction is central to the pursuit both of IS's own ontological security and its attempt to undermine the ontological security of its competitors, through a narrative premised on the instrumental maximization of difference via an ideological purity derived from existential violence and its narration (e.g., Bacon and Arsenault 2019).

IS has a long and uneasy relationship with al-Qaeda (Hamming 2020, 2022, 95–139; see also Bacon and Arsenault 2019; and Turner 2015); the group and its predecessors' attempts to secure and maintain a coherent sense of Self have always involved negotiating complex interactions with fellow Jihadists. Indeed, the origins of al-Qaeda and IS both lie in the Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation and its aftermath (Hamming 2020, 2022, 95–139; Gerjes 2017, 50–97). However, while al-Qaeda emerged during the course of the conflict and many of its early members had engaged in combat with the Soviets, the founder of what would become IS, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, arrived as the war was ending in 1993 with the aim of setting up a jihadist training camp along the lines established by al-Qaeda. From this moment, the leading figures of al-Qaeda and what would become IS always had a complicated relationship, with al-Qaeda supporting al-

Zarqawi in developing his organization despite the leadership's concerns over his vehement sectarianism, desire to attack Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia, and occasional criticism of what he perceived as al-Qaeda's hesitancy. Despite these concerns, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's organization, *Jam'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*, affiliated with al-Qaeda in 2004 becoming *al-Qaeda in Iraq*. The group would remain affiliated with al-Qaeda in some capacity, even after its 2006 reincarnation as the *Islamic State of Iraq*, until their official split in 2014, but the nature of this relationship became increasingly ambiguous, and it is clear that al-Qaeda's actual control of the group was minimal. Thus, the relationship between the IS and al-Qaeda has long been complex, fractious, and intertwined, converging and diverging in different moments.

Like many brothers, they have both inspired and disappointed the other in equal measure, displaying a fierce rivalry and efforts to define themselves relative to each other. Even when the IS operated as an al-Qaeda affiliate, it continued to distinguish itself through an emphasis on ideological purity, a rejection of "moderation," and a fervent sectarianism. There is, then, an important history of intra-jihadist competition to IS's brooding rhetoric and behavior. Following the 2014 declaration of the Caliphate, and the group's official split from al-Qaeda, the jihadist movement fell into chaos. In this context of intense competition and, for IS, rapid expansion, the group was faced with an urgent need to both constitute and publicize a coherent and distinct Self-identity. The creation of a distinctive "brand" as a means of articulating and publicizing the group's identity was a key feature of competition in a crowded marketplace (drawing on Bandopadhyaya 2019). Indeed, as Regine Schwab (2023) has noted, the use of ideological differentiation and/or convergence has been a key strategy in the context of intense intra-jihadist competition, which came to define the Syrian Civil War. From the outset, mass violence was an integral component of this branding (Hamming 2022, 22; Rogers 2018): for IS, genocide is Public Relations (Abrahms et. al. 2017).

Othering: The Language of Genocide

IS boasts about the mass killing, forced conversion, and sexual assault of religious minorities are commonplace. In this respect, the group's language is in line with other genocidal actors, albeit with IS arguably relishing in the acts of violence to a greater extent. For IS, the genocide itself is not the end goal but rather a route to a purer and more distinct identity for the perpetrator. For example, the group and its affiliates regularly celebrate the killing of Shi'a (referred to as *Rafidah*), emphasizing the numbers killed and extolling those who carry out this violence:

"our istishhadi brother Hamzah al-Khurasani set out with an explosive vest containing 16 kg of explosive substances and detonated it inside a Rafidi temple where approximately 1000 Rafidah were conducting their shirki rituals. The blessed operation succeeded in killing and injuring approximately 200 of them" (Islamic State 2016a, *Rumiyah*, Issue 4: 36; see also appendix 3a)

IS makes no distinction between the killing of Shi'a soldiers, militants, or civilians, celebrating all these acts of violence and holding them to be equally legitimate. There can be no doubt that this violence is genocidal, with the group explicit in its desire to eradicate the entire Shi'a Muslim community through violence. Followers are exhorted, in the strongest possible terms, to seize any opportunity to achieve this:

"Rig bridges with explosives and wage raid after raid. Take them, besiege them, and sit for them at every outpost. O men of the State in Baghdad, in its north and its south, in Karkuk, Salahuddin, Dayala, Fallujah, and Anbar, go further and give the enemies of Allah, of the filthy Rafidah and dirty murtaddin, who have turned from the Sunnah, their fill. Let them taste the cup of bitterness and deadly poison, for you are the people of war, strikers of enemies!" (Islamic State 2017, *Rumiyah*, Issue 9: 35; see also appendix 3b).

These representations and glorification of violence are reminiscent of previous genocidal discourses. The theme of purification has been evident in a range of genocidal contexts, including Rwanda, Cambodia, the Holocaust, and the French Wars of Religion (Taylor 2002; Davis 1973, 57; Appadurai 1998, 913; Hiebert 2008, 19). Nanninga (2019), for instance, emphasises the importance of terms such as "dirt" and "pollution" in positioning IS as an agent of purification. For example, IS frequently refers to minority groups as "filthy," utilizing distinct predication to portray them as a form of pollution that threatens the purity of the community:

"large number of the anti-Islamic propagandists in Bengal actually adhered to this filthy, cow-worshipping religion" (Islamic State 2016b *Dabiq*, Issue 14: 64; see also appendix 3c); "the filthy blood of the Rafidah" (Islamic State 2014, : 42); "The hands of the mujahidin soaked in the blood of the filthy Nusayriyyah (Alawites) are a testament to the jihad of the Islamic State" (Islamic State 2014, *Dabiq*, Issue 2: 42; see also appendix 3d).

Alongside the need to "cleanse," such discourses also frequently reference disease and illness to dehumanize victim groups and render existential violence as a medical necessity. Savage (2007) has argued that medical tropes are inherent to genocide, as seen in the Armenian genocide, the Cambodian genocide, and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, while Lifton 1996 and Hiebert (2008, 20) have noted the use of "medical metaphor" in the Holocaust. Such language, which frames violence as a necessary surgical procedure to ensure the health of the in-group, is consistently used by the IS:

"The Rafidah are a disease which cannot be cured except with the sword" (Islamic State 2017, *Rumiyah*, Issue 9: 9; see appendix 3e).

This statement captions an image depicting men, likely Shi'a Muslims, engaging in self-flagellation as part of the commemoration of the festival of *Ashura*. The use of a graphic image—showing men covered in blood as they strike themselves with chains—is designed to generate an affective response, articulated in the accompanying text as disgust.

Although there are significantly fewer references to the Yazidi community in IS propaganda, the group's subjection has been well documented. Badar (2016, 364) highlights the innumerable witnesses to mass violence, while (Cheterian 2021, 633) provides specifics: 2,240 Yazidis, predominantly "adult" men, killed, and roughly 5,800 women and children kidnapped. IS explicitly celebrates this violence as adherence to scripture, with reference to the Qur'an:

"kill the mushrikin wherever you find them, and capture them, and besiege them, and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush [At-Tawbah: 5]" (Islamic State 2014, *Dabiq*, Issue 4: 14; see appendix 3f).

The broader context of this quotation makes clear that IS sees the Yazidis as *mushrikin* (pagans) and genocidal violence as not only religiously legitimate but actively necessary in order to fulfil God's commands. The intention is clear: to eradicate the Yazidis as a separate religious community and destroy their identity. The use of such language by IS with regard to various out-groups, and particularly reli-

gious minorities, indicates the genocidal intent motivating violence.

BrOthering: Beyond Binaries

While IS's genocidal language is reminiscent of other genocidal actors, especially in its dehumanization of victims, it is also crucially distinct in its explicit focus on Third actors. For instance, IS's discourse on the correct treatment of the Yazidis speaks to the broader relationship between IS and the Muslim community. References to the necessity for mass violence against the Yazidis place the group's continued survival as a failure on the part of the broader Muslim community (Islamic State 2014, *Dabiq*, Issue 4: 14; see also Online Appendix 3f). As such, IS positions itself as distinct from the larger in-group, reproducing and reinforcing its claim that it is only through IS—and the group's commitment to commit ideologically imperative violence—that the Muslim community can return to adherence to *Shari'ah* and surrender to the sovereignty of God (e.g., Swinhoe 2021b, 191–99). IS's willingness to engage in genocidal violence demonstrates its supposedly unique commitment to God's will (based on its interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah). This attempted reconciliation of a sense of *both* unity with and distance from the broader Muslim community serves to constitute IS's sense of ontological security, scripting its identity as *uniquely capable* of protecting and leading that community.

More frequently than appeals to the dehumanization of victims, IS's propaganda sets out to construct the identities of its jihadist competitors. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which celebrations of mass violence are replete with criticisms of, and sarcastic references to, other jihadist groups. In the second issue of *Dabiq* (Islamic State 2014, 20–31), released shortly after the declaration of the Caliphate, IS devotes roughly a third of the publication to its dispute with other Syrian Islamist groups and al-Qaeda's attempts at mediation (see Online Appendix 3g). Crucially, explanations of distinctions between IS and its competitors focus on the latter's leniency towards religious minorities. This leniency is repeatedly highlighted and juxtaposed with IS's commitment to genocidal violence. Thus, the Islamic Front is condemned for their "commitment to respect ALL religious sects in Syria without exception, which would include the Nusayriyyah, the Ismā'iliyyah, the Yazīdiyyah, and the Durūz" (Islamic State 2014, 25). This commitment is represented as evidence of the group's alleged rejection of Islam and embrace of "secularism." An emphasis on toleration towards religious minorities accompanies accusations of "secularism," linking toleration with impiety. Such a move constitutes any approach short of genocide as a failure to adhere to a correct interpretation of Islam.

In contrast, IS assures its audience that "It killed *rāfidah* ("Muslims" according to the new al-Qā'idah leadership) by the thousands" (Islamic State 2014, 26). This statement appears as part of a list of the group's achievements, which it asserts have only been possible through divine support and intervention—"All this is from Allah alone"—in the face of widespread opposition (Islamic State 2014). Genocidal violence is framed as an act of pious devotion and evidence of IS's divine sanction, with the fact that the group was able to kill so many Shi'a Muslims, while facing multiple enemies, demonstrating the moral and religious rectitude of its violent actions. The purpose of this genocidal violence and its narration goes beyond the construction of Self and Other; in fact, its principal aim is to brOther competitor Jihadist groups. IS's primary focus is not the framing of Shi'a as Other or out-group, but rather, the development of a

pointed critique of al-Qaeda for treating the Shi'a as "Muslims" (and therefore not engaging in mass violence towards them). Delegitimization of rival Jihadist groups is pursued through humor, sarcasm, and irony (Mehran et al. 2024, 276, drawing on work from Stephane Baele 2019). The use of "scare quotes" around the term "Muslims" ridicules al-Qaeda for holding a supposedly ludicrous belief (see Schlechtweg and Härtl 2023). While this apparently absurd position is highlighted through a mocking tone, it is then juxtaposed with the (serious) celebration of its own killing of "thousands" of Shi'a. As such, genocide becomes a branding technique to secure its identity by establishing a clear distinction from and opposition to competitors with whom they previously had a closer relationship—no longer brothers, but brOthers. These moves to simultaneously narrate a coherent self-identity while destabilizing that of its competitors appealed to individuals and collective actors interested in or involved with jihadism, including those linked to competing groups. Indeed, the IS's success in securing large-scale defections of individuals (Schwab 2023, 8) has been noted, as was the group's competition with al-Qaeda for affiliates (Eleftheriadou 2020, 9–11).

IS's willingness to engage in genocidal violence, then, is a key and strategic feature of its identity, with jihadist competitors (beyond al-Qaeda) frequently referred to as "jihadist claimants" on the basis of tolerance towards "deviant" religious groups. This phrase both recognizes these other groups' *claims* to ideological proximity with the IS (as jihadists) while generating distance by emphasizing that these are mere performative claims undermined by their actions. The eleventh issue of *Dabiq* (Islamic State 2015b, 4) opens with an attack on the Taliban and its then de facto leader, Akhtar Mansur, which highlights his acknowledgement of Iran as a Muslim state, his recognition that Shi'a are Muslims, and "even condemning attacks against the *Rāfidah* of Afghanistan" (see Online Appendix 3h). This is followed by a lengthy critique of Islamist competitors in Syria, exposing their failures to adhere to Islam (see Online Appendix 3i). One particular focus is Ahrar ash-Sham and the group's Foreign Affairs Director, Labib al-Nahhas (Islamic State 2015b, 6–9). In this instance, the IS draws on David Cameron's positive comments about Ahrar ash-Sham to suggest that the group's commitment to the "protection of the minorities (who include the *Rāfidah*, the Nusayriyyah, the Druze, and the Ismā'iliyyah)" is evidence both of the group's religious deviance and alleged rejection of Islam, and of its willingness to work with the supposed enemies of the Muslim community (Islamic State 2015b, 8). In the following issue (Islamic State 2016d, *Dabiq*, Issue 12: 52), the theme is repeated and extended to numerous Islamist groups—including the Islamic Front, Alwiyyat al-Furqān, Jaysh al-Mujāhidin, Faylaq ash-Shām, and Al-Ittihad al-Islāmī li Ajnād ash-Shām—all of whom are lamented for their toleration and protection of religious minorities (see Online Appendix 3j). In contrast to this "most deviant" of "clauses," IS reiterates a commitment to genocide on the basis of religious deviance.

Failure to adopt this more extreme position is framed not just as misplaced leniency but fundamental (and emasculated) weakness. IS's actions purposefully provoked condemnation from competitor groups (indicating that they are an intended audience for IS's violence and associate discourses)—for instance, for genocidal violence targeting Christians—with these condemnations used evidencing "weakness" in contrast to IS's (hyper-masculine) dynamism (e.g., Swinhoe 2021b, 143). Sarcasm, and a tone of mock surprise, exaggerate the strength of IS in contrast to its feeble competitors:

"And thus, the Islamic State strikes terror directly in the hearts of the Copts after striking terror in the hearts of their Catholic allies before, while the jihād claimants and hizbiyyīn sit back and deliberate – in vain – on what they can do to prevent the further expansion of the Khilāfah..." (Islamic State 2015a, *Dabiq*, Issue 7: 32; see also appendix 3j).

Proactive IS violence is juxtaposed to the paralysis of competitors, more focused on defeating IS than pursuing jihad. Propaganda in *Dabiq* stresses that toleration of religious minorities and a misplaced focus on usurping IS leads inevitably to defeat and tangible benefits for the enemies of "true" Islam. For example, the failure of al-Qaeda's Yemeni branch to declare *takfir* on the Shi'a population is framed as directly responsible for the success of the Shi'a Houthi militant group's conquest of Sanaa (Islamic State 2015b, *Dabiq*, Issue 7: 34; see Online Appendix 3l). Weakness is linked, explicitly, to failure and Muslim suffering:

"the local branch of al-Qā'idah, deeming it incorrect to make *takfir* of the Rāfidī Houthis on an individual level, allowed their softened stance on matters of imān and kufr to get in the way of properly defending the lives and lands of the Muslims. The result? Yemen's largest city was blitzed by the Houthis and captured in one fell swoop, placing the lives of countless Muslims under the authority of a people whose religion it is to slander and abuse the wives and companions of Rasūlullāh' (Islamic State 2015b, *Dabiq*, Issue 7: 33–34; see appendix 3l).

This framing constructs the genocidal persecution of religious minorities as legitimate and necessary to ensure the safety of the community of Muslims. Moreover and vitally, it also constructs IS as the sole agent capable of defending Islam and the Muslim community precisely because of its willingness to engage in genocide: it is active and strategic brOthering through genocide, branding IS in a crowded Jihadist marketplace.

The importance of brOthering for IS is difficult to overstate. Even when the group focuses on constructing the identities of victimized "Others," this serves to construct and condemn the group's competitors: for IS, Othering is about brOthering. For example, their most detailed and extensive attack on the Druze comes in an article entitled "The Allies of al-Qa'idah in Sham" (Islamic State 2015c, *Dabiq*, Issue 10: 6; see Online Appendix 3m). The article constitutes the Druze not as People of the Book, eligible for protection via the *jizya*, nor pagans, like the Yazidi, but as apostates from Islam, drawing on multiple references to Scripture and jurists favored by jihadist groups (see Boutz et al 2018, 973 on the use of such "cultural tool kits"). The group make the case for the Druze's apostate status with reference to quotations from Ibn Taymiyyah:

"He also said describing the Druze, 'The kufr of these people is a matter over which the Muslims do not differ. Rather whoever doubts their kufr is a kāfir like them. They are not at the level of Ahlul-Kitāb nor the mushrikin. Rather, they are from the most deviant kuffār, and so the meat they slaughter is not halāl. Their women can be taken as slaves and their property can be seized. They are apostate heretics whose repentance cannot be accepted. Rather they are to be killed wherever they are found and cursed as they were described.'" (Islamic State 2015c, *Dabiq*, Issue 10: 9; see appendix 3 m)

The construction of the Druze as an apostate sect requiring eradication positions Jihadist competitors as similarly deviant because of their refusal to pursue violent persecution. Ibn Taymiyyah's quote is contrasted with statements from Aymen al-Zawahiri and Muhammad al-Jawlani to further highlight the hypocrisy of these groups and their failure to uphold their supposed ideology. Their calls for an end to vi-

olence and confirmation that they will not target disengaged Druze are framed as hypocrisy and religious inconsistency in contrast to IS's ideological purity. Such moves actively engender ontological insecurity in rival groups by exposing ambiguities within their competitors' discourses and contradictions between their behavior and that which is allegedly prescribed by Scripture and key jurisprudential texts.

Genocide as Public Relations: Violence as Branding in a Crowded Jihadist Marketplace

The importance of genocide as "branding," distinguishing IS from its competitors, is apparent throughout *Dabiq*. For example, the thirteenth issue devotes fifteen pages to a discussion of the Shi'a (Islamic State 2016c, *Dabiq*, Issue 13: 33–41; see Online Appendix 3n). The article outlines the approach of the "jihadi claimants," particularly al-Qaeda and the Taliban, contrasting it with the *manhaj* (methodology) of IS and, prominent founder, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban's condemnations of violence towards the Shi'a is framed as a betrayal of jihad and the Muslim community:

"They send their condolences to the Rāfidah and declare their willingness to cooperate with them against the mujāhidīn!" (Islamic State 2016c, *Dabiq*, Issue 13: 41; see appendix 3n also).

IS critiques and ridicules the "Zarqāwī Manhaj on the Rāfidah" (Islamic State 2016c,), quoting from a letter in which Zawahiri criticizes Zarqawi for the killing of Shi'a in Iraq (Islamic State 2016c, *Dabiq*, Issue 13: 39). The group explicitly juxtapose these strategies, with violence as the key point of demarcation:

"It is best that one contrasts this deviance of Dhawāhirī and the nationalist Taliban with Shaykh az-Zarqāwī's plan to cleanse Iraq of the Rāfidah" (Islamic State 2016c, *Dabiq*, Issue 13: 41; see appendix 3n also).

This divergence over how the Shi'a community should be understood and whether they should be subjected to genocidal violence is constituted as fundamental to explaining the difference between IS and its competitors:

"The difference between the two methodologies is due to the issue of *takfir*. Shaykh Abū Mus'ab considered the blood of the Rāfidah obligatory to spill, so he did not hesitate in executing operations that lead to their deaths... In contrast, adh-Dhawāhirī considers that the filthy blood of the Rāfidah is haram to spill, and so he censures any attempt at reviving jihād against these pagan apostates!" (Islamic State 2016c, *Dabiq*, Issue 13: 41; see appendix 3n also).

For IS, this distinction makes clear its own legitimacy, strength, and commitment to carrying out the word of God in contrast to the religious deviance, impiety, and weakness of its competitors. It demonstrates the extent to which genocide is fundamental to establishing a clear and coherent identity, which is not only distinct from but actively produced in partial opposition to proximal—brOthered—jihadist organization.

This strategy of using genocidal violence as branding exercise is not limited to the group's central leadership or propaganda outlets based in Syria and Iraq. Affiliates similarly contrast their own mass killing of "deviant" religious groups to the lenience of other Jihadist and Islamist groups, both local and transnational. In particular, *Sawt al-Hind* and *Voice of Khurasan*, the magazines produced by the IS in Hind and the IS in Khurasan, respectively, frequently celebrate the genocidal killing of Shi'a, Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious groups,

while contrasting this with the toleration of al-Qaeda and the Taliban:

"We slaughtered the Rawafidha and we will again do so in near future. We will slaughter you with the help of Allah, we have come to you with slaughter." (Islamic State 2021c, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 12: 4; see appendix 3o)

"Come forefront Oh! our muwahidin brothers cut off the necks of the Hindu Mushrikin with knives and axes. Burn the vehicles of the polytheists, the filthy Rafidah and apostates, their houses, their shops, their crops bring everything of theirs to Ash." (Islamic State 2021a, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 27: 14; see appendix 3p)

The Taliban and al-Qaeda are repeatedly castigated for failing to persecute religious minorities. For instance, the thirteenth issue of *Sawt al-Hind* (Islamic State 2021b, 10; see Online Appendix 3q) accuses al-Qaeda of prioritizing "worldly *siyasa*h [statecraft not based on scripture]" over adherence to Islam, demonstrated by condemnation of attacks on Hazara Shi'a in Afghanistan and the group's links to the Taliban, who are accused of having "brotherly alliance with Rafidah and Iran" (Islamic State 2021b; see Online Appendix 3q also). In contrast, IS is portrayed as fully committed to Islam and as acting solely in accordance with the Shari'ah precisely because they do not "compromise." Similarly, the tenth issue of the *Voice of Khurasan* (Islamic State 2022a, 14; see Online Appendix 3r) labels the Taliban a "heretical faction" because of its alleged desire to establish "all-inclusive government that will reflect every sphere of live of the common Afghanis, who also include Rafidah pagans and other heresies." It is made clear that the very fact of toleration is sufficient to establish IS's competitors as heretics in their own right—wayward brOthers.

As prodigal sons of the jihad, toleration—as weakness and impiety—is rendered active betrayal of Islam, the Muslim community, and the jihadi movement, including the putative founders of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Mullah Omar and Osama Bin Laden. IS groups emphasise that the Taliban, under their founder Mullah Omar, actively persecuted and attacked religious minorities in Afghanistan and destroyed their places of worship (Islamic State 2020b, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 4: 9). It is referred to as "disheartening" to see the Taliban betray Mullah Omar's legacy by refraining from violence against the Shi'a and actively providing security to minority places of worship (Islamic State 2021c, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 12: 13, 14; see Online Appendix 3s). This framing of competitors as not only betraying Islam but also the legacies of their founding fathers constitutes a powerful attempt to destabilize their identities and produce ontological insecurity through the interruption of an historical narrative. As ontological security requires a coherent and lasting story about the Self, this attack on competitor stories is an effective and aggressive propaganda effort, centered on existential violence.

Given the widely understood connections and entangled histories of IS and competitor groups, such as al-Qaeda, brOthering efforts have at times been seemingly extreme. This is designed, strategically, to shore up ontological security and present clear blue water between ideologically proximal groupings, in pursuit of support and resources. Recurrently, IS emphasise the active choice of competitors to side with "deviant" religious groups against the Muslim community and those truly committed to jihad. The Taliban, for example, have been accused of undermining jihad on behalf of the Shi'a:

"The real reason why the Taliban attacked the Uzbek muhajirin in Zabul was to protect their Rafidah compatriots" (Islamic State 2022b, *Voice of Khurasan*, Issue 20: 10; see appendix 3t).

Similarly, *Sawt al-Hind* has stated that the Taliban "killed Muwahidin [those committed to the *tawhid*, unity, of God] in order to take revenge for the killings of Mushrik Rafidah" (Islamic State 2020c, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 5: 9; see Online Appendix 3u), arguing that this not only delegitimizes the Taliban but all groups associated with them (such as Ansar Ghazwat al-Hind, an AQ affiliate based in Kashmir). Here, the strongest narratives of treachery are found, as proximal groups risk being "disowned" from a broader jihadist brotherhood. Once again, genocidal violence is used to construct IS vis-à-vis its competitors as the only group truly committed to Islam and carrying out the will of God. It is this genocidal violence that constitutes some of the strongest evidence of the group's unique legitimacy amongst the whole array of jihadist and Islamist organizations:

"Who is it today that are the bitter enemies of America, and who opposes the Jews and the rafidah and all of their tails [followers] from the tyrants? Who is it that enrages them? Who is it that threatens their security? Who unsettles them from their places of rest? Who became a source of concern for them and terrifies them?..

There is no doubt that they are the Mujāhidin, but I ask you by Allah, O seeker of Jihad - Is the Islamic State not on the top of this list?" (Islamic State 2020a, *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 8, P.11; see appendix 3v).

Conclusion

The relationship between IS's genocidal violence and identity construction does not follow the pattern or process outlined in the existing Genocide Studies literature. This is the first article to show that IS's identity construction and genocidal violence cannot be understood in binary terms of Self and Other alone. Rather, our analysis of IS's pursuit of ontological security highlights the fundamental but overlooked importance of Third figures, beyond binary relations of Self and Other. We have argued that IS purposefully engage in genocidal violence in order to juxtapose the group to competitors, writing an identity through proximal alterity, in pursuit of ontological security and strategic gain. Genocidal violence, and support thereof, serves the function of bloody ritual ablation into IS's fold, with the group deliberately prescribed more narrowly—as more extreme—than a broader jihadism. Genocide acts as a form of Public Relations branding exercise for IS; one that is designed to brOther jihadi competitors.

This article developed three contributions. First, the target of IS's violence is not only, or even primarily, those who die. Ours is the first article to argue that genocidal violence is motivated by a desire to brOther competitor groups. A move beyond binaries, to include more complex and populated narratives—accounting for the nuanced politics of Thirds—is vital for OST and Genocide Studies (e.g., Berenskötter and Nymalm 2020; Holland and Matthieu 2023). Second, we contribute to efforts to move studies of ontological security away from the West and the state (Lerner 2023). In doing so, we further efforts to understand and analyze IS violence without recourse to Orientalist tropes (Üngör 2019, 73–74), as part of an effort to resist instrumental existential violence. This instrumentality is usefully understood through a strategic narrative approach, broadened to capture violence as strategic practice. Third, the article contributes a novel analysis of an important case. With Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham toppling Bashar al-Assad, it is difficult to understate the im-

portance of jihadist competition and branding in Syria. Labelled in myriad ways (from “extremists,” to “militants,” to “new government”), HTS have shown the centrality of strategic public relations through violence and its restraint. Yet, the fierce urgency of a new Syrian dawn should not detract from the enduring importance of the Civil War, Salafi-Jihadism, and IS’s remarkable rise and fall.

Future research agendas would do well to more fully consider the centrality of the political discourse of brotherhood in world politics, including elaborating on the importance of the analytical concept and process of broOthering, whether by states or non-state actors. This should comprise part of a broader effort to nuance OST through the inclusion of Third figures, beyond binaries. We also urge greater reflection on the utility of propaganda for the production of ontological insecurity, drawing further on strategic understandings of the use of language and behavior. Most concretely, we hope that a new understanding of the drivers of genocide—especially for one of the most extreme genocidal actors the world has seen in past two decades—might better equip academics and practitioners to prevent existential violence.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this project was gained from the University of Leeds. To ensure this research was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical and legal requirements relating to the access and viewing of terrorist content, the dataset was built using a server developed by the University of Leeds specifically for this purpose. This custom-designed server was explicitly designed to support researchers engaging with sensitive and legally prohibited material. It ensured that the researchers have not directly reproduced or distributed terrorist material or engaged with prohibited content which is beyond the scope of the research project. We thank the University of Leeds for their help developing this server.

The data for this article cannot be made publicly available due to UK law (we have therefore produced an extensive, and legal, appendix).

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be made publicly available due to UK law, we have produced an extensive Online Appendix.

Supplementary Material

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