

Jihadi Beheading Videos and their Non-Jihadi Echoes

by Ariel Koch

Abstract

In recent years, the Islamic State terror organization has become notorious for its evil brutality. The brutal nature of its propaganda (distributed mostly online) inspires Jihadi sympathizers around the world, encouraging them to use violence against “the enemies of Islam”. This form of violent behavior has also been adopted and imitated by others – including non-Muslim individuals and groups – regardless of their geographic location, worldview, religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Drawing from numerous examples, this article illustrates two processes: first, the “mainstreaming” of beheadings among Jihadists, and second, the imitation of this method (decapitation) by individuals motivated by other kinds of extremism.

Keywords: Beheadings, Contagious Behavior, Copycat Crime, Islamic State, Propaganda, Social Media

Introduction: Mainstreaming Beheadings

The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) organization shocked the West with a wave of terrorism that was accompanied by propaganda campaigns of beheadings,[1] aimed at terrifying “the enemies of Islam” and inspiring its sympathizers to attack the West.[2] Omar Mateen, the Orlando Pulse club shooter, for instance, downloaded and watched IS beheading videos for two years prior to his attack.[3] The assailants of the Rouen church attack recorded themselves slicing the throat of an 84-year-old priest.[4] In the United States as well, a man who was “obsessed with beheadings” beheaded his co-worker.[5]

Beheadings are nothing new these days, and this IS-style gore propaganda,[6] which has been distributed online since early 2000s, is echoed on television, in film, and even in video games.[7] It was also reflected on the *Der Spiegel* cover page of its February 2017 issue, which depicted the United States’ president, Donald Trump as Jihadi John, the notorious British IS executioner.[8] In Belgium, football fans “unfurled a giant banner depicting the severed head of an opponent.”[9] As it seems, in the twenty-first century beheadings have gone mainstream. It is no longer alien to our reality.

While the academic literature on execution videos as Jihadi propaganda focuses on related security issues, or strategic, cultural, political and religious dimensions, little attention is being paid to the manifestations of these videos among non-Muslims. In other words, these videos have a contagious effect. Although Jihadi gore videos attract the world’s attention, Jihadists are definitely not the only violent actors who use this brutal method; and Jihadists’ videos—nowadays produced mainly by IS—have inspired non-Jihadi actors.

As is evident below, these videos affect the youth and are even linked to non-Islamic violent crimes derived from ideological, mental or criminal motives.[10] In other words, this article deals with copycat crimes, as the technique used by Jihadists (beheading) is being imitated by non-Muslims, who were exposed to this very particular method. The academic literature on copycat violence is extensive. Researchers in the United States note that, the “media contagion” effect fuels copycat crimes such as mass shootings.[11]

According to Ray Surette, the perpetrator of copycat crimes “must have been exposed to the media content of the original crime and must have incorporated major elements of that crime in his or her crime.” He added that “[t]he choice of victim, the motivation, or the technique in a copycat crime must have been lifted from an earlier, media-detailed generator crime.”[12] Additionally, Jacqueline B. Helfgott wrote that “[i]mitated crimes have occurred after intense media coverage” of violent incidents, and “after fictional depictions [of crimes][...] on TV, in film, and in video games.”[13]

In regard to the possible effects of IS beheading videos Arie W. Kruglanski said that “the very concept of beheading, that was virtually non-existent in our conscience prior to these events being propagated, is

now there.”[14] Indeed, in the last two decades, with the evolution of the Internet, this genre of videos was epidemically spread to other places, and thus it may bear lethal consequences. Instances for this notion may be found in different places such as Russia, Denmark, Japan, Israel and Brazil. This article argues that the leitmotif of all these instances is Jihadi propaganda, which documents vicious acts of murder and inspires other (non-Islamic) actors who are willing to mimic some techniques for their own purposes.

Although there is nothing new in the idea that terrorists learn from each other,[15] current academic literature on how non-terrorist actors learn from terrorists remains under-researched. This article’s goal is to shed light on the connection between contagious violent behavior and brutal propaganda videos, and to formulate recommendations for dealing with the challenges it poses. The article’s main questions are: (1) Are Jihadi beheadings videos memetic? (2) Can this type of videos inspire violent acts that are executed due to non-Islamic motives? And (3) do violent actors learn from each other’s methods of action?

There is another relevant question: Could this contagious violent behavior be a result of ubiquitous videos rather than driven by IS specifically? Indeed, there are now more videos of everything humans do (for instance, sex) than at any point in history before. The rise in beheading videos is just one manifestation of that broader phenomenon. However, this manifestation of gore has a negative effect, with potentially drastic ramifications.

This article relies on various academic studies and media reports, as well as on primary sources (mainly videos and texts) disseminated by extremists online. This is an interdisciplinary topic, which relates to various fields of research, such as psychology, education, and the terror-crime nexus. Thus, more qualitative and quantitative studies, both on national and international levels, are required to extend the knowledge of this phenomenon and its ramifications beyond the realm of Jihadist research. “Ultimately, we’re talking about contributing to the brutalization of interpersonal and inter-group conflict all over the planet,” said Kruglanski.[16] Accordingly, Justin Hastings also noted that these videos “might inspire some people to prefer that particular way of killing people as opposed to others.”[17]

The Islamic State Execution Videos

Judith Tinnes, who monitors IS execution videos, has shown that from 2015 to early 2018 more than 2,000 people have been executed by the organization.[18] IS members used a variety of ways to execute their prisoners, and its propagandists filmed many of these incidents and disseminated the documentation online. Captives were crushed by tanks, burned alive, drowned, bombed with rocket-launchers, or had explosive devices attached to their bodies.[19] Most of the videos showed executions by either shooting or beheading.[20] Some reports, although undocumented, mentioned the usage of chainsaws.[21]

Although the majority of the killings took place in Iraq and Syria and over 95 percent of the victims were locals,[22] it was the killing of foreigners that attracted global attention and became the focus of several academic publications.[23] Furthermore, it is possible for millions around the world to be exposed to a large number of execution videos due to social media platforms (SMP) such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,[24] and increasingly Telegram, which “may play a crucial role [for Jihadists] in reaching their desired audience,”[25] with technology that enables them to document incidents and easily distribute the documentation online.

A minority of non-Muslims also see the IS actions (reflected via SMP) in a positive way, without associating themselves with the producer. According to a survey conducted by Jack Cunliffe and Simon Cottee, involving about 2,300 American and British young adults, “a vast majority—93 percent—reported a negative attitude toward the Islamic State, and just 1 percent said they had a positive view of the group.” Moreover, they reported that “six percent were neutral. Of the 34 people who were reported to have had a positive attitude toward the Islamic State, five were Muslims.”[26]

As violence is considered a “contagious disease,”[27] so it can also be applied to “terrorism” and terrorist techniques. The idea that terrorism is contagious is not new; nor is the usage of media by terrorists.[28] However, while the relation of media, contagion and copycat behavior among Islamist terrorists is well researched,[29]

it is important to shed light on the potential contagious effects of Jihadi beheading videos on non-Muslims. Indeed, besides Islamist extremists, “other kinds of ideologies of hate and terror are also disseminated via old and new media and communication technologies,” and thus, “there can be little doubt that the inspirational virus is particularly potent when diffused through media forms.”[30]

Beheadings became synonymous with IS since its days as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), then led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. As Tinnes noted, this method of execution “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.”[31] Steven T. Zech and Zane M. Kelly wrote that IS videos “portray gruesome, torturous actions meant to terrorize and intimidate particular audiences,” and to “employ counter-normative violence against symbolic victims to gain compliance from adversaries.” By so doing, IS generates “fear and send[s] signals to international and local audiences.”[32]

According to Simone Molin Friis, “besides the brutality of the acts portrayed, what has made beheading videos of particular concern is their embodiment of a manifest transformation of an image into a ‘weapon’ for agents engaged in warfare.” As he noted, “the fatal injury portrayed in the videos is carried out not for the sake of murder in itself, but with the purpose of being reproduced and watched by an audience far larger than the one directly experiencing it.”[33] Thus, as Lilie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas claimed, these videos helped IS to introduce “spectacular thanatopolitics” to the West’s mainstream, and are turning it into a norm.[34]

Execution videos were considered part of the organization’s strategy, dubbed by Aaron Y. Zelin as “The Massacre Strategy”,[35] the goal of which is “not only to scare Iraqi Shiites but to provoke them to radicalize, [...] and then commit similar atrocities against Sunnis.”[36] AQI (and IS presently) wanted to provoke a violent reaction from its enemies, who will eventually strengthen the organization’s image as the protector and savior of Sunnis. These “public displays of violence”, as Friis called it, “have played a central role in the group’s global campaign.”[37]

Online Jihadi Propaganda in the Context of Cumulative Extremism

The use of the Internet by violent extremists is well explored, as it “has become the agent of virtual inspirational contagion.”[38] It is also applied to the Jihadi use of the Internet, which raised some questions about the influence that the Internet has on extremists. Meleagrou-Hitchens and Nick Kaderbhai explained that “Internet alone is not generally a cause of radicalization, but can act as a facilitator and catalyst of an individual’s trajectory towards violent political acts.”[39] Online Jihadism, thus, is contagious; it helps to recruit and mobilize people to perform violent acts. The impacts of these online activities also transcend the Jihadist milieu, as explained below.

This article uses the term “Jihad” in the context of terrorism, the executors of which define themselves as Salafists, who consider this kind of violence to be a necessary part of a sacred struggle against “the enemies of Islam”. These enemies are described as both “inside” the Muslim world – regimes and societies that are seen as “not Islamic enough” and which do not apply the Sharia (the Islamic law) appropriately – and on the “outside”, referring to non-Muslim nations that engage in conflicts with Muslim nations, occupy Islamic territories or otherwise negatively affect them politically, culturally and religiously.[40]

Propaganda “in the most neutral sense means to disseminate or to promote particular ideas.”[41] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defined this term as “any kind of ideas, doctrines or requests that are distributed [in the purpose of] affecting the opinion, the feelings, the attitudes or the lifestyles of any specified group with the intention of producing gain for the distributor whether directly or obliquely.”[42] Online Jihadi propaganda, which dates back to the 1990s, has become increasingly sophisticated, and is aimed at influencing billions of people, both Muslims and non-Muslims.[43] This is why IS propagandists have used hash tags that are not related to the Jihadi struggle whatsoever. For example, propaganda videos were distributed along with hash tagging the well-known American pop singer Justin Bieber.[44] However, extending the target audience

of Jihadists while using beheading videos creates new challenges: (1) it inspires other Jihadists to copycat the act; (2) it was adopted by non-Muslim political extremists; and, (3) it has been mimicked for criminal purposes.

Al-Qaeda and other Jihadi groups have used (and still use) “formal” and “informal” websites and forums through which Jihadists communicate and publish propaganda.[45] However, these forums suffered from “technical problems” and were closed for a long period.[46] This marked the evolution of “Jihadist social media”,[47] which has had a strong impact on the youth and serves as an uncontrolled and violent sphere.[48] Further, if “in today’s world any incident might easily trigger deep-rooted aggression,”[49] it is possible that gruesome Jihadi propaganda triggers non-Jihadi aggression.

In 2006, Roger Eatwell defined the process in which one extremist group provokes a reaction (“a spiral”) from another extremist group as “cumulative extremism”.[50] In December 2017, Ben Wallace, the British security minister, said that “extremists on all sides of arguments would love to dominate the ground and antagonize their opponents, pushing them to the extreme to ultimately cause some form of conflict.”[51] Peter R. Neumann wrote that there is a risk “that radicals at opposite ends of the political spectrum will drive each other to further extremes.”[52]

Accordingly, there is a risk that brutality by one group will provoke more brutality. Different extremists are not only driving each other to further extremes, they also learn and even copy from each other. For example: in Britain, the neo-Nazi group National Action mimicked IS in its videos and even advocated “White Jihad”.[53] In Italy, the Crusader State group, with a Facebook page with more than 10,000 likes, produced several IS-style videos.[54] In the United States, neo-Nazis planned to attack their anti-fascist rivals with a suicide-bombing.[55]

The Gore as Jihadist Propaganda Tool

Video clips are regarded as catalysts for violence, hence, they are perhaps most significant for Jihadi propaganda.[56] Beheading videos have been used as Jihadi propaganda since the 1990s. This happened for example during the “Caucasus Wars” between Russia and separatists-Jihadists from Chechnya and Dagestan (1994-1996, 1999). One infamous example is a video which shows Chechen Islamist fighters slaughtering six Russians soldiers, one after another.[57]

The first beheading video of a Western captive was of the Jewish-American journalist, Daniel Pearl. Kidnapped in Karachi, Pakistan, in January 2002, he was murdered by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, “the architect” of the September 11 attacks.[58] The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tried to prevent the distribution of Pearl’s execution video by pressuring Internet service providers, as well as various website owners, to remove the video. However, these days there are designated websites for this type of disturbing content, which continue to spread violent propaganda.[59] For example, Pearl’s murder video was uploaded to the former website Ogrish.com, which collected “snuff” videos of murder, torture, car accidents and so forth. However, the FBI demanded Ogrish.com to remove the video.[60] According to the website, the FBI warned its managers that they would be prosecuted if they allow the publication of Pearl’s murder. “We had no other choice than deleting the video... We live in a censored world.”[61] Today, typing Ogrish.com on a search engine (such as Google) will get you to LiveLeak.com that distributes various videos; including execution videos, disguised as news site without censorship.

Pearl’s murder inspired and was followed by other Jihadists. As Gabriel Weimann noted, “this pattern was later repeated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the insurgents in Iraq, who beheaded numerous hostages and posted the videotaped executions online.”[62] Beheading videos turned out to be a useful tool for terrorizing the Jihadists’ enemies.[63] In Iraq, the first American who was decapitated in front of a camera was Nicholas Berg, who was abducted by al-Zarqawi’s organization and was beheaded by al-Zarqawi himself.[64]

Similarly to Pearl’s case, the video of Berg’s murder was distributed online, and thus received global attention.[65] According to Nico Prucha, Berg’s video had a significant impact on western and non-western media.[66]

Not only were millions exposed to the propaganda, but it seems that many were interested and “provoked” by it.[67] After Berg’s video was spread online, it became a “viral hit”[68] that reminded the viewers of the murder of Daniel Pearl.[69] Dozens more people of different nationalities eventually shared Berg’s fate.

Effective IS propagandists have inspired several attacks in the West.[70] However, as Charlie Winter argued, exposure to “propaganda alone is not the reason that someone becomes a supporter [of IS]. What propaganda does do, though, is catalyze the individual’s radicalization and concentrate their already-held sympathies.”[71] Therefore, beheading videos serve “as a vehicle by which to convey both vengeance and supremacy.”[72] Yet, it does have a role in the decision to kill, and in a particular way. For example, in November 2017 it was revealed that a British couple planned to behead Paul Goldwin, the leader of Britain First, an extreme right-wing British street movement, as well as Katie Hopkins, a British anti-Islamic media personality.[73]

The influence, first and foremost, manifested itself by the act of decapitation. In September 2014, Australian authorities arrested fifteen Australian-Muslims who planned an attack in the streets of Sydney. The thwarted scheme was to abduct passersby in broad daylight and slaughter them in front of cameras.[74] This plot was dubbed by the Australian prime minister, Tony Abbot, as “demonstration killings”, the sole purpose of which was spreading terror through the streets of Sydney and humiliate Australia.[75] In November 2014, a young British man was arrested for planning to decapitate a soldier or a policeman.[76]

In September 2015, in Denmark, a 15-year-old girl and her 30-year-old “Islamist” boyfriend watched IS videos on YouTube. They later stabbed the girl’s mother to death while she was asleep and decapitated her.[77] In December, a man in London who was inspired by IS tried to decapitate people at a Subway station.[78] In Russia, at the beginning of March 2016, a nanny of Uzbek ethnicity was caught on cameras with the severed head of a 4-year-old girl. After being arrested the nanny stated to Russian media that she learned how to decapitate a person from propaganda videos.[79]

Mimicking the Jihadists’ Technique

A survey of Cunliffe and Cottee about the propaganda videos produced by IS reveals the wide spectrum of people who were exposed to this propaganda. Cottee explains that they were “surprised by respondents” who reported exposure to the Islamic State’s videos. Fifty-seven percent said they had watched an Islamic State video before, beyond clips shown on TV and in online news material.” Furthermore, “[o]f this number, an even more remarkable 46 percent said [that] they had seen more than 10 Islamic State videos.”[80]

Jihadi beheading videos were also mimicked by other extremists who had previously not been associated with this type of gruesome propaganda. For example, in 2007 two neo-Nazis in Russia uploaded a three-minute video clip to YouTube, in which they documented their murder of two migrant workers, allegedly Spaniards. The victims are seen lying with their hands tied and then sitting under a Nazi flag stretched between two trees. One victim was decapitated and the other one was shot in the head. The killers, both of them masked and dressed in black, were standing in front of the camera with their backs to the Nazi flag making the Nazi salute. [81] It is the first recording of decapitation by neo-Nazis in the twenty-first century.

According to Sova, a center for monitoring hate-crimes in Russia, “Neo-Nazi Russian gangs radicalize further and further while borrowing tactics from Islamic extremists.”[82] Approximately a year after the murder of the two Spaniards Sova received an e-mail message with an attached picture of a beheaded Tajik immigrant. The motive for these actions is ideological, although violent Jihadi propaganda also provides inspiration for violence driven by criminal motives or mental illness. In 2008, law enforcement in the United States foiled a neo-Nazi plot to assassinate former president Barack Obama. The plot was to kill 88 African-Americans, 14 by beheading.[83] These numbers are symbolic to neo-Nazis, as “88” stands for “HH” (Hail Hitler) and “14” stands for “14 words”, a popular white supremacist slogan.[84]

Mexican drug cartels (MDCs), for example, are sympathetic with beheadings even more than the IS.[85] Like IS, they are very active on SMP.[86] Are the cartels drawing inspiration by Jihadists, or is it the other way

around? It is very difficult to know for certain, but in the world of SMP it is not baseless to assume that the influence is mutual: the cartels are inspired by IS and vice versa.[87] This type of inspiration is manifested by the actual nickname of Iván Velázquez Caballero, one of the leaders of Los Zetas cartel, who adopted the name (or received it from his peers): “El Talibano” (referencing the Taliban).[88]

Some argue that the influence and inspiration that cartels draw from the Jihadists is expressed by the method of decapitating in front of the camera. For example, according to Ioan Grillo, a journalist who lived in Mexico, “[d]ecapitation was almost unheard of in modern Mexico” until 2006, when the former Mexican president Felipe Calderon declared war on drug cartels.[89] Brian J. Philips wrote that the Mexican government reported “1,303 decapitated bodies in the country between 2007 and 2011.”[90] As Grillo explained, “[s]ome of the first narco snuff videos looked almost frame for frame like Al Qaeda execution videos.”[91]

Philips noted that “the use of this tactic [decapitation] took off around the same time that groups in Iraq were using similar methods to draw attention with Internet videos.”[92] He added that “[i]t is likely that there was some co-evolution, with both types of groups learning from each other’s online butchery as the years went on.”[93] Don Winslow argued the contrary; that IS learned from the MDCs. “This is the ISIS playbook,” he wrote, “social media as a means of intimidation, recruitment, and provocation; mass murder as a means of control – that we now watch with horror and revulsion. In reality, we’ve been seeing it for years. Just across our border. ISIS learned it from the cartels.”[94]

Is it possible that Jihadists draw inspiration from the cartels? In 2011, two cartel members were decapitated by their rivals, one of them with a chainsaw and the other with a knife.[95] Five years later, in the city of Mosul, Iraq, it was reported by an Iraqi News outlet that nine young men were executed by ISIS with chainsaws, after being blamed of espionage.[96] IS videos even showed children chopping off a bound man’s head.[97] In 2012, both IS and the MDCs produced videos with similar scenes of drive-by shootings.[98] Both also recorded execution by explosives more or less at the same time, during 2015.[99]

Beheadings as part of drug wars and crime are not unique to Mexico. For example, in March 2016 the severed head of a Dutch criminal was found inside a burning car in Amsterdam.[100] In December 2014, two kids in Israel attacked a schoolmate because they wanted to steal his bicycle. The attackers hit their victim and threatened him with a knife, declaring that they would “do to him like ISIS.” One of them asked or maybe threatened: “Do you know how it is done by ISIS?”[101]

In February 2015, three kids in Japan were arrested after they beheaded a 13-year-old boy. The killers “watched internet videos showing the execution of hostages by Islamic State fighters and sought to mimic them.”[102] Less than a month later, also in Japan, a 14-year-old boy tried to behead his school’s pet goat, after watching IS videos.[103] It should be noted that in Israel, IS cell members “taught themselves to slaughter sheep, apparently in preparation for slaughtering humans.”[104]

On the same day in which the bicycle theft case inspired by IS was reported in Israel, reports were published about a serial killer arrested in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The murderer, a 23-year-old man called Jonathan Lopes dos Santos, was arrested after decapitating the heads of five prostitutes and seriously injuring others.[105] Dos Santos confessed that these crimes were inspired by the horror videos distributed by IS. To the question of a reporter about why he committed the murder, Dos Santos replied: “I don’t know, I think it’s because I watch a lot of war videos.”[106]

Conclusions

Although some may argue that the case studies reviewed in this analysis are merely a number of incidents of the same sort of violence happening in different places around the world by different groups, scholars and professionals should not neglect the fact that IS beheading videos have an effect on various actors; not only on IS sympathizers or other terrorists, but on criminals as well, and on the youth. IS, it seems, has successfully mainstreamed beheadings and provided a source from which many could be inspired or copy practices.

The examples described throughout this article illustrate how violent Jihadist propaganda, presented in the execution videos, impacts societies and individuals in various regions across the world. It also provides inspiration for brutal acts carried out by non-Jihadists for other reasons, including ideological (as in the case of the neo-Nazis), criminal (as in the case of the cartels) or mentally ill (as in the case of Dos Santos).

This indicates that homicide committed in the name of “religion” may provide inspiration for “non-religious” acts of murder. In other words, Jihadist beheading videos are memetic. Through the Internet, visual depictions of decapitation have been adapted and imitated by an increasing variety of actors. Moreover, the mutual processes of learning among radical entities that use brutality as means of propaganda and adopt the method of decapitation is clearly evident. In this manner, such an act becomes common with its own perceived legitimacy among the perpetrators.

This brief review reflects the broader phenomenon of how these propaganda videos impact our lives in the modern age of social media. Hence, the use of violence after watching Islamic State propaganda videos, or the adoption of the decapitation technique in executions, is not a unique characteristic of Muslim extremists in general nor Jihadists in particular. It is embodied in the brutal cases of violence and physical threats that have occurred in many different places.

The distribution of violent propaganda videos may contribute to radicalization and to the adoption of the beheading technique as a means of intimidation or deterrence. A civilized society cannot afford to be carried away by propaganda, the goal of which is to undermine the order of society, personal security, and thus national security. This is also true regarding the propaganda of IS and other radical entities, from ideological types like the neo-Nazis or criminals like the drugs cartels in Mexico.

Confronting these brutal propaganda videos requires cooperation on different levels, since the repercussions of the distribution of these videos seem to affect many people around the world. For instance, cooperation is required between countries as well as corporations that create technological tools used for distributing propaganda. It is also important for the media to not encourage murderers by providing an audience or contextual resonance. For this reason, the media should consider not publishing the details of murder methods and the murderers’ identities, whatever their motives may be. Furthermore, governments should use diplomatic, legal, and educational tools that help ensure a balance between free speech and restricting the distribution of violent content on the Internet. In addition to security and intelligence organizations, governments should enlist the involvement of educational institutions as well, as an educational system is best equipped to affect young people who can be inspired and influenced more easily by violent propaganda. Therefore, cooperative efforts should be increased in the field of education, both on the national and international levels, especially in view of the intense exposure of young people to today’s violent content openly disseminated via the various SMP, a problem that is not relevant to just one nation, but rather common to all humans and societies that seek life. “Do you know how it is done by ISIS?” a young Israeli kid asked his classmate, and the answer to this question is obvious, not only in Israel but also in many counties around the world; a definite “YES”. This should be a cause for serious concern.

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Notes

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