

IV. Resources

Counting Lives Lost – Monitoring Camera-Recorded Extrajudicial Executions by the “Islamic State”

by Judith Tinnes

Abstract

The “Islamic State” (IS / ISIS / ISIL / Daesh)’s visually documented executions, particularly those involving Western victims, have been receiving tremendous attention by international mass media. Yet, much of the Western reporting focuses on the barbaric nature of the displayed violence (neglecting other important aspects of the propaganda technique) and disproportionately covers executions of Western victims, while similar killings of local people are under-reported. No regular monitoring of camera-registered extrajudicial executions covering all locations of the group’s geographically scattered provincial system is available to date. Aiming to fill this gap, the author initiated a census project based on continuous monitoring of IS execution visuals.

For accessing the statistics, visit:

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/483/DATA>

Background

Terrorism is a combination of violence and propaganda. Camera-recorded executions for public display are an integral part of the Islamic State’s strategy of terror. With over 1,000 captives killed in front of a rolling or still camera in 2015 alone, the notorious terrorist organization has brought this propaganda technique to a new level, dwarfing in quantity and graphic content similar atrocity campaigns of its Iraqi predecessor organizations and those of other Jihadist groups [1]. The visual depiction of excessive, counter-normative, often sadistically “innovative” violence has emerged as a signature element and key feature of the IS’ “brand” of terrorism, distinguishing the group from other jihadist and secular terrorist actors throughout the world.[2]

From the Islamic State’s perspective, the unique, highly-choreographed visual releases fulfill several tactical and strategical aims. The most important are:

- i. Securing the attention of the mass media to exploit them as free-of-charge multipliers for their propaganda message,
- ii. demonstrating religious justification and governance capacities (e.g., by the swift application of Sharia “justice”),
- iii. deterring international and local adversaries,
- iv. demonstrating power over life and death and portraying supremacy,
- v. outraging local and international audiences,
- vi. provoking Western governments to (over-)react,
- vii. recruiting new members to its ranks, and

viii. satisfying revenge feelings of members and supporters (e.g., by retaliatory acts against adversaries).

Usually, a typical visual release fulfills several of these objectives at the same time and is carefully calibrated for particular audiences. In many instances, the depicted violence is accompanied by a verbal religious justification by the propagandists to neutralize possible counterproductive blowback among its followers.

This display of visual violence has proven highly effective, particularly in regard to reaching high levels of mainstream media attention. Many mass media outlets – most notably tabloids – show unashamed voyeuristic fascination with execution footage, often ignorant of the full (much broader and complex) spectrum of ideological messaging. Mass media's preoccupation with the violence-centered subset of IS total propaganda output overshadows other important aspects of the group's messaging, thereby forestalling a holistic understanding of its media strategy. Counterbalancing this lop-sidedness, empirical research demonstrated that narrative themes of state-building, utopianism, victimhood and militarism play a far more substantial role in IS overall media output.[3]

Though research focusing on the non-lethal aspects of IS propaganda is urgently needed, the phenomenon of IS on-camera executions also deserves special empirical examination, because loop-sidedness likewise applies to the violence-centered subset of IS propaganda. Much of the news reporting covering on-camera executions tends to focus on the barbaric nature of the displayed violence and its perpetrators and neglects other important facets of the propaganda technique [4] (e.g., IS attempts to justify its extrajudicial killings by references to – its own interpretation of – Islam), thereby getting in the way of a more balanced and objective assessment and understanding. In addition, Western news reporting tends to be characterized by a striking bias when it comes to the citizenship of victims of such extrajudicial executions: while visually documented executions of Western foreigners generally receive saturation coverage in international mass media, similar on-camera killings of local people more often than not go under-reported or are totally ignored. The extent of such neglect remains noticeable even if one takes into account that obtaining background information on domestic captives is difficult because independent journalism has become virtually impossible in IS-controlled areas. However, this cannot serve as a full explanation for the lack of attention to local victims: when it comes to on-camera executions, visuals are generally available and can be used as a basis for reporting and monitoring, even if in-depth coverage is often not feasible.

Aims, Scope, and Methods

This monitoring project aims to provide academics, journalists, practitioners, policymakers, human rights activists, and other researchers with empirical data on visually documented executions which the IS terrorist organization has perpetrated since January 1, 2015. The two main objectives of this project are:

1. Providing quantitative information based on a long-term data collection effort in order to offer a fact-based, aggregated, and granular insight into IS' notorious media technique of camera-recorded executions.
2. Counterbalancing the Western media's reporting bias against executions of non-Western victims by offering data irrespective of victims' country of origin.

A long-term monitoring approach was chosen for three reasons: a) to provide representative data, b) to measure changing dynamics, and c) to counteract IS' efforts to manipulate perceptions of its actions through short-term tactical propaganda stunts, which misrepresent overall realities on the ground (e.g., while the group tries to create the image that its henchmen are highly active in many locations all over the world,

aggregated data reveal its limited reach by showing that the majority of executions was carried out in its shrinking core territory in Iraq and Syria).

The monitoring effort is based on a data collection of execution visuals (videos, photo reports, and images) that were officially released by the IS (i.e., produced and distributed by its official media outlets). With a few exceptions, unofficial releases (i.e., unbranded visuals published by non-official sources) were excluded from the data set. Such materials were included only if they had been distributed or re-posted by several pro-IS social media accounts and if the displayed execution incidents could be verified by alternative sources. The data set was restricted to executions of captives (including locals who were executed by illegitimate Sharia courts for social, religious, or other civilian “crimes”). On-the-spot killings, such as battlefield killings, drive-by-shootings, or assassinations are not included in the data corpus. Aftermath-only visuals (i.e., videos or pictures that displayed captives’ remains, but neither showed them alive nor their executions) were only included if a sufficient amount of information on the related incident could be found. Executions claimed in text- or audio-only statements were excluded as well. It should be noted that large-scale massacres (incidents with 100+ victims) were excluded from the data corpus, as such outlier records documenting an extraordinary number of victims executed in a single incident would cause statistical distortions of the general data pattern. However, while excluded from granular calculations, these incidents are part of the monitoring effort and are textually noted in the results file.

To build up the data corpus, IS execution visuals (videos, photo reports, images) were systematically collected by tracking official and unofficial IS social media accounts in different languages on *Twitter* and *Telegram* – IS’ favorite social media outlets. Although the IS decentralized media distribution system is characterized by high content redundancy, at least 15 accounts were visited twice a day to avoid missing releases due to account suspensions.[5] All relevant releases were retrieved in original file quality, indexed, and archived. In addition, a number of – mainly English-language – secondary sources (such as websites or social media accounts of researchers, activists, journalists, think tanks, and news outlets) were regularly consulted to retrieve further information and ascertain or correct facts if necessary. All relevant information gathered from primary and secondary sources was aggregated, categorized, and condensed in a data sheet, and results are presented in tabular overviews. It should be pointed out that despite the author’s effort to identify as much information as possible on each execution, information provided by IS was often the only information available for some or all categories of an incident – hence it could not be independently verified (e.g., the “charges” against a victim provided by IS to justify an execution). This is particularly true for executions of non-Westerners.

Limitations

While the monitoring effort is based on a large data corpus, there are several limitations which need to be kept in mind. First, as the data collection was started only in January 2015, the census does not provide a full account of IS on-camera executions since the group’s declaration of its “caliphate” on June 29, 2014 – in other words, the first half year of the “caliphate” has not been covered.

Second, the census only covers camera-recorded executions and does not provide an account of all executions perpetrated by the IS on the ground. Country-based execution statistics released by human rights organizations which rely on a network of local activists, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), provide execution numbers much higher than those of the corresponding country subsets of the present monitoring effort, which means that the IS publicizes only a fraction of its extrajudicial executions. Readers should therefore be cautious in extrapolating the data pattern of IS on-camera executions to

generalize about IS's general killing activities. There is a discrepancy between IS's self-portrayals and actual events on the ground. For instance, while human rights activists have documented a significant amount of executions of women and children [6], on-camera killings of females and minors are rare. Moreover, it is important to realize that the IS does not publish every on-camera execution it has recorded. Defectors gave accounts of incidents where the group visually documented executions but subsequently withheld publication of the recorded footage [7] – presumably for tactical reasons.

Third, as mentioned before, it is often impossible to verify the claims made by the IS in its execution visuals. Therefore, part of the information may well be inaccurate – including deliberate deception efforts by the group.

Fourth, the present census is limited to statistics-only information. However, if an in-depth understanding of IS on-camera executions is to be achieved, an additional qualitative analysis contextualizing the quantitative findings is required (for example, the reasons given by IS to justify such executions should be analyzed against the background of the group's ideological claims and strategic objectives as revealed in captured documents from its archives).

Despite these limitations, the new statistics of camera-recorded extrajudicial executions provide an unprecedented quantitative insight into the phenomenon of IS media-oriented executions. The author encourages academics, journalists, and other researchers to use the census (which is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License) as an auxiliary instrument for their own research.

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Notes

[1] See for example: 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. 3-21. URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/120>

[2] Cf. Zech, Steven T.; Kelly, Zane M. (2015, May): Off with their Heads: The Islamic State and Civilian Beheadings. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 6(2), pp. 83-84. URL: <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/1157> For the subject of “branding”, see also Ligon, Gina S. et al. (2014, November): *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction*. Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. URL: https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_ISIL%20Branding%20Leadership%20Culture%20and%20Lethal%20Attraction_Ligon_Nov2014.pdf

[3] See for example: Winter, Charlie (2015, October): *Documenting the Virtual “Caliphate”*. (Quilliam Report). URL: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>; Zelin, Aaron Y. (2015, August): Picture or it didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(4), pp. 85-97. URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445>; Tarabay, Jamie et al. (2015, March 20): To its Citizens, ISIS Shows a Softer Side. *Vocativ*. URL: <http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/to-its-citizens-isis-also-shows-a-softer-side>

[4] See for example: Tinnes, Judith (2015, February): Although the (Dis-)Believers Dislike it: A Backgrounder on IS Hostage Videos – August-December 2014. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(1), pp. 76-94. URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/403>

[5] In spite of these efforts, it is conceivable that the author missed a small number of incidents, as IS often integrates execution footage in longer, multi-topic releases (compilation videos). Due to the high amount of video footage released by IS on a daily basis, it was not feasible to watch every multi-topic video from start to finish. While such videos were systematically downloaded and skimmed, a small number of short-duration segments might have been overlooked. However, as pro- and anti-IS social media users tend to refer to executions in their postings – which raises the probability that unnoticed cases come to the author's attention – the number of missed incidents should be very low.

[6] See for example: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) (2015, December 29): *More than 2,000 Syrian Civilians Executed by IS during 18 Months since Declaring its Alleged Caliphate*. URL: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=41663>

[7] See for example: Miller, Greg; Mekhennet, Souad (2015, November 20): *Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine*. *The Washington Post*. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html