



Images and International Security

Behead, Burn, Crucify, Crush: Theorizing the Islamic State's Public Display of Violence

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Photo credit: Johan Spanner (www.johanspanner.com,



What kind of technique and practice is this deliberate display of cruelty against human bodies?

What is the content of the Islamic State's videos?

How do they work?

Is this new?

What is the logic, dynamics, and politics of these violent power displays?



Outline of the presentation

1. Case

- Why it is important.

2. Contextualization of the Islamic State's public display of violence.

- More specifically, I try to problematize the public, political constitution of IS's violence as an exceptional evil by placing the acts in a broader historical-political context.

3. Analysis of the Islamic State's videos.

- The aim of this part is to further our understanding of IS's display of violence by explicating the distinct logic and dynamics of the group's videos and asking how they function within a broader technology of power.



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CASE





The Case of the Islamic State

A rapidly growing literature

- ...military capabilities, ideology, history, terror-campaign, institutional structure, ability to materialize the caliphate, founding, religion, etc.

The Islamic State as a visual, aesthetic phenomenon

- The case of IS is also significant, because of the group's more symbolic-expressive power and the "images" it has created on a representational, virtual battlefield.





Exceptional evil?

David Cameron: 'The embodiment of evil', 'a network of death', 'unique in its brutality'.

Chuck Hagel: 'Beyond anything we have ever seen'.

John Kerry: 'Ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, and valueless evil'.

Barack Obama: IS 'has no vision other than...slaughter' and 'offers nothing but misery and death and destruction';

The videos show that 'There can be no reasoning, no negotiating with this brand of evil', because 'the only language understood by killers like this, is the language of force'.





A rhetoric of “evil madmen” ‘advances neither understanding of [terrorist] horror nor, for that matter, the capacity to combat or prevent it’

(Euben 2002: 4; Bleiker 2003: 430, 2008; see also Der Derian 2002; Stern 2003; Hutchison & Bleiker 2008).



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CONTEXTUALIZING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S PUBLIC DISPLAY OF VIOLENCE

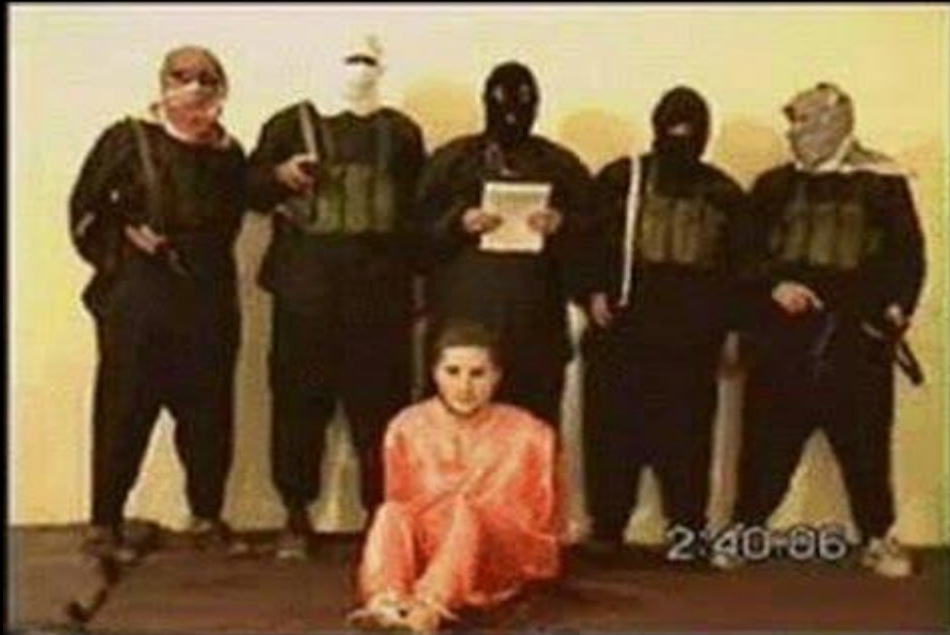




Execution of Robert François Damiens, place de Grève. Paris, on March, 28 1757.
Engraving, French National Library.



Public beheading in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, January 2015, LiveLeak.







Iraq, February 2015, YouTube.



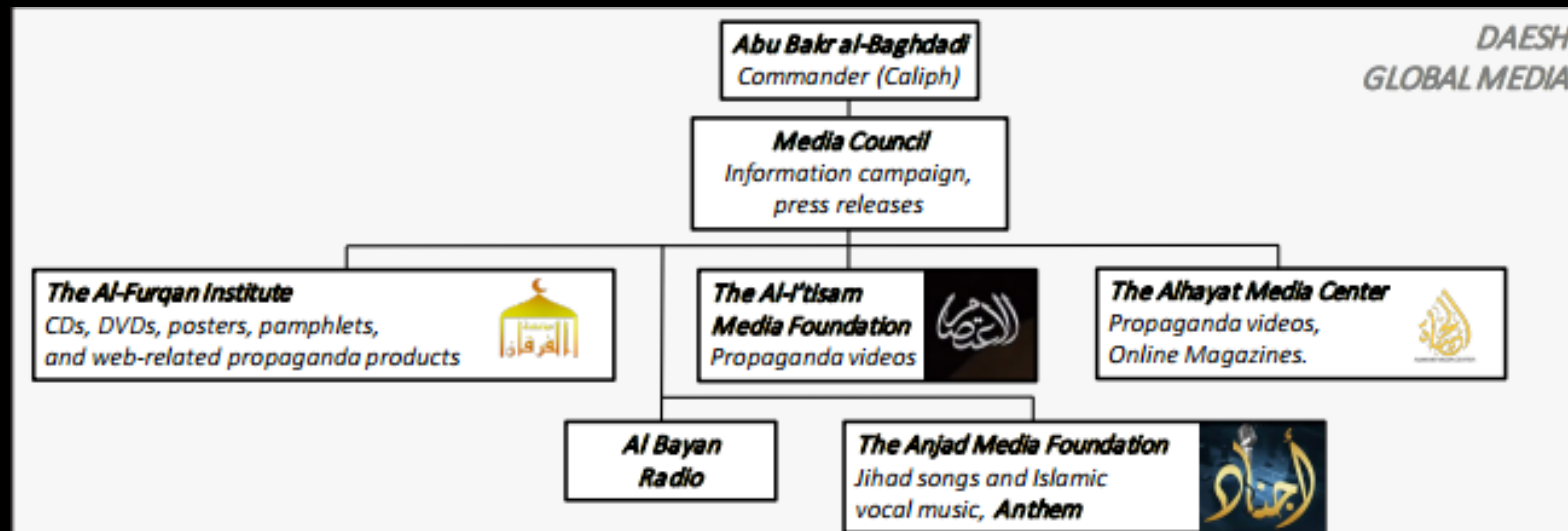
In short

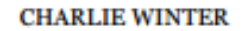
- The Islamic State is **not the first political agent that** mobilizes the public display of cruelty against humane bodies, nor are they the only group currently using the technique.
- Put differently, the violence and the technique in itself is not exceptional. It is **a contemporary case of an age-old phenomenon.**
- Yet, what is new about the Islamic State's public display of violence is the **visibility** and **publicity** of the acts, and the **global, immersive nature of the spectacle** they have created.



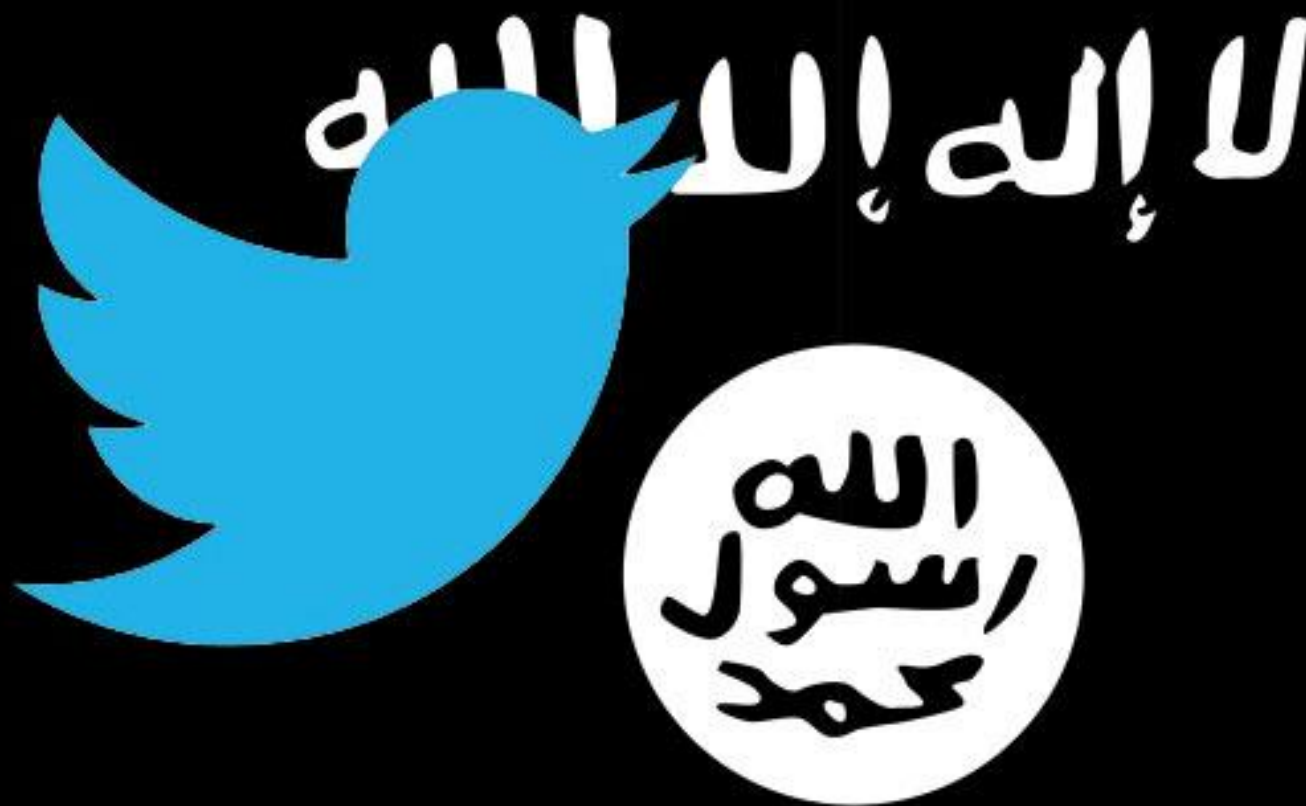
Media transformations

- The media transformations of the 21st century have introduced a number of significant transformations of how images and videos circulate.
- The **speed** with which an act of violence can reach a global audience has been greatly accelerated.
- The effects of filmed atrocities are no longer confined to local or even national arenas, but are visible through the **global** reach of media communication.
- Moreover, while militant groups previously depended on larger media organizations to publicize their acts, modern multiple media is allowing groups like IS to present their deeds to a public without relying on being noticed by television networks.











The argument

- It is not the technique of displaying violence that make IS exceptional, but the group's ability to exploit the contemporary media environment to increase the **public visibility** of their deeds and create a more **immersive spectacle**.
 - The case of IS shows that insurgents and militant groups are becoming remarkably adept at establishing their presence and manipulating their impact through imagery.
- And these alterations pose **new questions** in terms of how to theorize and respond to this form of violence in the future.
 - *who* controls when, where, and how violence is seen.
 - The role of "propaganda" in relation to radicalization, recruitment, and the process of turning violent.



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The Islamic State's videos **LOGIC, DYNAMICS, AND POLITICS**





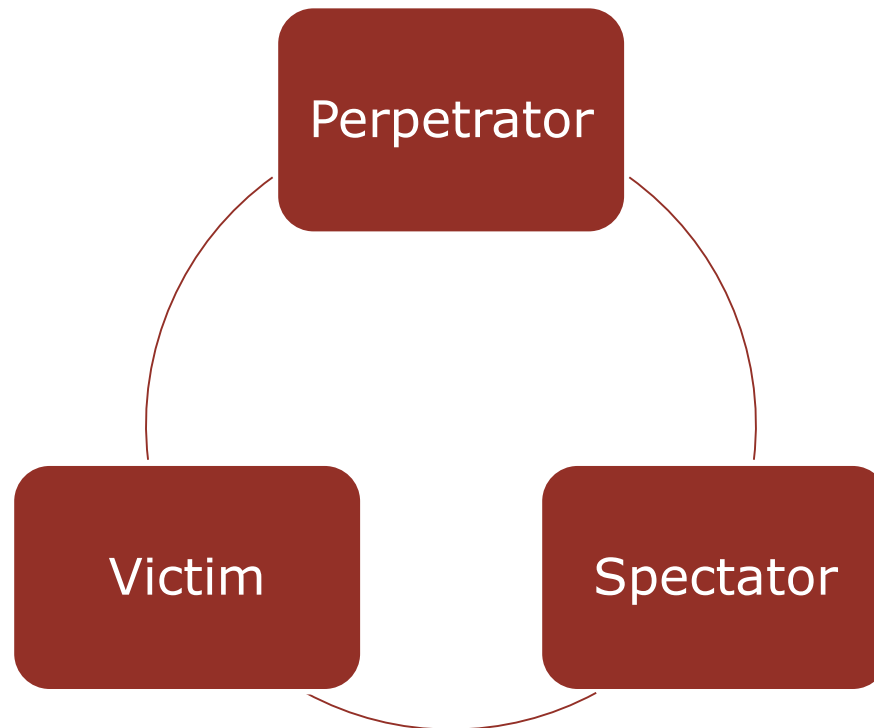
Key points

The public display of violence in IS's videos is a form of violence...

1. ...which is predominantly about the effects on witnesses.
2. ...which relies on the power of transgressive violence to produce the spectacular effect.
3. ...which mobilizes the victim to produce the public appearance of consent.
4. ...which has multiple political functions (and an ambivalent relationship to political order).

Violent Dialogue: effects on witnesses

- A power strategy with a significant communicative and visual—perhaps even aesthetic—dimension.
- It is the **display** and **publicity** of the violence, rather than the scale of injuries inflicted on the victim that constitutes the most central aspect of the deed.
- The political efficacy of the acts predominantly depends on the **visual impact** of suffering and death on a target audience.





'Healing the Believers' Chest' (*al-Furqān Media*, January 2015)



'Healing the Believers' Chest' (*al-Furqān Media*, January 2015)



Transgressive Violence

- **How** the victim is executed is as important as **why** he is executed.
- In order to create a **spectacle of violence**, i.e., a visually striking performance that will attract attention and have an effect on designated spectators, the perpetrators cannot rely on displaying just any form of physical violence.
- They must display **transgressive violence**, that is, an act of violence, which is **beyond** witnesses' comprehension, because it violates prevailing mores and sensibilities.
- More specifically, transgressive violence is an act of violence, which is **perceived as particularly horrific and incomprehensible** by a target audience, because it **transgresses cultural and political discourses of law and morality**, which manage the circulation of everyday violence.



'Healing the Believers' Chest' (*al-Furqān Media*, January 2015)





(Wilayat Hims, October 2015)



'They are the enemy so beware of them #4' (Wilayat Ar Raqqa, February 2016)



The Mobilization of the Victim

- What separates the carefully choreographed violence in IS's videos from other forms of terrorist violence, such as suicide bombings, is the way in which the individual victim is mobilized in the performance.
- The victims in IS's videos are not only killed; they also take active part in the performance.
- More specifically, the producers of IS's videos explicitly mobilize the victims to "speak" on their behalf by making them perform carefully staged confessions.

'I call on my friends, family, and loved to rise up against my real killers, the US government, for what will happen to me is only a result of their complacency and criminality (...) I guess all in all, I wish I wasn't an American.'

'A Message to America' (al-Furqan Media, August 2014)

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم



'Healing the Believers' Chest' (*al-Furqān Media*, January 2015)



Political function

Multiple political functions and an ambiguous relation to political order.

Undermining a political order

- Through public, spectacular executions of individual citizens, IS seeks to contests the political power of sovereign states, they otherwise have little chance of defeating in a conventional military confrontation.
- In this way, IS seeks to convert military weakness into strength by hitting the enemy at its most vulnerable point, the individual citizen, thereby challenging modern political sovereignty based on the care of individual life.

Enforcing a moral and political order

- In many ways, IS's staged violence is as much a *manifestation* of sovereignty and a way of enforcing a moral and political order through the visual display of strength and authority.
- There is a strange dichotomy of transgressive violence and civil order in many of IS's videos.



'Healing the believers' chest', (*al-Furqān Media*, January 2015)

'You are no longer fighting an insurgency—we are an Islamic army and a state that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide'

- "Jihadi John" before beheading Foley.



“But If You Return [To Sin], We Will Return [To Punishment] #3 – Wilāyat Nīnawā”



'Sang pour Sang' (al-Hayat Media, 2016)