

II. Research Notes

Although the (Dis-)Believers Dislike it:

a Backgrounder on IS Hostage Videos – August - December 2014

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Abstract

With the beheading video of U.S. photojournalist James Foley, the Islamic State (IS) initiated a hostage video campaign that received tremendous coverage in the international news media. This backgrounder highlights the most important aspects of IS hostage videos with a particular focus on their media strategic functions, which, in part, stand in sharp contrast with strategic guiding principles voiced by traditional Jihadist ideologue such as Ayman al-Zawahiri – exposing the growing rift between the IS and Al-Qaeda. Providing examples from primary sources and identifying commonalities and differences to earlier hostage footage, the Research Note illustrates that the IS hostage video campaign is rationally calculated, multifaceted, and constantly changing.

Keywords: Islamic State; IS; hostage videos; execution videos; media strategy; beheading

Introduction

On August 19, 2014, with the beheading video of U.S. photojournalist James Foley, the Islamic State (IS) initiated a hostage video campaign drawing tremendous attention by the mainstream media. Much of the news reporting focused – in stark black-and-white-rhetoric – on the barbaric, savage, and evil nature of the displayed violence and its perpetrators, thereby neglecting that execution videos contain many more facets that deserve attention when a realistic assessment is to be made. This backgrounder highlights the most important aspects of IS hostage videos [1] with a particular focus on their media strategic functions, which in part stand in sharp contrast with strategic guiding principles voiced by traditional Jihadist ideologues such as Ayman al-Zawahiri – exposing the growing rift between the IS and Al-Qaeda.

Theatre of Terror: Characteristics of IS Execution Videos and their Predecessors

Hostage execution videos are not mere documentations of conflict atrocities but high-impact propaganda instruments in the terrorists' "War of Ideas" for which the killings were purposely committed. As early as 1974, Jenkins pointed out that

terrorist attacks are often deliberately choreographed by the terrorists to achieve maximum publicity, particularly to attract the attention of the electronic media or the international press. [...] Terrorism is psychological warfare. It is theatre [2].

Consequently, hostage executions and their media orchestration are the total opposite of senseless emotionally-driven behaviour. They are the product of a rationally deliberated calculus that aims at creating a maximum impact on different target groups at the same time, thereby unfolding a degree of political leverage their producers would not gain otherwise due to their minority status.

Terrorism, being rather a strategy of communication than of mere violence [3], has to rely on the distribution power of mass communication outlets to unfold maximum publicity. In the battlefield of the media, where

more than half of terrorists' battle is taking place [4], the Internet (and the social media in particular) have taken centre-stage. Nevertheless, the traditional mainstream media remain of high importance for terrorists, who try to exploit them as a powerful echo-chamber for enhancing the radius of their message. On the other hand, terrorist attacks combine many news factors [5] (i.e. features that render an event news-worthy), making them ideal assets for coverage. Due to this mutual benefit, the relationship between terrorism and the media is often referred to as symbiotic. Hostage takings are particularly well-suited to play the theatre of terror, as they last for a prolonged period, often unfolding a climatic event structure with a dramatic potential. These kind of dual-phase terrorist acts are emotionally laden, and focus on a few individuals that can easily be categorized into a "good versus evil" scheme. The combination of "human interest", life-and-death situations, and dramatic choreography proves irresistible for the media, especially commercial ones, wishing to attract and hold audiences.

On May 11, 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization *Jama'at al-Tawhid Wa'al-Jihad* (one of the IS' predecessor groups), released a video showing the decapitation of American communications contractor Nicholas Berg. It marked the beginning of a video series that bears much resemblance to the current IS hostage video campaign – but is also characterized by some discrepancies that shed light on shifts in media strategy. Typically, execution videos are highly staged and focus on the execution ritual that consists of several recurrent steps (e.g. a self-identification of the hostage, a legitimizing speech by the executioner, or the actual execution). According to Perlmutter, "beheading videos are inherently symbolic, in fact they are the personification of symbolic warfare" [6]. Many of them have a symmetrical image structure, with the captors (mostly an odd number) posing behind their kneeling and shackled hostages in a centred group-photo-like constellation, signalling a hierarchy which demonstrates the terrorists' power over their helpless victims. The forensic signature of beheadings is consistent. They are "essentially ritual murders that are used as psychological warfare and propaganda" [7]. The hostage is beheaded with a knife – a pejorative allusion to the slaughter of animals aimed at dehumanising the victim. The executioner places the severed head on the centre back or chest of the torso. According to Neer and O'Toole,

ISIS's violence is premeditated, purposeful, cold-blooded, and predatory, and has a sadistic quality to it. [...] [It] is best described as instrumental violence, and is the type typically preferred and engaged in by psychopaths [8].

Execution videos are laden with colour symbolism. Often, the captive is forced to wear an orange jumpsuit – a reference to the prison uniforms at Guantanamo Bay. The IS adopted the orange jumpsuit symbolism, introduced by Zarqawi a decade ago, for many of its 2014 videos and also occasionally uses it in photo reports of executions released by its provincial media wings. The executioner is usually clad in black clothes – symbolically representing the concepts of jihad and the caliphate by creating a historical link to both the prophet's black battle flag and the medieval Abbasid Caliphate [9]. While many of the 2004 killings were filmed indoors in rooms with empty walls (except of a group banner in the background), most of the 2014 executions were recorded outdoors in desert areas – demonstrating that the perpetrators are in full control of the geographic region and do not have to hide at a clandestine location. The IS footage contains only a few dominant colours: the black of the executioner's clothes, the orange of the hostage's jumpsuit, the beige of the sand, and the blue of the sky. The setting is heavily staged, creating the impression of a minimalistic theatre, focusing in an unprecedented manner – without any elements of distraction – the viewer's attention on the executioner and his victim. The sharp contrasts between the few colours (at some points the executioner appears to be a threatening dark silhouette against the blue sky) gives the image an enormous visual impact that remains effective if it is transferred from a screen to static stills in print media. Other than in most of the 2004 videos, the IS victims are mostly not blindfolded, which amplifies the psychological impact.

The first four 2014 videos showing the execution of Western captives (i.e. James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, and Alan Henning) were choreographed and produced in a strikingly similar fashion. Staged down to the last detail for media suitability in accordance with typical Western news settings, the videos use a political (instead of a religious) narrative. While most tapes from the 2004 series contain characteristic religious elements, such as *anasheds* songs or Quranic verses, such features have been dropped in the four IS videos. Even the praising “Allah-u-akbar”, militants usually frenetically shout during the killing process, was left out. While most traditional hostage videos are in Arabic, the IS executioner, widely dubbed as “Jihadi John” (henceforth JJ), delivers his statement in fluent English with a London accent. The political leaders and the public of the hostages’ home countries are explicitly addressed, and the videos make abundant mentioning of recent political decisions and military actions by these nations. In an introductory part, each of the four IS videos contains an edited segment of TV news reports on addresses by Western political leaders or parliamentary decisions, framing the subsequent hostage footage in a clear political context.

While the 2004 videos were shot with low-quality video cameras – implementing the golden rule of terrorism to achieve maximum impact with minimal effort – this does not apply to the IS videos, which are filmed from different angles with multiple HD cameras. An extensive frame-to-frame analysis of the elaborately produced IS hostage video *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* by Quilliam/TRAC [10] has revealed that the central hostage segment was filmed in multiple takes over no less than 4-6 hours and has been edited using AVID post-production technology. The fact that “this is not something that an amateur photographer can learn through trial and error” [11] proves that the IS has professional media experts in its ranks. The production costs of the video amount to “at least \$200,000” [12]. For Quilliam/TRAC it is “clear that the content of the video was carefully considered and the individual (or individuals) who directed it were obvious perfectionists” [13]. Nevertheless, their analysis has exposed that the producers made several editing mistakes, revealing information they had wanted to conceal (such as three hidden executioners).

A common characteristic of the 2014 IS’ execution videos is tactical self-censorship, whereby the producers exclude the most graphic content. Only the very beginning of the execution procedure is shown, then the screen turns to black, and afterwards the bloody aftermath is displayed for a few seconds. This is not an entirely new practice. Roughly 20% of the beheading videos released in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia 2004-2008 were self-censored [14] to prevent a “bad PR” effect (i.e. being heavily criticized even by supporters for being excessively violent and breaking Islamic law). What is new though, is the frequent use of self-censorship: Without one exception all officially released IS hostage execution videos were self-censored. Moreover, according to Bunker, “beheading victims are normally put through dry runs of the beheading [...] to get them conditioned for the terminal event” [15] – a cynical effort to make the later visual production suitable for target audiences. With this media strategy, the IS holds a balance between psychological warfare (by showing the victim’s body) and audience-suitability (by sparing viewers the most distressing moments).

The IS execution videos use a consistent narrative. As a communication (instead of a violence) strategy, terrorism aims to send a message to different target audiences. The violence perpetrated against the victim is only a medium to draw the target audiences’ attention and make them receptive for the message. Consequently, what is said in a hostage video, is of particular importance. The intention to convey a message becomes evident in video titles, which often explicitly include the term, e.g. the Foley video is titled “A Message to America”. The central message of the IS Western hostage video campaign is to deter the U.S. and its allies (mainly via generating pressure from the general public) from direct military intervention against IS targets in Iraq and Syria. For example, IS executioner JJ threatens:

We take this opportunity to warn those governments that enter this evil alliance of America against the Islamic State to back off and leave our people alone. (Steven Sotloff video, released: 2/9/2014)

If you, Cameron, persist in fighting the Islamic State, then you, like your master Obama, will have the blood of your people on your hands. (David Haines video, released: 13/9/2014)

With an average run-time of 2 minutes 46 seconds, the duration of the four videos is unusually short – roughly half the average length of the hostage footage released in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia 2004–2008 [16]. This is probably done to fit into the news items format structure of Western news media. The legitimation for the violence is mainly retributive and formulated straight-up without complex theological arguments. For example, in the Sotloff video, JJ states:

I'm back, Obama, and I'm back because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State, because of your insistence on continuing your bombings and [unintelligible] on Mosul Dam, despite our serious warnings. You, Obama, have but to gain from your actions...[unintelligible] another American citizen. So just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people.

The clear-cut, simple legitimation narrative marks a significant difference from the 2004 videos, where militants delivered sophisticated legitimizing arguments for their deeds [17]. This is in line with a general trend towards simplification of ideological messaging in order to make it more accessible for Western audiences (particularly young people with limited attention span) [18].

While in the past terrorists frequently legitimized executions by pointing to alleged individual “crimes” a victim had committed, such as spying, the first four executed Westerners are presented as victims of their home nations’ foreign policy. [19] Their governments are accused of showing no interest in the fate of their citizens – a common propaganda communication strategy that aims to drive a wedge between leaders and ordinary citizens. Before his execution, Foley is forced to say:

I call on my friends, family, and loved ones to rise up against my real killers, the U.S. government, for what will happen to me, is only a result of their complacency and criminality. My message to my beloved parents: Save me some dignity and don't accept any meagre compensation for my death from the same people who effectively hit the last nail in my coffin with their recent aerial campaign in Iraq. (released: 19/8/2014)

The language of the 2014 IS videos is less elaborated than that of the carefully formulated and theologically-founded Jihadist statements in earlier hostage footage; e.g. in the David Haines video JJ proclaims:

Your evil alliance with America, which continues to strike the Muslims of Iraq and most recently bombed the Haditha Dam, will only accelerate your destruction, and playing the role of the obedient lapdog, Cameron, will only drag you and your people into another bloody and unwinnable war.

Symbol expert Dawn Perlmutter has identified elements of gang codes in the videos. She points out that the language, gesture, and violence signify disrespect in the same manner as a gangbanger is calling out a rival gang leader. Perlmutter gives the examples of JJ dishonouring Obama by omitting his President title, and calling Cameron an “obedient lapdog” (a double insult negating his political autonomy and equating him to a dog – a species deemed impure in Islam). With the hostage murder, the IS sends the message: If you enter our territory we will kill a member of your gang [20]. JJ emphasizes the IS’ frontal disrespect by making plenty use of personal and possessive pronouns like “you” and “your”, while aggressively pointing his knife to the camera. Demonstrating his power over life and death, he dominantly points the knife to his captives when mentioning them.

A chilling innovation of the IS’ hostage video campaign is the group’s tactic to present the next victim at the end of an execution tape. This practice breaks with traditional release patterns of hostage media. Terrorist

groups often release so-called proof-of-life videos that precede later execution footage. Such tapes serve to create credibility by providing evidence that a captive is still alive and indeed held by the group which is claiming the kidnapping. In case an organization makes demands, it uses a proof-of-life tape to publicize its conditions for the release of a hostage, usually linked to an ultimatum of several hours to days and a threat to kill the captive when the deadline has expired. In 2014, the IS did not use this traditional video type and instead introduced hybrid videos combining execution and hostage footage. The presentation of a new victim immediately after the display of his predecessor's body is a maximum psychological warfare operation. Moreover, the unpredictability of the IS' time schedule (no ultimatum is announced, only demands are made) raises the psychological pressure, making the captors – as the sole controllers of events – appear powerful while underlining the helplessness of their adversaries. Foley is not even shown in a hybrid video before his execution – implying that the group, at this stage of the kidnapping case [21], deemed the psychological pressure of its actions more important than the fulfilment of any demands.

Media Bias: High vs. Low Profile Hostages

The videotaped decapitations of the American and British hostages raised a media storm [22]. According to a NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 94% of Americans said that they saw, read, or heard the news coverage about the beheadings of the U.S. journalists [23]. This awareness is higher than for any other major news event in the last five years [24] and proves that the IS has been successful in grabbing the attention of a maximum audience and spreading its message to millions of viewers in the Western hemisphere. The tremendous coverage amplifies its well-organized and highly resilient social media campaign [25], making the mainstream media an active participant in the group's "War of Ideas". Much discussion has unfolded on whether it is ethically justifiable to publish screenshots or segments from the videos or even the full-length tapes. Proponents emphasize the importance to show visuals in order to provide a realistic account of the enemy's brutality and to secure freedom of speech, an intrinsic element of a functioning democracy. Critics point out that showing the footage plays directly into the hands of the Jihadists and is insensitive towards the victims and their families. Several news outlets completely refrained from publishing stills from the videos – a notable example is the British newspaper "The Independent on Sunday": After the beheading of aid worker Alan Henning, it used a plain black front cover with white letters reading:

On Friday a decent, caring human being was murdered in cold blood. Our thoughts are with his family. He was killed, on camera, for the sole purpose of propaganda. Here is the news, not the propaganda [26].

Remarkably, only few discussions have focused on the center-piece of the videos – the terrorist message – with many news outlets simply transcribing verbal quotes from JJ's statements and the hostages' scripted speeches without carefully framing them as terrorist propaganda.

The success of the IS media campaign can be considered as one important reason for the spread of videotaped beheadings to other nations. A high media attention is particularly useful for emerging groups which have not yet managed to establish instant name/brand recognition. In an apparent move to copycat the IS media strategy, several other militant groups published similar footage, amongst them Algeria-based AQIM splinter-group *Jund al-Khilafa* (JK) and the Sinai-based *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* [ABM]. Some characteristics of their tapes bear striking resemblance to the IS hostage videos, indicating that the militants used the IS productions as templates for their own media operations (e.g. the JK beheading video of French mountaineering guide Hervé Gourdel contains an introductory segment with edited news footage and employs a similar self-censorship tactic).

Perlmutter has identified another important reason for the geographical spread of beheading videos: in line with her gang code interpretation of IS media, Perlmutter considers the decapitations as initiation rituals comparable to the “blood-in” code that requires a new member of a group to commit murder; consequently, the filmed decapitations are a form to pledge allegiance to the IS [27]. This is consistent with both the developments on the ground (JK and parts of ABM have merged with the IS) and the IS’ narrative. In an article about secured pledges of allegiance published in its English-language propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, the group writes about JK:

when Shaykh Abū Muhammad al-‘Adnānī [the IS spokesman, J.T.] made a call to target crusaders everywhere, the mujāhidīn of Algeria were the quickest to answer his call, and immediately presented a French prisoner for execution if the French did not withdraw from the American coalition against the Islamic State, and then executed him when the French arrogantly insisted upon continuing their transgressions. [28]

Other than one might expect, the media storm effect does not apply to all execution videos in a similar manner. Instead, a strong bias can be observed, manifesting itself in an over-reporting of Western hostage killings and an under-reporting of domestic executions. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Jihadist groups have regularly published execution videos. Many of these tapes were unofficially released productions uploaded by individual fighters (or their enemies) to social media sharing sites, such as YouTube. Much of this low-quality, Arabic-language footage is uncensored and displays excessively cruel violence [29]. It can be assumed that these unofficial productions were not choreographed for Western media-suitability, and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to find reliable information on the victims and their killers. These factors might explain why such videos do not receive the same amount of coverage than Western captive footage. However, the media bias also applies to official releases displaying domestic hostages. For example, on August 28, 2014, the IS released a carefully choreographed English-subtitled video featuring 24 captive Peshmerga fighters, one of whom is beheaded in front of the Great Mosque in Mosul – “a provocation, trying to show that IS control of the city is assured” [30]. It addresses Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and U.S. President Obama and contains a threat to decapitate further hostages. Though released only a few days after the Foley video (with the high-impact news coverage still going on), the Peshmerga video did only receive very little attention – in spite of the fact, that the lives of the 23 remaining captives were endangered.

The so-far most blatant disregard for domestic hostages could be observed in the coverage of the IS compilation video *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*. The tape contained two segments of hostage footage, the first showing the simultaneous beheading of 22 Syrian officers and pilots, the second displaying the remains of executed American aid worker Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig. In the first 24 hours after the video release, the mainstream media almost entirely focused in their reporting on the Kassig segment (as if it were a separate video) and completely ignored the Syrian officers and pilots’ segment [31]. Later on, as the number of news articles covering the Syrians’ executions raised, most of this reporting nevertheless dealt primarily with the identities of the international IS executioners and did not pay much attention to the hostages [32]. Remarkably, Kassig’s parents mentioned the killed Syrians in a statement released on the same day they learned of their son’s death [33]. IS supporters exploit the under-reporting of domestic casualties in their social media posts. The ignorance of non-Western victims perfectly fits into their “Western arrogance” narrative. For example, IS supporter “Milk Sheikh” tweeted on November 26: “One Kafir beheaded by the Islamic State = Cocunuts cry like Rafidah on Ashurah. Assad kills 200+ civilians in Raqqa = Cocunuts are quite [quiet is meant, J.T.]”.

Terrorism Cinema: Choreographing Execution Videos for the Young Generation

While the first IS execution videos were similar in terms of content, choreography, and production style, the IS set a new media strategic precedent with the release of *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* on November 16. The 15 minutes, 53 seconds English-language compilation video consists of three segments: The first, split into further sub-segments spanning across the video as a conjunctive narrative, summarizes the IS' history, expansion successes, and ambitions – communicating the message, that the group is unstoppable. By displaying graphic footage of air strike casualties caused by Assad's forces, it also serves as a legitimization for the violence shown in the second segment – the simultaneous beheading of 22 Syrian officers and pilots. The last segment displays the bodily remains of executed U.S. aid worker Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig. The video re-engages traditional elements of Jihadist propaganda such as *anasheed* songs and Quranic verses – indicating that it is not primarily addressed to a Western audience (including potential recruits) but mainly to Jihadist supporters and enemies in the region (such as Assad's army).

While in the past the IS has released video footage showing gunshot executions of a large number of captives, the carefully choreographed ritualized mass beheading documented in graphic detail is a first – not only for the group but for global Jihadist propaganda in general. The 22 military personnel, captured by the IS during the overrun of Division 17 and other military bases in summer, are paraded through an olive grove to a desert place in a humiliating way, bent, barefooted, and shackled, with each militant grabbing one of them by the scruff of his neck. The ritual procession, led by JJ, walks past a wooden box with black military knives, each militant taking one when passing by. The captives, who are wearing dark blue (rather than Guantanamo-style orange) jumpsuits are forced to kneel in a line left and right to JJ, creating a symmetrical constellation. Notably, all militants are unmasked, have different nationalities or ethnicities, and wear military fatigues, except JJ. Clad in his black executioner uniform, his face covered, he gives a short threatening address to Obama. Before the beheading starts, the camera lingers over the faces of the captives. Some of the militants are shown running their thumbs over the blades of their knives – a psychological warfare tactic obviously targeted at the audience (the militants are standing behind their victims and are out of their view). With the word “Bismillah”, JJ signals the begin of the decapitations.

The slickly edited HD video makes heavy use of cinematic special effects. The psychological impact of the footage is reinforced by visual effects and chilling sounds (e.g. when the militants pick their knives from the box, the sound of metal sliding against metal is exaggerated). The video has a climax-oriented structure, culminating in a movie-like “showdown”, focusing on JJ beheading “his” captive: In the most disturbing scene, the executioner begins to decapitate his victim (shown in slow-motion), then halts the execution, exposes the neck wound of the victim, and then suddenly looks up (emphasized by an uncanny sound effect), staring threatening into the camera, which holds the scene for a moment, then (underlined by a fast-motion effect and chilling sound), pounces back on his victim to complete the beheading. With its shock effects, the choreography of the whole scene strongly resembles American horror slasher movies. In motion pictures, slow motion explicitly disrupts the illusion of natural vision, the process of dying is drawn out for inspection, enabling the sequence to shock, the mortification of the body becomes lyrical, yet the graphic nature signifies realism to viewers [34]. Employed in a terrorist video, the slow-/fast-motion and sound effects are a means to aestheticize, dramatize, and spectacularize the (real) violence, thereby creating, on the one hand, a distance that keeps the video appealing for viewers, while, on the other hand, retaining the shock value of the footage, which is required for psychological warfare. After the beheading, the camera lingers solemnly in slow-motion over the faces of the perpetrators, the footage now resembling a heroic epic glorifying the warrior ethos of its protagonists. With effects of Western cinema culture, a cowardly act – the cold-blooded decapitation of shackled, kneeling, helpless victims – is framed as a heroic deed.

Wrapping the violence in cinematic elements is a media strategic meant to create a familiar bonding to foreign viewers and secure a range and impact of message outreach which the IS propagandists would not gain otherwise. It particularly appeals to young Muslim Jihad sympathizers familiar with Western pop culture, where the domestication of ultraviolence is “a signifier of ‘action’ and pleasure” [35]. According to former French IS hostage Nicolas Hénin, particularly the European IS recruits have seen more horror and disaster movies than time spent reading pages from the Quran [36]. This points to an often overlooked function of execution videos: recruitment. Considering the support of the greater Jihadist community as vital, the IS invests more effort in recruitment than any other Jihadist group, with a special emphasis on foreign fighters [37]. As “terror marketing” [38], beheadings resonate with young Muslim Jihad sympathizers (including converts) around the world, who interpret the violence as a just retribution for the West’s oppressive and humiliating behaviour towards Islam. Execution videos prove that the IS is making good on its threats to kill – thereby raising its street credibility [39] and demonstrating power and prowess in the competitive environment of terrorist groups. Though on a smaller scale as in *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*, Western pop cultural elements can also be found in other IS execution videos. For example, De Graaf and Boyle point to striking similarities between the edited news segment in the Sotloff video and the opening credits of the U.S. TV series “Homeland” [40]. The exploitation of Western pop culture becomes further evident in the IS’ use of style elements from Hip Hop music videos: the “dissing” of adversaries, JJ’s gesturing, and the use of sound effects to emphasize certain words (such as echo effects) are common codes of Hip Hop culture, which is very popular among young Muslim males.

The appeal of IS execution videos manifests itself in the overwhelmingly celebratory reactions of the group’s supporters (many of them IT-savvy individuals), kicking off social media hypes. The reactions do not only prove that the supporters see the videotaped murders as a huge victory against their enemies and a restoration of the “Ummah’s” honour, but also that they regard the graphic violence as entertainment. For example, on November 16, 2014, “abdul haafidh” tweeted: “Watching ‘even though the disbelievers dislike it’ In Full HD May Allah bless #IS’s media team”. The message was accompanied by a picture of his TV with the video running on it. The grim, left-handed executioner JJ has turned into a celebrity-like cult figure praised by his countless fans with slickly edited glorifying and threatening art-work, often used as avatars and headers for their Twitter and other social media accounts. A symbolic signature figure for the unstoppable brute force of the IS, JJ has become more than his individual personality: He is now a brand with an established recognition value (which might also explain why he is still appearing in his typical identity-concealing black uniform while other executioners show their faces). One artwork image displays JJ in front of a full moon (with written elements of the IS flag on it), pointing his knife to the camera. With moon and knife not only symbols of Jihadist culture but also typical elements of horror film symbolism, JJ is put close to American slasher movie heroes such as Michael Myers from “Halloween”. Research has shown that young horror film watchers prefer violent and murderous slasher monsters and find them attractive because of their killing prowess [41]. JJ’s fans abundantly quote their hero’s sayings, first and foremost the vengeful catchphrase “I’m back”, used in the Sotloff video (likely an allusion to the famous quote “I’ll be back” from the Terminator movies). His fan community welcomes his deeds with cheering comments. On November 16, “Pro-Muslim” posted a screenshot from the central scene of *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*, showing JJ staring into the camera during the beheading and commented: “That stare. .. Priceless”. Considering him a weapon to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, they use pictures of him for making threats against adversaries, and express their excitement to see him “in action”. On December 24, when the IS broke news about the capture of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh, “Abu Jandal” posted two stills of JJ and sarcastically wrote: “That Jordanian Pilot has Won a VIP exclusive audience with our brother Jihadi John! Enjoy your Prize!”

The detailed graphic nature and the dropping of its self-censorship mechanism in *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* can probably be attributed to a shift in the IS' media strategic targeting pattern, moving the focus from the "far" back to the "near" enemy (foremost: the Assad regime). With its detailed documentation of excessive violence, the group tries to deter Assad's military personnel in a "Shock and Awe" manner and seeks to raise its profile among local anti-Assad forces, increasing its recruitment appeal. The shifted focus is further substantiated by the initiation of a new IS hostage video series titled "Nusayri Soldiers in the Hands of the Islamic State", showing the beheading of captured Assad military personnel. Other than in the Western hostage videos, the captives are mistreated and humiliated on-camera (e.g. one soldier is forced to kiss the boot of a militant and mocked when he bursts into tears). In contrast to the solemn execution rite of the compilation video, the Nusayri series portrays violence as casual (e.g. one soldier is decapitated while sitting on a bench). However, notably, the IS has re-engaged its self-censorship mechanism in the series, a move that might have been caused by "bad PR" effects in reaction to its excessively cruel compilation video. A separate tape, released on December 24, 2014, and titled *The Execution of a Murtaf Group Linked to the Nusayari Regime* displays 13 alleged Assad spies who are questioned and later simultaneously killed by gunshots. In contrast to most of the previous IS hostage videos, the footage (which also employs slick post-production editing such as special effects overlays) was not recorded in a remote desert area; instead the captives were publicly executed in front of a large crowd, obviously to create a high deterrent effect among the local population.

The focus on the "near" enemy, the excessive violence, and the high production value of the mass execution segment are not the only discrepancies that distinguish *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* from previous IS hostage videos. Its last segment, showing the bodily remains of U.S. aid worker Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig, is characterized by several striking irregularities, of which the most important are:

1. The video does not contain a statement by Kassig. Given that the central element of terrorist propaganda is the message, this is a remarkable inconsistency. JJ plays down the omission by cynically mocking Kassig's bodily remains by stating: "Peter, who fought against the Muslims in Iraq while serving as a soldier under the American army, doesn't have much to say. His previous cell mates have already spoken on his behalf". Notably, the hostage is not presented as a victim of his home government's foreign policy; instead his military past is emphasised – maybe in an attempt to counter the heavy criticism the IS had received for the death threat against Kassig, a Muslim convert who had been on a humanitarian mission to help the local population (including injured militants).
2. The production value of the segment is far below the rest of the video. The footage is poorly lit and does not contain many special effects.
3. Kassig's body is not shown; only his severed head is displayed in what Quilliam/TRAC believe to be – with a high degree of certainty – a still photo, that has been edited into the video [42].
4. The IS does not present its next victim at the end of the video.

Most experts have concluded that the discrepancies do not emanate from deliberate media strategic decisions but are rather a result of the IS' plans to videotape Kassig's execution having been foiled, most probably because the hostage resisted his captors. Based on medical expert analyses, Quilliam/TRAC conclude that Kassig might not have been beheaded, as the IS suggested, but shot instead [43].

Zealous Young Men: Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi Revisited

One of the most important conclusions that can be drawn from the IS hostage video campaign (and from *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* in particular) is the fact that the group's media strategy turns the strategic guiding principles voiced nearly a decade ago by Ayman al-Zawahiri upside down. In an intercepted letter from July 2005, Zawahiri, at that time the second-in-command of Al-Qaeda Central (AQC), criticized Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then-leader of the IS' predecessor organization Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), for the way he conducted jihad in Iraq. Though formulated rather as a piece of advice rather than as a direct order, the letter reveals a first "tension that has arisen between the 'old guard' of al-Qaeda and the operational echelon in 'the field'" [44]. While Zawahiri does not question the theological justification of Zarqawi's actions, he pragmatically criticizes his method to achieve his goals. Zawahiri's main dictum is that the success of Jihad is dependent on the support from the Muslim masses, "therefore, the mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve" [45].

In his letter, Zawahiri criticized three elements of Zarqawi's strategy. The first point of criticism was the indiscriminate attacks against ordinary Shia people – he opines that the majority of Muslims does not comprehend the sectarian violence and finds it alienating. Notably, while Zarqawi's organization regularly conducted brutal attacks against Shiite civilians, it often either refrained from officially claiming these attacks or offered non-sectarian justifications for its deeds (e.g. it legitimized hostage killings by pointing to alleged "crimes" that the individuals had committed, such as spying, instead of highlighting their Shia identity). In contrast, the IS openly propagates an anti-Shia ideology, condoning sectarian cleansing. In Episode 2 of the propaganda video series "Lend me your Ears" (released: 29/9/2014), British hostage John Cantlie is forced to say that the IS does not "regard the Shia as Muslims at all. In fact [...] [they] are considered worse than Americans as they are apostates claiming to be Muslims while worshipping the dead". In the first segment of *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* which summarizes the IS' history in brief, the narrator states:

It was not befitting for the grandsons of Abu Bakr and 'Umar [...] to take the stance of a subservient and humiliated person. So they sharpened every blade to make the rafidah [pejorative term for the Shia, J.T.] taste all sorts of killing and torment. They uprooted the fortresses, pounded the strongholds of shirk, and cleansed the land of the filth of the rafidah.

The second element Zawahiri criticized in 2005 was AQI's foreign leadership (Zarqawi himself was Jordanian-born), which he thought might stir up sensitivities among Iraqi people. Indeed, in the years following the U.S. 2003 invasion of Iraq, foreign fighters – not only leaders but also ordinary foot soldiers – were often treated with suspicion by domestic militants. In the IS, the tide has turned. About half of the estimated 30.000 fighters-strong group consists of foreigners [46]. That the IS considers and propagates itself as a multi-national force becomes strikingly evident in the mass execution scene from *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*: The video's producers carefully selected the prominently featured executioners from different nationalities and ethnicities. Also in November 2014, the IS tried to capitalize on the protests in the U.S. city of Ferguson, appealing to African-Americans by emphasising its own non-racism stance. On November 27, IS supporter "State of Islam" posted a picture of several fighters from different nationalities/ethnicities with the comment: "Many races. No racism. This is the Khilafah. #Ferguson #IslamicState".

The third strategic element – the one Zawahiri criticised the most rigorously – were the videotaped beheadings. He wrote:

Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable – also – are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughter-

ers, etc. They do not express the general view of the admirer and the supporter of the resistance in Iraq, and of you in particular. [47]

Zawahiri was especially concerned about the “bad PR” effect of beheadings that could be amplified by the mainstream media coverage:

The general opinion of our supporter does not comprehend that, and [...] this general opinion falls under a campaign by the malicious, perfidious, and fallacious campaign by the deceptive and fabricated media [48].

To avoid counterproductive reactions, Zawahiri recommends to stop decapitation as a method of execution:

We can kill the captives by bullet. That would achieve that which is sought after without exposing ourselves to the questions and answering to doubts. We don't need this [49].

Criticism by leadership figures such as Zawahiri and the controversy about the decapitation scenes within the broader Jihadist community eventually led to a sharp decline in beheading videos [50]. In the first years after its foundation, Al-Furqan media, the IS' oldest media production centre (founded on October 31, 2006 by the group's predecessor organisation Islamic State of Iraq), strictly complied with Zawahiri's advice. When executions of hostages were videotaped, the captives were killed by gunshots. However, since its establishment in April 2013, the IS has not only re-introduced videotaped beheadings but made the cruel execution method the hallmark of its media strategy. Moreover, it ignored opposition, even from hard-line supporters [51], to the decapitation of captives who were engaged in humanitarian work (such as Alan Henning) and/or were Muslim converts (e.g. Abdul-Rahman [Peter] Kassig).

The media strategic shift of going “back-to-the-roots” has to be seen in the broader context of the IS' and Al-Qaeda's differences in strategy which in February 2014 led to AQC's public expulsion of its Iraqi branch, which since its admission into Al-Qaeda in December 2004, had become a “liability to the image of jihad generally and of al-Qa`ida in particular” [52]. One important root cause of the internal strife is a generation gap. Approximately half of the IS membership is made up of young men, who

criticize Zawahiri as being an old man who [is] both lacking in wisdom and too far-removed from the Syrian conflict to justifiably weigh in on the strategy for it [...]. They regard the old hands of jihad as has-beens who need to step aside and make room for the next generation of jihad [53].

Many of the media strategic elements employed by the IS (such as the simplification of the messaging or the exploitation of pop cultural elements) can be interpreted in the context of the group's agenda to win the hearts of young foreign Jihad sympathizers. For this young generation, which has grown up with the brutality of Western action and horror movies, the graphic violence depicted in beheading videos has become a pull (rather than a push) factor. That the young make up the targeted demographic group most receptive to IS' recruitment efforts, may release the organization from worries about “bad PR” effects and encourage it to continue its strategy. However, it can be expected that the generation gap will almost certainly have negative effects as well. With so many young fighters, the IS lacks experienced and skilled members for its long-term goal to consolidate and expand its Islamic Caliphate. The group is aware of this weak point and tries to counteract it – one example worth mentioning is a special call by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for scientists, scholars, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers and people with military and administrative expertise in many domains, stressing that the IS is in dire need of such personnel [54]. That well-educated people are equally attracted to cruel beheading scenes than the inexperienced “zealous young men” is, however, questionable.

AQC and its branches consequently adhere to their media strategic standard of avoiding decapitation footage

and keep up their vocal criticism of non-conformers. On December 8, Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi, a senior commander of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), openly chastised the IS for its beheading videos, stating:

These are scenes which we do not accept and we strongly reject [...] Prophet Mohammad [...] has ordered us to be kind in everything, even in killing, and it is not part of kindness to film beheadings and slayings and publish them in public, where sons and daughters of those killed can see [55].

In line with this, AQAP's own hostage media footage differs considerably from the IS videos. For example, in a December 4 tape featuring kidnapped U.S. journalist Luke Somers (who was later killed in a failed rescue attempt), al-Ansi, who is unmasked and wears traditional Muslim clothes, reads from a prepared script in a calm tone without heavy gesturing. Somers is dressed in Western civilian clothes, appears to be unshackled, and is not visibly threatened with a weapon. The IS and its supporters counter Al-Qaeda's criticism and PR-conscious approach by accusing it to betray jihadist principles. On December 29, "anbaari12" tweeted a picture of Zawahiri with a mocking speech bubble reading: "We don't implement Shari'ah because we want to be popular".

Bifurcated Media Strategy: Terror News Programming

In an effort to reach out to a more sophisticated audience, the IS embarked on a new media strategic path parallel to its execution video campaign. On September 18, 2014, it released the introduction of a propaganda video series featuring British hostage John Cantlie. By the end of 2014, six episodes have been released in addition to the intro trailer; the group has announced two further instalments on its advertising banner. With the multi-part footage titled *Lend me your Ears – Messages from the British Detainee John Cantlie*, the IS tries to portray itself as a civilised and legitimate organisation by carefully packaging its political messaging through the words and conventions of a Western news media insider [56]. Mimicking a news setting with Cantlie serving as the anchor, the experienced war reporter is shown sitting on a wooden desk against a black background, his hands unshackled. Though he candidly admits that he is speaking under duress, the videos do not show any physical violence perpetrated against him [57] and lack the threatening tone of the execution videos. Instead of intimidating the political leaders and public of the hostage's home country, the IS attempts to subtly influencing its audience, trying to persuade it of the group's views and causes [58].

The Cantlie video series pursues three main objectives. The first is creating a counterbalance to the Western news media reporting. As mentioned before, terrorists remain dependent on the mainstream media for maximum distribution of their messages. However, it is not only important *that* their acts are reported but also *how* the media report on it. As terrorism is widely condemned by local and international news outlets, the reporting takes the stance of the IS' adversaries, which is counterproductive for the group's image. In the intro, Cantlie says on the IS' behalf:

I'm gonna show you the truth behind the systems and motivation of the Islamic State and how the Western media, the very organisation I used to work for, can twist and manipulate that truth to the public back home. There are two sides to every story – think you're getting the whole picture? [...]. Join me for the next few programs and I think you may be surprised at what you learn (released: 18/09/2014).

Cantlie's straight and open tone combined with his facade of being a news anchor – a role, Western audiences associate with reliability – give his message an aura of trustworthiness.

The second objective of the propaganda series is congruent with that of the execution videos: The footage

aims to deter the U.S. and its allies (mainly via the general public) from continuing or starting a military intervention against the IS. Hereby, the group takes a double-tracked approach. It presents itself as an unstoppable invincible force and simultaneously portrays its adversaries as being incapable of conducting a successful military intervention. “Obama’s under-construction army”, a “motley collection of fighters on the ground” who have “a long history of underperforming” (Episode 2, released: 29/09/2014) will confront “the most powerful Jihadist movement seen in recent history” (Ep. 1, released: 22/09/2014) and is

completely underestimating the strength and fighting zeal of the opponent. Not since Vietnam have we witnessed such a potential mess in the making. Current estimates of 15.000 troops needed to fight the Islamic State are laughably low. The State has more Mujahideen than this and this is not some undisciplined outfit with a few Kalashnikovs. (Ep. 1)

Consequently, “anyone hoping for a nice neat surgical operation without getting their hands dirty is in for a horrible surprise once it gets under way” (Ep. 3, released: 12/10/2014).

The IS exploits Cantlie by having him perform news analyses – a common format of Western news culture. In the style of a press review, the hostage quotes selected expert opinions taken from different media reports that fit into the IS’ argument that an intervention by the U.S.-led alliance is doomed to fail. Katz has pointed out that the IS’ timing of hostage video releases and its choice of victims correlate with political and military actions by its adversaries. She concludes that the

IS’s demonstrations of might, along with their claims of Western engagement in an ‘unwinnable war,’ are rooted not in confidence, but fear. The group’s simultaneous presentation of brute through beheadings, and tranquil debate through Cantlie, show a by-any-means approach to sway both Western officials and citizens as Western action against IS escalates [59].

The third objective of *Lend me your Ears* is criticising the hostage negotiation policy of the U.S. and the U.K. Both governments adhere to a strict no-ransom stance – in contrast to many European nations who covertly negotiated with the IS and secured the release of their citizens through ransom payments totalling tens of millions USD. Between 2004 and 2008, the IS’ predecessor organizations and other ultra-radical Jihadist groups in Iraq – at least under their official brand name – refrained from publicly demanding money and also refused secret ransom deals, considering it “un-Islamic” to ask for material goods. Instead, when making demands, they tried to extort political concessions (such as a prisoner release or the withdrawal of troops), which the hostages’ home countries largely denied, explaining in part the high death rate of abductees in the hands of these groups (>90%) [60]. In contrast, the IS’ openness for ransom deals has resulted in a remarkably higher survival rate of its hostages: Of the 23 known foreign abductees held together in Syria, 15 were released, 6 were executed (1 Russian, 2 Britons, and 3 Americans), and 2 (Cantlie and an unidentified U.S. woman) are still being held [61] at the time of the writing of this Research Note.

By utilising Cantlie, the IS passes harsh criticism on the inflexibility of the U.S.’ and U.K.’s handling of the current hostage situation, stating:

Only the British and American prisoners were left behind. [...] Our governments had chosen not to negotiate with the Islamic State through our families and friends. And while everyone else had fulfilled conditions for release, for us there was no deal (Ep. 5, released: 25/10/2014).

The group indicates that it prefers prisoner exchanges over ransom payments by letting Cantlie ask:

Since 2008, France has reportedly paid 58 million in ransom payments to different Islamic groups, nearly 10 million a year. These payments are one of many demands made by different Islamic groups. Wouldn’t it just be cheaper to release the Muslim prisoners as asked? (Ep. 6, released: 21/11/2014).

Aiming to drive a wedge between the hostage nations' leaders and ordinary citizens, the IS makes Cantlie introducing himself at the beginning of each episode as "the British citizen abandoned by my own government". The captive accuses the U.S. government of being hypocritical, because it swapped Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl for five high-profile Taliban held at Guantanamo but ruled out a deal for the IS hostages:

The double-standards on display here are breathtaking. [...] He was one man. We were six. And the Islamic State asked for Muslim prisoners in exchange for all of us (Ep. 6).

Moreover, Cantlie suggests that the governments may have deliberately abandoned the hostages for selfish political reasons, stating that the

killings are, rather unfortunately for us, exactly the sort of thing our governments need to bolster public support. [...] Prime Minister [David Cameron], you have known about our situation for nearly two years. You chose not to enter negotiations with the Islamic State that might have got us out, and now you want to use these deaths to fan the flames of this war? If that is the case then I deeply resent it (Ep. 3).

Though Cantlie being a "high-profile" hostage, the *Lend me your Ears* series received markedly lower media coverage than the more spectacular beheading videos of Cantlie's former cell mates. The IS has tried to forestall a lack of viewer interest in its series. Guarding against a wear-out effect, it has employed several mechanisms to create suspense. For example, the advertising banner for the series announces eight episodes in total (making viewers ask themselves how the "story" will end, foremost, what will happen to Cantlie when the series is over). At the end of each episode, Cantlie invites the audience to join him again in the next program, sometimes giving a preview on what to expect in the upcoming instalment. Additionally, in Episode 6, the tone of the series gets grimmer, with Cantlie saying that his "fate will overwhelmingly likely be the same as my cell mates", raising psychological pressure.

In addition, on October 27, the IS used the media-trained journalist for a new propaganda twist in an effort to command headlines. In a video unrelated to the *Lend me your Ears* series, the organization made its captive "report" from the Syrian city of Kobane, which has become an important symbolic battlefield in the fight between the group and its adversaries. The video adheres even more to Western journalistic conventions than the series. Instead of his usual self-identification as a "prisoner of the Islamic State" and wearing an orange jumpsuit, Cantlie is dressed in black civilian clothes and can move freely. Switching back and forth between panorama views of the war-torn city and Cantlie, the camera work resembles a traditional news report delivered by a special correspondent. Cantlie's phrasing, prosody, and self-confident gesturing pretend him to be an official IS war journalist (instead of being a hostage under duress).

The video's main communication purpose is to refute Western mainstream media reports of the IS being on the retreat in Kobane. On the group's behalf, Cantlie states:

The battle for Kobane is coming to an end. The mujahideen are just mopping up now, street to street, and building to building. [...] Contrary to what the Western media would have you believe, it is not an all-out battle here now, it is nearly over. As you can hear, it is very quiet, just occasional gunfire.

A real revolution, the IS video with Cantlie as guest presenter [62] received much attention in the Western news media and in Jihadist circles. While some Western analysts blamed the Stockholm syndrome for Cantlie's cooperative behaviour [63], the video generated sympathies for the captive within the Jihadist community. For example, on December 30, IS supporter Abu Umar Al-Ansari tweeted: "I am starting to like John Cantlie, especially after his Ayn Al-Islam [IS name for Kobane, J.T.] video". One day later, he added: "I don't want to see him dead". Some IS supporters believe that Cantlie has turned into an IS member, e.g. on

December 19, Abu Hamza al Misri listed the names of the Western hostages, who he said, Obama did not rescue. Cantlie's name is included in parentheses, with the comment "began a career as #ISIS journalist". At the writing of this backgrounder, Cantlie's fate remains unsolved, however with the growing sympathies in the Jihadist community, it is getting increasingly difficult for the group to legitimize an execution of the converted captive without losing serious support.

Conclusion

The spectrum of aspects outlined in this backgrounder makes clear that the IS' hostage video campaign cannot be assessed in simple dualistic categories. It is rationally calculated, multifaceted, and constantly changing. Consequently, it cannot be countered successfully with a one-dimensional, static approach. For example, capitalising on the "bad PR" effects of beheading videos by highlighting their cruelty and inhumanity in a counter-narrative campaign might have been successful a decade ago, when the opinions of "old guard" Jihadist ideologues such as Zawahiri were widely respected and the Jihadist community felt largely alienated by scenes of excessive violence. In the current scenario, however – while probably successful to deter more sophisticated Jihad sympathisers from joining the group – relying on the counterproductive effects of videotaped beheadings will be rather ineffective for discouraging the IS' main demographic target group, namely young foreign sympathisers who disrespect the advice of "old-school" ideologues and consider the IS' unique brand of extreme violence [64] and its cinematic choreography a pull instead of a push factor.

Mainstream media outlets and individual journalists have to be constantly aware that they can be active participants in the rationally deliberated IS' hostage video campaign. Because of the high news value of hostage executions, media outlets cannot ignore such stories. However, whether the coverage will be a success for the IS or for its adversaries, depends to a large extent on how those terror acts are framed. Using -black-and-white terminology such as "pure evil", "vicious", "monsters", "savages", or "barbarians" to describe the terrorists and their instrumental media-oriented violence strips the phenomenon of its complexity, thereby failing to inform the public (the media's core mandate), ignores real dangers (e.g. the recruitment appeal of beheading videos), and pokes needless fears by demonising the enemy (which in democracies may lead to overreactions that in turn may be part of the IS' calculus). A more differentiated approach is needed, if the media want to avoid becoming part of the problem, instead of its solution.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author is part of the Editorial Team of 'Perspectives on Terrorism', but she played no editorial role in relation to the decision to publish this Research Note.

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Notes

- [1] For the purpose of this backgrounder, hostage videos are defined as officially released Jihadist videos primarily focusing on abductees. An official release is defined as a Jihadist publication that has been produced and distributed by established Jihadist media production and distribution outlets.
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- [3] See for example Schmid, Alex P.; de Graaf, Janny (1982): *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: SAGE.
- [4] Cf. Ayman al-Zawahiri, in: Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) (Ed. & Trans.) (2013): *Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi (English Translation)*, p. 10. URL: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>
- [5] For the concept of news factors, see Galtung, Johan; Ruge, Mari Holmboe (1965, March): The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), 64-90. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/002234336500200104>
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- [8] Neer, Thomas; O'Toole, Mary Ellen (2014, December): The Violence of the Islamic State of Syria (ISIS): A Behavioral Perspective. *Violence and Gender*, 1(4), p. 147. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/vio.2014.0037> URL: <http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/vio.2014.0037>
- [9] Cf. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) (2006, March): *The Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda*. (CTC Study), p. 105. URL: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-imagery-project>
- [10] See Quilliam Foundation; Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) (2014, December): *Detailed Analysis of Islamic State Propaganda Video: Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*. URL: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/detailed-analysis-of-islamic-state-propaganda-video.pdf>
- [11] Ibid., p. 31.
- [12] TRAC as cited in Shubert, Atika (2014, December 8): ISIS's Brutal Beheading Video: Search for Clues. *CNN International*. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/12/world/isis-syria-video-analysis>
- [13] Quilliam Foundation; Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) (2014, December), op. cit., p. 31.
- [14] Cf. Tinnes, Judith (2010, May): *Internetnutzung islamistischer Terror- und Insurgentengruppen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von medialen Geiselnahmen im Irak, Afghanistan, Pakistan und Saudi-Arabien*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Universität des Saarlandes, Saarbrücken, Germany), p. 730. URL: <http://scidok.sulb.uni-saarland.de/volltexte/2010/3117/>
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- [16] Cf. Tinnes, Judith (2010, May), op. cit., p. 699.
- [17] For a comprehensive analysis of Jihadists' legitimation of hostage executions see Prucha, Nico (2013): Kangaroo Trials: Justice in the Name of God. In: Rüdiger Lohlker (Ed.): *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations*. (Studying Jihadism, Vol. 2). Göttingen: V&R unipress, 141-206.
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- [19] It has to be mentioned that in the David Haines video, JJ refers to the victim's military past. However, in his forced statement, Haines names the British Prime Minister's politics as the sole reason for his demise: "I would like to declare that I hold you, David Cameron, entirely responsible for my execution".
- [20] Cf. Perlmutter, Dawn (2014, September 3): The Politics of Islamic Beheading. *FrontPage Magazine*. URL: <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/dawn-perlmutter/the-politics-of-beheading> and Perlmutter, Dawn (2014, September 16): Beheading Raises Islamic State Street Cred. *FrontPage Magazine*. URL: <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/dawn-perlmutter/beheading-raises-islamic-state-street-cred>
- [21] While the IS did not publicly make demands for Foley, the group tried to secretly strike a deal with the U.S. government, which was unsuccessful due to the U.S. strict no-ransom policy. See, for example, Callimachi, Rukmini (2014, October 25): The Horror before the Beheadings: ISIS Hostages Endured Torture and Dashed

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[28] Dabiq, Issue 5, p. 32.

[29] E.g. a video released in summer 2014 shows several sequential beheadings allegedly conducted by IS militants. After having completed the first decapitations, the captors frighten the remaining victims by showing them the severed heads of their comrades and taunting them.

[30] BBC News (2014, August 28): Islamic State Militants "Behead Kurdish Man" in Iraq. *BBC News Middle East*. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28975638>

[31] One notable exception was the National Post, even mentioning the mass beheading scene in the headline of its article: National Post (2014, November 16): Grisly ISIS Video Showing at least a Dozen Beheadings Ends with Claim that U.S. Aid Worker Peter Kassig is Dead. *National Post*. URL: <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/11/16/grisly-isis-video-showing-at-least-a-dozen-beheadings-ends-with-claim-that-u-s-aid-worker-peter-kassig-is-dead>

[32] One remarkable exception was the BBC (which had also reported on the Peshmerga video), releasing a news article on the identities of the hostages: Usher, Sebastian (2014, November 20): Islamic State Video Draws Attention to Syrian Victims. *BBC News Middle East*. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30117417>

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[34] Cf. Tait, Sue (2009, September): Visualising Technologies and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Screening Death. *Science as Culture*, 18(3), p. 338. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09505430903123016>

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 334.

[36] As cited in El Difraoui, Asiem (2014, November 22): Die brutale Subkultur des "Heiligen Kriegs". *Die Welt*. URL: <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article134518761/Die-brutale-Subkultur-des-Heiligen-Kriegs.html>

Jihadist supporters also prove themselves as connoisseurs of Western pop culture in their social media posts, e.g. on December 19, "Colonel Shami" tweeted four pictures of swords with the comment: "Pick your blade only one" – an obvious allusion to the crucifixion scene in Monty Python's British comedy "Life of Brian".

[37] Cf. Katz, Rita (2014, August 22): The Overlooked Goal of the Islamic State's Beheading Video: Recruitment. *inSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism*. URL: <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/component/content/article/21-jihad/4418-the-overlooked-goal-of-the-islamic-state-s-beheading-video-recruitment?Itemid=122>

- [38] Mosendz, Polly (2014, October 2): Beheadings as Terror Marketing. *The Atlantic*. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/beheadings-as-terror-marketing/381049>
- [39] Cf. Perlmutter, Dawn (2014, September 16), op. cit.
- [40] See de Graaf, Mia; Boyle, Darren (2014, September 3): Was ISIS Hostage Video Inspired by Homeland's Opening Credits? Expert Reveals how Themes from Popular Culture are Used to Attract Western Recruits. *Daily Mail Online*. URL: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2742248/Is-ISIS-copying-Hollywood-drama-techniques-recruit-young-disaffected-westerners-jihad.html>
- [41] See Fischhoff, Stuart et al. (2005, Summer): The Psychological Appeal of Movie Monsters. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 10(3). URL: http://web.calstatela.edu/faculty/sfischhoff/psychological_appeal_of_movie_monsters1.pdf
- [42] Cf. Quilliam Foundation; Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) (2014, December), op. cit., p. 26.
- [43] See Quilliam Foundation; Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC) (2014, December), op. cit., 28-29.
- [44] Bar, Shmuel; Minzili, Yair (2006): The Zawahiri Letter and the Strategy of Al-Qaeda. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 3, p. 39. URL: http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1343/bar_minzili_vol3.pdf
- [45] Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) (Ed. & Trans.) (2013), op. cit., p. 5.
- [46] Cf. Kane, David (2014, November 28): The Syrian Conflict: The Arab Spring Version 2.0? *inSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism*. URL: <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/320-the-syrian-conflict-the-arab-spring-version-2-0>
- [47] Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) (Ed. & Trans.) (2013), op. cit., p. 10.
- [48] Ibid.
- [49] Ibid.
- [50] See Tinnes, Judith (2010, November): Counting Lives in a Theater of Terror – An Analysis of Media-Oriented Hostage Takings in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 4(5), pp. 16-17. URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/120>
- [51] See, for example, Malik, Shiv (2014, September 24): Radical Cleric Urges Islamic State to Release British Hostage Alan Henning. *The Guardian*. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/radical-cleric-islamic-state-release-british-hostage-alan-henning>; SITE Staff (2014, November 16): Jihadists Debate Permissibility of IS Beheading of Peter Kassig. *inSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism*. URL: <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/314-jihadists-debate-permissibility-of-is-beheading-of-peter-kassig>, and Katz, Rita (2014, November 17): The Kassig Beheading: The Islamic State's Last-Ditch Effort to Keep US Boots out of the Caliphate. *inSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism*. URL: <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/315-the-kassig-beheading-the-islamic-state-s-last-ditch-effort-to-keep-us-boots-out-of-the-caliphate>
- [52] Lahoud, Nelly et al. (2012, May): Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined? (CTC Report), p. 26. URL: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>
- [53] Kane, David (2014, November 28), op. cit.
- [54] As cited in Ali, Abdallah Suleiman (2014, July 3): Baghdadi Vows Revenge in Announcing "Islamic State". [Sahar Ghoussoub, Trans.]. *Al-Monitor*. URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/iraq-syria-baghdadi-call-muslims-caliphate.html>
- [55] As cited in Variyar, Mugdha (2014, December 9): ISIS Beheadings are "un-Islamic", Says Yemen Al-Qaeda, which Killed American, South African Hostages. *International Business Times*. URL: [56] Cf. SITE Staff (2014, October 16): Jihad through Shakespeare: The Islamic State's Outreach to the West. *inSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism*. URL: <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/298-jihad-through-shakespeare-the-islamic-state%E2%80%99s-outreach-to-the-west>
- [57] Off-camera, Cantlie and other IS hostages were heavily mistreated, see for example: Callimachi, Rukmini (2014, October 25), op. cit.
- [58] It is worth mentioning that the IS has deepened this media strategic approach by publishing articles about or allegedly authored by some of its abductees (i.e. Foley, Sotloff, and Cantlie) in its English-language propaganda magazine "Dabiq".
- [59] Katz, Rita (2014, November 17), op. cit.
- [60] See Tinnes, Judith (2010, November), op. cit., pp. 13-15.

[61] All hostages who were executed or are still being held originate from non-negotiating countries.

[62] Cf. Peyrard, Michel (2014, November 24): The John Cantlie Mystery. [Judy Pain, Trans.]. *Paris Match*. URL: <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Le-mystere-John-Cantlie-647430>

[63] See Kinder, Tabatha (2014, September 19): John Cantlie Isis Video: Is Stockholm Syndrome to Blame for English Journalist's Anti-Western Speech? *International Business Times*. URL: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/john-cantlie-isis-video-stockholm-syndrome-blame-english-journalists-anti-western-speech-1466325>

[64] Cf. Neer, Thomas; O'Toole, Mary Ellen (2014, December), op. cit., p. 149.s