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Picturing the "Hordes of Hated Barbarians":
Islamic State Propaganda, (Self)Orientalism, and Strategic Self-Othering

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In recent years, there has been a proliferation of research into the Islamic State's (IS) visual communications output. The current article provides a conceptual contribution to this literature by developing an original framework for the analysis of the group's propaganda. Drawing together postcolonial and political communications scholarship, it shows how IS photopropagandists have sought to mobilize civilizational discourses surrounding the "dangerous Orient" as a core feature of its image operations. More provocatively, the article argues that the group has weaponized the Orientalist image in order to strike fear into the hearts and minds of its enemies. Using visual discourse analysis, and focusing on images produced within the group's propaganda alongside their remediation by Western media and political actors, the article develops the concept of *strategic self-Othering* to show how IS successfully harnesses the discursive power of Orientalism in its messaging, thus feeding into a wider posttruth communications style that prioritizes shocking, fear-inducing imagery over notions of truth and reason.

Keywords: hybridity, Islamic State, Orientalism, propaganda, posttruth, strategic essentialism, strategic self-Othering

So if all told there is an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism, there is also a very powerful reinforcement of this in economic, political, and social exchange: The modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing. (Said, 2003, p. 325)

In 1978, the Palestinian American literary scholar Edward W. Said (2003) published his now-classic *Orientalism*. In the book, he analyzed the process through which "the East" had been portrayed in Western cultural texts as a place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes" (Said, 2003, p. 1). Focusing mainly on 18th- and 19th-century "elite" European literary and academic texts, Said (1997) conceptualized Orientalism as "an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, 'different' one called the Orient, the other, also known as 'our' world, called the Occident or the West" (p. 4). With the end of the Cold War, and in particular the events of September 11, 2001, he went on to argue, Orientalist discourses had become even more concentrated, suggesting a movement away from an exotic and sensual understanding of the

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East toward a more threatening, monolithic image. Here, the dangers posed by "Islamic" fundamentalism were now understood to have replaced the threat posed by the Soviet Union, thus creating a new enemy upon which a range of anxieties could be projected (Said, 1997). According to Tim Jon Semmerling (2006), for example, Orientalist fears have become further exacerbated in the contemporary, "posttruth" era, as social divisions, political disenchantment, and the erosion of long-standing metanarratives have given rise to an enervating ontological insecurity, in which the Oriental "Other" often appears to be more powerful than ever before.

It is the endurance of Orientalism as a discourse that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks that the current article seeks to interrogate. But rather than view it as a form of power-knowledge that is simply *imposed* on the peoples and cultures of the East, it seeks to show how Orientalist-inspired imagery increasingly forms part of the symbolic currencies used by "Oriental" groups themselves. The analysis centers on the Islamic State organization and, in particular, its use of propaganda imagery during conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and beyond. In line with a growing body of scholarship focusing on the role, function, and power of images within terrorist propaganda (Roger, 2013), and the IS movement in particular (see Anfinson, 2019; Friis, 2015; Kraidy, 2017), the article shows how the group recontextualizes and strategically mobilizes civilizational discourses and identities, *inverting* and *instrumentalizing* such imagery as a key element of its visual political communication strategy.

To do so, the article develops the notion of *strategic self-Othering*, a concept that helps us better understand the way IS media operatives deliberately portray the group "as a particularly dangerous embodiment of the Orient" (Said, 2003, p. 331). As we shall see, though much of the IS's propaganda imagery is rooted in a violent Salafi jihadi worldview (see Baele, Boyd, & Coan, 2020), the group's propagandists are keenly aware of the symbolic and cultural resonance Orientalism has within Western cultural imaginations. By incorporating such images into its visual communications output, the goal is to "exploit and amplify preexisting psychosocial and strategic conditions in target populations" (Ingram, 2020, p. 13). In so doing, the analysis reveals how the group has a sophisticated understanding of *both* the dynamics and logics of today's "hybrid" media landscape (Chadwick, 2014) and also of the symbolic import and utility of cultural ideas, narratives, and discourses. IS propagandists, thus, have not only sought to use "the weight of the media against the media" to secure its goals (see Bolt, 2012, p. 257) but also to repurpose this phrase, seek to use the weight of *culture against culture*. This gives the group a powerful new weapon.

To develop this argument, the article is structured as follows. The first section discusses the role of the image in terrorist communication strategies and within the contemporary, "hybrid" media environment. It then moves to develop an original framework for the analysis of IS image operations. Drawing on the works of pioneering postcolonial critics Said (2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987), the article introduces the concept of *strategic self-Othering* to show how IS successfully harnesses the discursive power of Orientalism in its propaganda. This framework is then applied to images appearing across the group's vast English-language propaganda output, comparing these with quintessential works of Orientalist visual culture and contemporary media and political *re*presentations. The analysis concludes with a discussion of how IS's visual communication strategies are not simply isolated to violent Salafi jihadi circles, but rather echo the emergence of a wider, posttruth communication style that prioritizes shocking, fear-inducing images and narratives over notions of truth and reason.

Terrorism, Image Warfare, and the Strategic Use of Fear

Despite being subject to a range of competing definitions, "terrorism" has long been viewed by academics as a form of violent *visual* political communication (see Roger, 2013). According to this perspective, terrorism principally functions as a publicity-seeking strategy that uses violence to generate fear and uncertainty among those beyond the immediate victim(s). A core objective here is to use violent deeds to bring about social, political, economic, or religious change. Although we should be careful in overstating their effects (see O'Loughlin, 2011), visual, and in particular photographic, images are of central importance within this context as they help communicate terrorist acts to wider audiences. The attacks of September 11, 2001, remain the most enduring example of this strategy, whereby "terrorists exploited the 'real-time' of images, [and] their instantaneous worldwide transmission" (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 27), turning the visual representation of the strikes into *weapons* that could be used to gain a strategic advantage over al-Qaeda's enemies.

Since those historic events, however, the arsenal of digital visual communications technologies available to such groups has proliferated (see Archetti, 2013; Kampf & Liebes, 2013). Widespread access to Web 2:0 and social networking platforms, alongside the increased affordability of new smartphone technology, has altered the flow of images around the world, providing terrorist groups with a "competitive system of meaning" that can be used to counter mainstream accounts (Ingram, 2016, p. 1). Here, the visual dimension to these communications are of central importance because images, and photographs in particular, "come with an implicit guarantee of being closer to the truth than other forms of communication" (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 217). As perhaps the archetypal modern terrorist organization, the IS has demonstrated a keen understanding of the norms, logics, and affordances of this new media environment. In the past, terrorist actors were highly dependent upon news media organizations for "oxygen," something that ensured that a group's message could be distorted or reframed by journalists and their sources (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2011). The availability of new communications technologies and platforms, however, has since enabled organizations like IS to develop their own sophisticated media apparatuses, disseminating content to larger, more diverse audiences than ever before.

By way of an example, "official" multilingual propaganda produced within the group's media department (*Diwan al-Ilam*) can be distributed across decentralized tiers of regional media offices across Iraq, Syria, and beyond (see Whiteside, 2016). This content is then further spread via an unofficial army of *ad hoc* activists (or *media mujahideen*) and international news media, which amplify core images and messages to mainstream audiences (Krona, 2019, p. 115). Within this hybridized media system, the IS is able to exploit older and newer media logics to its advantage, harnessing the "pockets of *interdependence*" that exist among loosely connected sets of actors (Chadwick, 2014, p. 285; emphasis added).

Much of what the IS produces within its propaganda is a reflection of the group's Salafi jihadi worldview. As such, recurrent symbols such as black flags, deserts, dromedary, and equestrian imagery can be viewed as fulfilling a desire to emulate Islam's pious ancestors (see Ostovar, 2017). At the same time, however, it is equally clear that these austere religious themes also compete alongside a very modern set of strategic objectives, the most significant of which is the production and dissemination of fear (see Bockstette, 2008). From operational treatises such as Abū Bakr al-Naji's (2004) influential *Management of*

Savagery (see also McCants, 2015), Abū Ḥamzah al-Muhājir's (2010) *To Those Entrusted With the Message* or the Al-Himmah (Anon, 2015) field guide *Media Operative, You are a Mujahid Too!* IS ideologues have repeatedly emphasized the centrality of fear-inducing imagery within their propaganda output.

Part of the reason for this is because fear is politically and strategically useful (see Altheide, 2006). In particular, when audiences are in a state of heightened fear, the parts of the brain that facilitate survival, the "salience networks," are quickly stimulated and move to repress the more rational, executive "control networks," making it much harder to form clear decisions (Nierenburg, 2018, p. 315). IS's deliberate use of photo editing and digital filtering software to enhance the intensity of its violent imagery is seen as a way to maximize these desired psychological responses. As such, whether it be targeted toward friends or enemies, "insiders" or "outsiders," local, regional, or international media, IS propagandists understand that content that features graphic, stylized imagery helps capture attention and push its propaganda far beyond its own social networks (Al-Dayel, 2021, p. 1220).

Reading Orientalism *in the Caliphate*

As we have seen, IS has proved itself adept at using "the weight of the media against the media" (Bolt, 2012, p. 257), making extensive use of the contemporary, hybrid communications landscape to produce and disseminate fear-inducing images far and wide. But this is only part of the story. Indeed, key to the effectiveness of the group's visual propaganda has been the way it also uses the weight of *culture against culture*, engaging with the audience's memories, beliefs, and values: That is, fear "works" best when it activates shared cultural memories and draws upon deep-rooted ways of seeing, speaking, and thinking about the world (Ventsel, 2021, p. 26).

In this regard, one of the dominant frameworks used by Europeans for making sense of the East and Islam is the discourse of "Orientalism." As noted above, for centuries, Orientalism provided European artists, historians, and politicians with a powerful schema to divide the world into ontologically distinct spheres of East and West. These Orientalist texts imposed limits on the ways Europeans imagined the East and consistently reduced its peoples and cultures to a stereotypical mass of threatening figures and locales. As the Cold War transformed into the war on terror, moreover, academics began to identify a shift in Orientalist discourse and imagery, with the Orient portrayed as more powerful and menacing than ever before. More recently, scholars have argued that a loss of faith in traditional institutions and explanatory metanarratives in the contemporary, posttruth era has given rise to a state of ontological insecurity, whereby Oriental subjects psychologically gain the upper hand by placing Western viewers in submissive positions (Semmerling, 2006).

Despite the continued resonance of Orientalism, demonstrating the extent to which terrorist propagandists are familiar with such discourses is somewhat difficult. In fact, even if IS members were to share Said's views, any attempt to directly cite thinkers outside of the Salafi jihadi "ingroup" would leave them open to criticism from the more extreme fringes of the movement. At the same time, however, just because there are no direct references to Said's work, this does not mean that we are unable to see the *trace* of his thinking across the group's communications output. Indeed, cultural and educational factors,

alongside a degree of empirical evidence, suggest that the group's media operatives are all too aware of the notion of Orientalism and seek to incorporate its ways of seeing and speaking into IS image operations.

Most IS propagandists came of age during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Dawson, 2021), a period in which Western and in particular United States cinematic and cultural products dominated the global imagination (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005). During this time, audiences across North Africa and the Middle East witnessed a proliferation of information sources, with hundreds of new 24-hour television channels exposing Arab youths to foreign cultural influences (Kraidy & Khalil, 2008, p. 338). Scholars have speculated that viewers may have internalized the Orientalist-inspired "negative identities" expounded in Hollywood cinematic texts that were popular around this time (see Nashef, 2011, p. 359). Research by Lina Khatib (2006), for example, has shown how several Middle Eastern films made during the 1990s and 2000s themselves explicitly sought to invoke Orientalist stereotypes in order to portray Islamic fundamentalist groups as a "degenerate Other" within, thus strengthening the modern nation-state and its repressive security apparatus (p. 76).

Research into the educational backgrounds of IS fighters, moreover, also suggests that an influential coterie within the group has advanced, professional qualifications, and thus may be familiar with concepts such as Orientalism (see Ahmed & Pisoiu, 2014; Dawson, 2021). Journalists Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet (2015), for example, have shown how the group's media department has been dominated by foreign recruits and professionals, many of whom are understood to have university-level qualifications and are known to have worked as senior editors, content producers, and videographers in areas such as journalism and public relations. In fact, despite few explicit references to Said's work, there are frequent allusions to "the Orientalists" across the group's media output and, in particular, the sinister, conspiratorial influence this way of seeing and speaking has had on Muslim societies. Thus, we see repeated reference to the fact that Muslims have historically been "enslaved by the West" (*Dabiq*, 2015a, p. 4) and that the "Crusader colonization" of the Middle East region during the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (*Dabiq*, 2016, p. 28) led directly to the "European colonization" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*Dabiq*, 2015d, p. 38). As one author puts it, "The old colonialism was but a front for the Crusaders, just as it is today a front for the Jews and Christians" (*Rumiyah*, 2016a, p. 19). There is also a clear understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship between knowledge and power that has been central to Said's (2003) work (see p. 27), with parallels drawn between mainstream Salafi scholars' knowledge of Islam and European Orientalists before them (*Rumiyah*, 2016a, p. 30). Indeed, on a broader level, the IS's Salafi jihadi worldview itself serves to reproduce the basic binary distinction between "East" and "West" (*Dabiq*, 2014a, p. 6), "modern" and "tribal" (*Dabiq*, 2014c, p. 12), as originally outlined in *Orientalism*. This view is further supported in research by Baele and colleagues (2021), who have shown how IS propaganda powerfully reproduces the kinds of essentialized, "civilizational" identities outlined in Said's (2003) pioneering work.

As such, while it is impossible to fully establish the "true" motives underpinning the group's propaganda choices, there are sufficient grounds to conclude that IS is aware of discourses such as Orientalism, alongside the cultural resonance they hold within Western cultural imaginations. In fact, as strategic agents, or "plagiarists" (Ingram, 2016), IS media workers know that essentialist and reductive cultural identities and discourses can be knowingly coopted or appropriated for strategic purposes. As Dina al-Raffie (2012) points out, to secure legitimacy and meaning with contemporary audiences, Salafi jihadi

master narratives seek to exploit discursive "linkages" that transcend localized, theopolitical boundaries, as this helps expand and develop a group's recruitment pool. Thus, from the appropriation of violent computer game imagery (Dauber, Robinson, Baslious, & Blair, 2019) to the use of scenes from mainstream Hollywood cinema (Saade, 2020), IS propagandists have sought to "recontextualize" a range of culturally familiar texts to incorporate them into the group's image operations (Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018).

Importantly, this calculated use of Orientalism is reflective of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1987) notion of "strategic essentialism." Although she never advanced a complete definition of the term, Spivak (1987) described strategic essentialism as a representational tactic that acknowledges the way colonial subjects can be said to knowingly appropriate their "Otherness" as a means to strategically construct a collectivized political space. As Myria Georgiou (2012) explains, "These strategic positions appear either in organized attempts to resist politics of marginalization and racism or cultural temporal tactics to construct spaces of belonging" (p. 25). According to this logic, the colonized subject seeks to invoke a seemingly "authentic" essence, a static notion of identity or culture, which deliberately downplays the diversity and heterogeneity of the group. That fixed "essence" is then used as a starting point for political struggle. For the IS, in particular, this means essentialist and reductive discourses such as Orientalism, as with wider cultural artifacts, can be knowingly coopted or appropriated for strategic purposes, enabling the group "to set their own temporal boundaries when claiming recognition in political arenas whose boundaries are set by hegemonic political players" (Georgiou, 2012, p. 25).

This is not to say that IS propagandists completely subscribe to an essentialized conception of the self. Indeed, scholars have long argued that one of the principal aims of IS's propaganda is to construct a positive image of the caliphate as a legitimate state for Muslims (see Lakomy, 2020; Winter, 2015). Yet, as strategic agents, IS media operatives tactically mobilize *parts* of the discourse for their own politically expedient goals. As we shall see, in this sense, the group's communication practices can be viewed as a partial response to Western Orientalist discourses; a response that involves the *perpetuation* and *reappropriation* of those very same ways of seeing and speaking for unique ends.

Critically Analyzing Islamic State Propaganda Imagery

To better understand the way the IS mobilizes such imagery, this article develops a form of visual discourse analysis (Rose, 2016) that draws upon Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis. Fairclough's work is of importance here because it focuses attention on the *textual, intertextual*, and *contextual* dimensions of media and visual representations. Such an approach "is based on the principle that texts can never be understood or analyzed in isolation—they can only be understood in relation to webs of other texts/discourses and in relation to the social context" in which they are created (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 70).

In particular, *textual analysis* focuses on the site of the image itself and its formal or compositional elements. This means investigating the presence of dominant themes in IS propaganda imagery, such as the use of recurrent backdrops, clothing, bodily expression, religious symbolism, camera angles, and photo-editing software. *Intertextual analysis* examines the way IS media workers draw upon a wider set of discourses to stabilize the meanings of these images. This part of the analysis is important because, as

noted, the meaning of these images is not self-evident or self-contained. Rather, efforts must be made to temporarily "secure" the meaning of a particular image through reference to a wider set of cultural myths and symbols (Barthes, 1973). Finally, *contextual analysis* places these images into context and explores the links between wider image use and contemporary social practices. This last feature of the analysis helps us better understand the way discourse constitutes our day-to-day actions and practices, shaping our identities, interactions, and experiences.

In line with Rose's (2016) suggestion that visual discourse analysis should draw upon a broad range of "eclectic" sources (p. 195), the data for this article have been drawn from the IS's vast propaganda arsenal (e.g., nasheeds, propaganda videos, social media, and multilanguage propaganda magazines such as *Dabiq, Rumiyah*, and *Dar al-Islam*), produced from 2014–2017. This time frame witnessed both a period of intensive propaganda production and an aggressive public outreach strategy designed to influence Western audiences (Colas, 2017). Furthermore, to explore the intertextual underpinnings of the IS's propaganda, a secondary research strategy was adopted that examined historical and contemporary examples of Orientalist-inspired visual culture. Here, woodcuttings by proto-Orientalists such as Erhard Schön were analyzed alongside paintings by artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Henri Regnault. These quintessential works of Orientalist art were further supplemented by analysis of contemporary media representations of IS, alongside political campaign materials produced within the United Kingdom during the 2014–2017 period. Though this approach admittedly involves the selective analysis of images produced across different contexts and settings, it nevertheless allows us to pay close attention to the relationship among texts, the discourses that stabilize and bring meaning to those texts, and the wider social and discursive practices they form (Fairclough, 1995).

Strategic Self-Othering: Picturing "the Demonic, Hordes of Hated Barbarians"

The rebranding of the organization as "*the* Islamic State" in June 2014 coincided with a series of spectacular military victories across areas of northern Syria and Iraq (Lister, 2015). Although the group's English-language propaganda encompassed a range of competing themes during this time (Winter, 2015), one of the central, guiding objectives underpinning its image operations was the strategic mobilization of fear in enemy audiences (Winter, 2019; see also Bockstette, 2008). To further secure these objectives, IS photographers and media workers used a powerful strategy of "self-Othering" that, as we shall see, deliberately played on long-standing stereotypes surrounding the "dangerous Orient." A key aim here was to appropriate the group's "Otherness" as a means to temporarily construct a collectivized subject position and instrumentalize stereotypical dimensions of its identity for politically expedient purposes. Inspired by al-Naji's (2004) influential *Management of Savagery* text, this approach specifically called for IS fighters to unleash "savage chaos" on adversaries and bring about a return to "the law of the jungle in its [most] primitive form" (p. 27). The aim here, in al-Naji's (2004) words, was to ensure the group's enemies would be in a near-constant state of fear and apprehension so that favorable "media goals" could be achieved (p. 69).

The strategy was first evident in the representation of the IS as an aggressive, ambulatory, and expansive force spreading across large swaths of Iraq, Syria, and beyond. Echoing W. J. T. Mitchell's (2011) claim that the wars on terror have produced "an endless supply of faceless warriors, massed for interminable

conflict" (p. 1), throughout this period audiences were repeatedly presented with images exhibiting vast convoys of vehicles propelling through arid desert landscapes and pouring into towns and cities across the region. As can be seen in Figure 1, the group deployed slick visuals depicting near-identical rows of dusty, white Toyota Hilux pickup trucks either arranged in tight formation (*Dabiq*, 2015a, p. 44) or pictured sweeping through pristine desert landscapes (*Rumiyah*, 2016a, p. 26).[1]

*Figure 1. IS's strategic self-Othering practices (**Dabiq**, 2015a, p. 44; **Rumiyah**, 2016a, p. 26;
Rumiyah, 2016c, p. 28).*

        Often organized into a glossy visual narrative portraying the group as emerging out of bright yet seemingly uninhabited desert settings before pouring into gray, industrialized towns and cities (see, for example, the video nasheed *My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared*; Anon, 2013), such imagery functioned to link the group to the first generation of Muslims while also perpetuating the myth that Islam emerged from the deserts, rather than urban spaces, of seventh-century Arabia (Denney, 2011, p. 69). Here, the subtle use of filtering effects, such as color saturation and vignetting, serve to demarcate the boundaries between the wild, untamed deserts of the caliphate and civilized but corrupt metropolitan spaces in Syria and Iraq. These scenes are further supplemented by images depicting large numbers of heavily armed soldiers engaged in aggressive training sequences deep in the Iraqi and Syrian hinterlands (*Dabiq*, 2014e, pp. 26–27) or pictured marching threateningly toward the viewer (*Rumiyah*, 2016c, p. 28).[2] Playing on long-

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[1] See *Dabiq* (2014a, pp. 6–9); *Dabiq* (2014b, pp. 11, 38); *Dabiq* (2014c, pp. 1, 7, 18, & 31); *Dabiq* (2015d, pp. 9, 13, 28, & 31); *Dabiq* (2015a, p. 44); *Dabiq* (2015b, p. 25); *Dabiq* (2015c, p. 39); *Rumiyah* (2016a, p. 3); *Rumiyah* (2016b, p. 26); *Rumiyah* (2016c, p. 10); *Rumiyah* (2017a, p. 34).

[2] See *Dabiq* (2014a, pp. 33, 39); *Dabiq* (2014d, pp. 28, 32); *Dabiq* (2014e, pp. 6, 8, 10, 12, 26, & 27); *Dabiq* (2015a, pp. 9, 11, 12, 24, 41, & 83); *Dabiq* (2015b, p. 14); *Dabiq* (2015c, pp. 40, 44, & 45); *Dabiq* (2015d, pp. 9, 62); *Rumiyah* (2016a, p. 8); *Rumiyah* (2016c, p. 28); *Rumiyah* (2017a, p. 3); *Rumiyah* (2017b, pp. 30, 46).

standing cultural portrayals of the masked terrorist, such images function to powerfully engender fear and uncertainty in audiences by deindividualizing the identities of its fighters and providing an abstract canvas on which a range of fears and identities can be projected (Ahmad, 2018, p. 66).

While it is clear that these *strategic self-Othering* practices seek to deliberately exaggerate the size and capabilities of the group, it is also important to acknowledge the curious sense of *disorder* within such imagery. IS fighters are typically pictured wearing either black uniforms, symbolic of the revered Abbasid Revolution (Ostovar, 2017, p. 90), or sandy-colored desert camouflage outfits, as worn by the group's secretive special units (Tomlinson, 2015). Yet there is also a degree of sartorial variation on display, with fighters pictured wearing worn, weathered-looking clothing, or holding weapons in an unruly or undisciplined manner (Machin, 2007, p. 131). The sparse, liminal desert settings, moreover, further connote an arenaceous sense of dislocation, with the ever-present desert backdrop helping to constitute the identities of IS fighters and signify notions of untamed masculinity (Leyshon & Brace, 2007, p. 168). Above all, however, while the images described here reflect themes evident across various forms of wartime visual political communication, they also knowingly invoke a number of Orientalist tropes and myths. The most enduring, according to Said (2003), is the portrayal of Islam as a violent, resurgent, and conspiratorially spreading threat to the Occident.

Rooted, in part, in ancient portrayals of pre-Islamic Eastern empires and civilizations as barbarian invaders (Kalmar, 2012, p. 30), for Europeans in particular, Islam became known as "an aggressively expanding, competing form of monotheism that sought to subsume and overrule the Gospel of Christ," violently replacing the cross with the sword and crescent (Viktus, 1999, p. 208). As Said (2003) explains:

> Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century, the "Ottoman peril" lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore. Its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life. (pp. 59–60)

Subsequent scholarship has shown how these early encounters became deeply ingrained within European cultural imaginations, constructing the image of a large, homogenous, and regressive threat to the Occident (see Hackforth-Jones & Roberts, 2005; Roberts, 2015). Such nightmarish visions curiously foreshadow those produced by IS photopropagandists.

Perhaps most significant in this regard is Erhard Schön's fifteenth-century woodcuttings depicting the violent and systematic expansion of Ottoman forces into Europe (see Figure 2). In a series of intricately carved plates, titled *Turks in Hungary*, Schön (1530) channeled proto-Orientalist fears of horrible atrocities believed to have been committed by monstrous Turkish soldiers (Feliciano, 2011, p. 256). Crucially, in these carvings, invading armies were simultaneously portrayed as formidable and highly efficient, yet unruly and undisciplined, forces that brought terror and devastation to European nations, riding or marching victorious over the bodies of innocent women and children.

***Figure 2. Erhard Schön (1530),* A Lament to God about the many and horrible frenzied deeds committed by bloodthirsty Turks and request for merciful help.**

Over the course of subsequent years, this visual motif developed into a powerful regime of representation that helped simultaneously to control and pacify the East while also perpetuating anxieties about Islam as "an irrational herd or mass phenomenon" driven by "passions, instincts, and unreflective hatreds" (Said, 2003, p. 317). For instance, the Anglo-Egyptian war against the Muhammed Ahmad's Mahdist Caliphate in Sudan (1881–1899) gave rise to a proliferation of mythmaking images of the Mahdi and his supporters, providing a further screen on which to project British fears, fantasies, and insecurities. These nightmarish visions manifested themselves visually in the burgeoning popular press in Britain at the time, with newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News, The Graphic,* and *Pall Mall Gazette* furnishing their pages with paintings of vast armies of anonymous, faceless Mahdist warriors being repelled by small battalions of British soldiers (Long, 2014).

More recently, this mode of representation resurfaced as part of a series of highly emotive campaign images produced by right-wing lobbying organizations and political parties in the UK during the 2015 European refugee crisis and subsequent 2016 Brexit referendum (see Figure 3). In the days after the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, for example, campaigning group Leave.EU remediated images from the IS nasheed video *My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared* (Anon, 2013) to suggest that UK citizens might witness similar attacks if they were to remain in the European Union. Titled *Islamist Extremism Is a Real Threat to Our Way of Life*, the now-deleted social media posts depicted a disorderly group of masked, heavily armed fighters emerging out of the seemingly wild, untamed deserts of Syria. As Vian Bakir (2020) notes, in using such images, Leave.EU aimed to covertly exploit "the cultural-psychological attributes of profiled target

audiences" on issues such as immigration so as to influence their political decisions (p. 12). In so doing, however, they also served to amplify the IS's *strategic self-Othering* practices by calling attention to the more reductive and stereotypical aspects of the group's identity.

Around the same time, the UK Independence Party also sought to invoke similar, colonial anxieties in its notorious *Breaking Point* (2016) poster. While it did not directly use material produced by the IS, its imagery deliberately played on the Orientalist "barbarians at the gates" trope via the portrayal of a seemingly endless procession of adult male Syrian and Afghan refugees marching through lush, green European fields. Crucially, the party's campaigners drew on the same discursive repository of intertextual fears and anxieties about the East, Islam, and terrorism as used by the IS. Indeed, much more so than the historical examples discussed above, IS propagandists themselves were keenly aware of the cultural resonance such fears held within Western audiences. During this period, the group's communications pointedly sought to reinforce the fear that IS fighters had hidden "among the mass of illegal migrants entering Europe by sea from North Africa" (*Dabiq*, 2015c, p. 58), with one magazine article offering explicit advice on the legitimacy of "entering into dar al-harb [house of war] by way of seeking refuge" before turning and killing ones host (*Rumiyah*, 2017c, p. 38).

Figure 3. Leave.EU (2016) **Islamist extremism is a real threat to our way of life** *and UKIP (2016)* **Breaking point.**

Further dimensions to these *strategic self-Othering* practices are the graphic depictions of the IS's brutality and uncivilized violence (see Friis, 2015). Thus, appearing alongside photographs depicting the group as a large, aggressive, and rapidly expansive force has been a series of images portraying its fighters willfully indulging in archaic and barbaric forms of violence (see Figure 4). In al-Naji's (2004) words, the core objective behind such a strategy has been to kill hostages and enemies "in [such] a terrifying manner" so as to "send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters" (p. 33).

Accordingly, across the IS's propaganda output, audiences have been presented with recurrent scenes of mass executions of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers (*Dabiq*, 2014c, p. 21), images of captured enemies being beheaded in remote, though ever-present, desert landscapes (*Rumiyah*, 2016a, pp. 22–24), or graphic depictions of religiously sanctioned "hudud" punishments, such as stoning (*Dabiq*, 2014b, p. 36), amputation, and defenestration (*Dabiq*, 2015a, p. 42). Textually speaking, the IS's explicit labeling of its fighters as "soldiers of terror" (*Dabiq*, 2015b, pp. 17–19), or its violence as "*just* terrorism" (see *Dabiq*, 2015d), further supports these visual self-Othering strategies, as they represent a conscious attempt to portray its actions as barbaric and cruel yet religiously sanctioned. Nevertheless, while the iconography of such images can be said to function in the most basic, politically expedient sense, generating fear among enemy audiences, their strategic value also lies in the way they draw upon and intensify preexisting societal narratives and discourses surrounding the "dangerous Orient." In particular, a core feature of the group's *strategic self-Othering* is a reinforcement of the myth that Muslims have a "predisposition" to brutal, lascivious violence (see Kumar, 2012, p. 54).
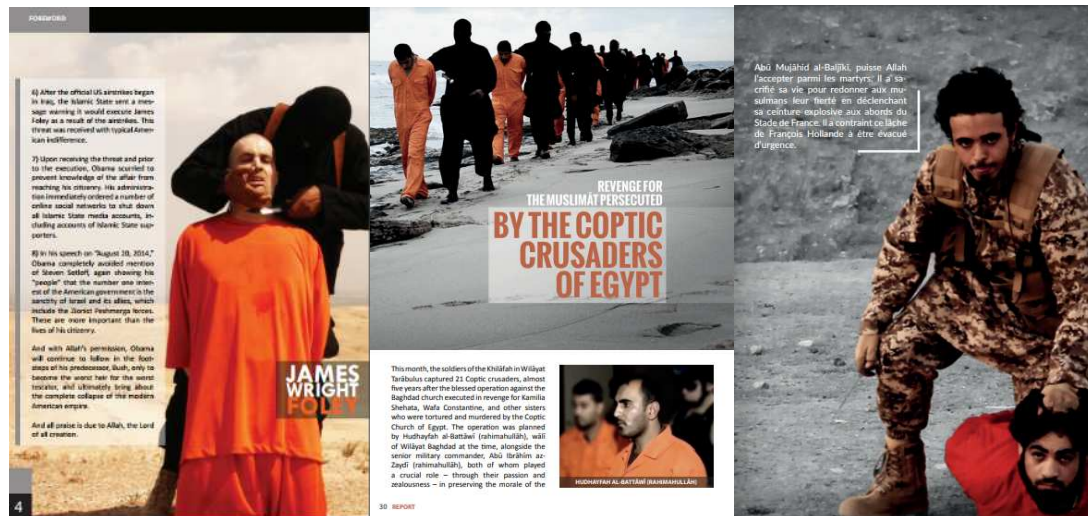
*Figure 4. IS's strategic self-Othering practices (***Dabiq***, 2014c, p. 4; ***Dabiq*** *2015a, p. 30;* **Dar al-Islam***, 2016, p. 107).*

As noted, early European encounters with Islam provided a screen on which to project fears and fantasies about the East. Alongside imagining "the demonic hordes of hated barbarians" (Said, 2003, p. 59), subsequent representations served to depict Oriental subjects as, in part, "fond of beheading and other cruel forms of punishment and torture" (Viktus, 1999, p. 220). Painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Henri Regnault reveled in graphic depictions of Oriental cruelty and despotism, with the latter's macabre *Execution Without Judgment Under the Moorish Kings* (1870) powerfully foreshadowing themes invoked in the IS's own propaganda "art."

Predictably, this preoccupation with the Orient's cruelty and despotism has formed a key thread within early news media depictions of the group's rise. Indeed, for UK newspapers in particular, the emergence of the IS helped reinforce long-standing perceptions of the East as a space of danger, violence, and savage barbarity. Thus, as the group's propagandists released videos and photographs depicting the violent conquest of swaths of territory, UK tabloid newspapers developed a grizzly fixation with the execution spectacles that followed. The widely publicized captures of journalists, aid workers, and foreign migrants offer powerful cases in point (see Figure 5). While news reportage stopped short of revealing the precise moments of execution, fascination with the IS's "political snuff cinema" (Rogers, 2018, p. 122) helped reinforce and amplify the group's self-Othering practices while also (intertextually) reproducing the very same patterns of representation outlined above. Echoing Semmerling's (2006) claim that contemporary Orientalist discourses encourage anxiety in Western audiences, these media spectacles functioned to place viewers in subordinate positions, inviting them to simultaneously fear and fantasize about the IS's digitally enhanced, hypermasculine executioners and their stereotypical desert caliphate. In some cases, moreover, alongside the direct remediation of IS propaganda imagery, hyperlinks to the original videos were embedded into subsequent articles (see Wyke, 2015), thus further amplifying these *strategic self-Othering* practices to mainstream audiences.

Figure 5. John the executioner (Daily Mirror, 2014); 21 Beheaded for being Christians (Daily Express, 2015).

Conclusion: The Discursive Utility of Orientalism

Adding to the growing scholarship on IS propaganda and image operations, this article has sought to provide a conceptual contribution to the literature by theorizing how the group deliberately appropriates Orientalist discourses to capitalize on the fear and uncertainty that Western audiences have historically associated with the "dangerous Orient." As we have seen, the representation of the IS as a violent, aggressive, ambulatory, and rapidly expansive force, one that, importantly, appears to have emerged out of barren desert landscapes of Syria and Iraq, helps support a deliberate strategy of self-Othering, whereby essentialized stereotypes about Islam and Muslims become "weapons" in the group's propaganda arsenal. These images continue to resonate with deep, culturally ingrained fears and fantasies about the Orient and the (imagined) threat it poses to the West, enabling the group to simultaneously use the weight of Western media against media, while also harnessing the weight of culture against culture.

In making this argument, however, it is wrong to assume that these *strategic self-Othering* practices are limited to the IS alone. Indeed, in a period characterized by growing levels of public and political uncertainty, alongside declining levels of trust in democratic actors and institutions, such strategies provide actors from across the political spectrum the opportunity to amplify both manifest and latent cultural fears of the "Other." Here, scholars of propaganda and political communication have repeatedly highlighted similar tactics in recent years across the hybridized, posttruth media environment (see Cabañes, 2020; Ventsel et al., 2021). Thus, in a context where highly emotive images, identities, and narratives are

mobilized by political actors, and when competing "facts" struggle for public attention and legitimacy, images that play on simplified fears, insecurities, and repressed cultural stereotypes offer powerful currency in today's posttruth political climate. As Darren Lilleker (2018) has pointed out, within such a setting, "media reportage, popular culture, and interpersonal communication can build up perceptions of reality that become more 'real' than reality itself" (p. 277). In this sense, the IS's use of such images can be seen as symptomatic of a wider posttruth communication style, one that centers on the role of personal fears, beliefs, and emotions in shaping citizens' perceptions of global events, alongside the mobilization of reductive identities based on racial or religious difference (Waisbord, 2018).

By way of an example, in recent years, Russian officials and state media have sought repeatedly to invoke humor, underpinned by essentialized self-identities, into their strategic communications and public diplomacy campaigns. Amusing advertisements by the state-funded international broadcaster *RT* have served to portray the channel as a Soviet-style "propaganda bullhorn," with journalists pictured marching like soldiers to patriotic music, corrupt producers seen unloading truckloads of state money, and the channel's creative editor dressed as a stereotypical Russian bear (Chernobrov, 2022, p. 287). Despite utilizing humor, as opposed to fear, much like IS media operatives, the producers behind these viral advertising campaigns fully understand the way stereotypical Russophobic identities and discourses are ingrained within the Western cultural imagination, and thus provide ample opportunities for exploitation.

In fact, the IS's use of Orientalist-inspired imagery is of further significance within the contemporary context. Although Said sought to highlight the way "Islamic" fundamentalism emerged within the geopolitical imagination to replace the threat posed by the Soviet Union (1997), more recently scholars such as Michael Haldrup and colleagues (2006) have identified a "resurgent Orientalism" and mainstreaming of Islamophobic sentiment in the language and imagery used by populist and far-right organizations. Here, exclusionary forms of nationalism merge with explicit racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, typically focused on the incompatibility of Islamic cultural practices with a seemingly monolithic European identity, giving Orientalist discourses and imagery new cultural currency (Brown, 2020). As discussed above, with the 2015 refugee crisis, and in particular the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks, such views have become further entrenched within the European cultural imagination and continue to shape media portrayals of the IS (Ahmad, 2020).

More important, however, the renewal of Orientalism within media, political, and cultural narratives feeds into an all-consuming "politics of fear" (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicolson, 2013, p. 398) that perpetuates Orientalism's necessity as a "deep story" within Western cultural imaginations (Horchschild, 2016). As argued elsewhere (Ahmad, 2019), in this setting, media and political representations of terrorism help fulfill a mutually sustaining and legitimizing framework that enables seemingly contradictory political groups to become reliant upon each other for strength and sustenance. Thus, while such representations help further the IS's self-Othering strategies, they also reinforce right-wing populist political narratives alongside the state's own exaggerated perceptions of terrorist threats. In such a situation, "alleged enemies feed rhetorically into one another's interests," as each side sees political advantage in the existence of the Other (Zulaika & Douglass, 2008, p. 29). As we have seen, journalists themselves are also forced to play their part in this rotten apparatus, recycling the most spectacular, fear-enticing images in the hope that it boosts failing audience figures.

Nevertheless, despite such claims, we should remind ourselves that the focus here has been on only one dimension of the IS's propaganda arsenal. To strengthen these claims, it is necessary for future research to both consider the extent to which these *strategic self-Othering* practices are evident across the group's communicative output and also understand precisely *where* and *when* such strategies are invoked. For instance, research has shown how IS propagandists adapt and frame media content to reflect the group's overall strategic fortunes and outlook (see Wozniak, Woods, & Lee, 2020). Thus, as its material capabilities decline, and battlefield losses mount, its propaganda begins to "focus more exclusively on their ability to mete out violent chaos to their enemies" (Wozniak et al., 2020, p. 2). Does this shift result in an increase in the kinds of self-Othering strategies analyzed here? Likewise, looking beyond the group's propaganda, to what extent are these Orientalist-inspired self-representations evident within more mainstream public and political communications, and how do audiences themselves engage with such images? These are important areas for future research because history tells us that the threat, both real and imagined, posed by groups like the IS will be with "us" for a long time, so it is vital that we better understand the ways such images are used and understood if we are to find ways to effectively counter them.

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