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‘Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism’:¹ *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Self-Othering* in Islamic State Propaganda

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This chapter considers the way nostalgic and civilisational discourses associated with the ‘East’, Islam and terrorism are re-appropriated and repurposed by enemy groups as a key feature of their messaging strategies. Focusing on Islamic State propaganda, it offers a provocative take on the theme of enemy encounters by showing how contemporary terrorist organisations invoke culturally resonant narratives and imagery into their propaganda in order to exploit and amplify psycho-social and strategic conditions in target audiences. In particular, the analysis shows how Islamic State photo-propagandists have developed two clear messaging strategies, labelled here as *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Strategic Self-Othering*, which are targeted towards the group’s imagined audiences; those viewed as ‘believers’ and ‘disbelievers’. In these visual messages, the Islamic State seek to portray the caliphate as *both* ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes’ *and* a space of fear, uncertainty, and uncivilised violence in a deliberate attempt to leverage the power of culture against culture.²

Keywords: Islamic State; nostalgia; Orientalism; self-Othering; propaganda; visual communication

As many of the chapters in this collection demonstrate, one of the most basic features of human communication is the construction of enemy images. Throughout history, nations have sought to define themselves by demonising, dehumanising and exaggerating the threat posed by ‘enemy’ populations, something that, as a consequence, has served to bolster recruitment efforts and mobilise citizens in support for wars and unpopular foreign policies.³ Yet despite attempts to maintain clear boundaries between adversaries, in truth they have always been unstable. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War these boundaries have become even more fluid and uncertain, with today’s enemy images characterised by a growing ambiguity over *who* and *what* the enemy is. During the early years of the ‘war on terror’ era, for example, scholars called attention to the presence of reductive, Orientalist-inspired stereotypes and stock enmification tropes in media portrayals of the terror threat.⁴ At the same time, however, over the course of this ‘war’ others called attention to a

¹ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7 (2015), pp. 20-24.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Routledge (1978/2003), p. 1.

³ See Richard K. Popp & Andrew L. Mendelson, “X”-ing Out Enemies: Time Magazine, Visual Discourse and the War on Terror’, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 11. 2 (2010), pp. 203-207, for an overview.

⁴ See Debra Merskin, ‘The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush’, *Mass Communication and Society*, 7.2 (2004), pp. 157-175; Justin Lewis, ‘Terrorism and News Narratives’, in Daya

breakdown in distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, friend and enemy, with encounters with the terrorist-Other often appearing to be encounters with our-*selves* as enemies.⁵ As if to further unsettle these distinctions, the very media through which we experience today's enemies has also undergone profound transformations. Distant acts of war and political violence are no longer confined to geographically bounded arenas of conflict, but, instead, seep out and become instantly accessible through widely available social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram. Outside of online spaces, this content is further amplified via international news media, where user-generated media is often *re*-mediated into news stories in an attempt to retain and engage fleeting audiences. Within this new, hybridised media landscape, enemies appear closer than at any point in history, entering into our living rooms, bedrooms and intimate spaces via an increasing range of screens and devices.

It is at the intersection between debates concerning the enemy Other, shifting conceptions of war and conflict, and new communications technologies that the current chapter is situated. Focusing on the Islamic State, a violent Salafi-Jihadi organisation which, at its height, ruled over 7.7 million people, the chapter offers a provocative take on the theme of enemy encounters by considering the way the group uses propaganda images to communicate with different sets of audiences. More specifically, the analysis shows how the group appropriate nostalgic and civilisational imagery to portray the caliphate as both 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes' *and* a space of fear, uncertainty, and uncivilised danger.⁶ These visual strategies are designed to exploit and amplify pre-existing psycho-social conditions within different audience collectives,⁷ thus enabling Islamic State propagandists not only to utilise 'the weight of

Kishan Thussu & Des Freedman (eds.), *Media & Terrorism: Global Perspectives*. London: SAGE (2012), pp. 257-270; Jared Ahmad, 'A Shifting Enemy: Analysing the BBC's Representations of "Al-Qaeda" in the Aftermath of the September 11th 2001 Attacks', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 9.3 (2016), pp. 568-590, for example.

⁵ See Jared Ahmad, *The BBC, the War on Terror and the Discursive Construction of Terrorism: Representing 'Al-Qaeda'*. Cham: Palgrave (2018).

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 1.

⁷ See Haroro Ingram, 'The Strategic Logic of State and Non-State Malign "Influence Activities": Polarizing Populations, Exploiting Democratic Recession', *The RUSI Journal*, 165.1 (2020), p. 13.

the media against the media', but also, to repurpose this phrase, use the weight of *culture against culture* to secure its goals.⁸

The chapter begins by discussing the long-standing relationship between terrorists and their (imagined) audiences, focusing in particular on the Islamic State's audience segmentation strategies and the way the group crafts distinct images for different audiences. Following this, the chapter outlines the methods and data, before moving to analyse two sets of recurrent images that appear across the group's communications output. Here, two core analytical concepts are introduced, *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Strategic Self-Othering*, which each help to shed light on the way the Islamic State's identity-based messaging appeals to both friends and enemies alike. The final concluding section points to the complex utility of enemy images in an era characterised by a loss of faith in political institutions and a questioning of the very notion of 'truth' itself.

The imagined audience and Islamic State's identity-based messaging

Since the discipline of terrorism studies emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, one of the major areas of scholarly consensus has been the view that audiences are central to political violence.⁹ From the Sicarii's high-profile assassination campaigns of early antiquity to Russian anarchists' 'propaganda of the deed' during the 19th century, terrorist actors throughout history have sought to communicate violent acts to idealised 'imagined audiences'. While the target audience may vary from act to act, terrorists use violence, or the threat of violence, primarily to influence the behaviour of those watching. As Alex Schmid notes, 'by using violence against one victim, [terrorism] seeks to coerce and persuade others. The immediate victim is merely instrumental, the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience'.¹⁰ Though we should always keep in mind that audience members are not passive receivers of fixed messages, but rather active interpreters of such propaganda, terrorist actors have a keen

⁸ Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries*. Columbia: Columbia University Press (2012), p. 257.

⁹ See Alex Schmid, 'Terrorism as Psychological Warfare', *Democracy & Security*, 1.2 (2005), pp. 137-146.

¹⁰ Alex Schmid, 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16.2 (2004), p. 207.

understanding of their various target constituencies, and thus seek to tailor or segment their messages to specific groupings of friends and enemies.

For the Islamic State in particular these audience segmentation practices form a central pillar of its communications strategy. Indeed, since rebranding itself as *the* Islamic State in June 2014, the group's leaders and propagandists have sought to develop a powerful, 'identity-based' messaging strategy that divides the world into two imagined collectives; namely, 'believers' and 'disbelievers'.¹¹ These dichotomised social identities revolve around highly simplified and essentialised in- and out-group constructs that echo wider patterns of enmification seen in conflicts throughout history.¹² As former leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, makes clear: '[t]he world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: the camp of [true] Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr and hypocrisy'.¹³ Purposefully echoing George W. Bush's reductive '[e]ither you are with us or the terrorists',¹⁴ this stark, binary division of the world into friends and enemies serves to underpin the group's entire propaganda output and is a near-constant theme across its messaging.

These imagined audiences comprise both internal and external elements. For those viewed as 'believers', the internal in-group includes Sunni Muslims within the Islamic State's immediate territorial or geographic sphere of influence (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sinai, West Africa, Afghanistan, etc.). Here, research consistently reveals how the vast majority of the group's propaganda is targeted towards internal audiences, due to the fact that it is produced in Arabic and focuses on local or regional themes.¹⁵ In order to expand its territory and maximise recruitment efforts,

¹¹ See Alexandra Herfroy-Mischler & Andrew Barr, 'Jihadist Visual Communication Strategy: ISIL's Hostage Execution Video Production', *Visual Communication*, 18.4 (2018), p. 523.

¹² See Stephane Baele, Katharine Boyd & Travis Coan (eds.), *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press (2020), p. 103

¹³ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 'A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan', Al-Hayat Media Centre (July 4th 2014).

¹⁴ George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', U.S. Government Archives (September 20th 2001). Available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (Accessed June 6th 2022).

¹⁵ See Aaron Zelin, 'Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9.4 (2015), pp. 85-97.

however, there is an external dimension to the in-group, which encompasses Sunni Muslim supporters and sympathisers outside its direct territorial influence; a group traditionally characterised as the Ummah. Constituting a form of ‘public diplomacy’, much of this material is produced for foreign, non-Arabic-speaking audiences by the Islamic State’s al-Hayat Media Center. Here, magazines such as *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, *Dar al-Islam*, *Istok* and *Konstantiniyye*, produced respectively for English, French, Russian and Turkish-speakers, alongside a range of other formats such as videos, computer games, nasheeds, and social media content, constitute dimensions of the Islamic State’s ‘full-spectrum’ propaganda and thus help to reinforce its singular, totalising message.¹⁶

When seeking to communicate with members of this in-group, two of the most important strategic goals are the *propagation* of the Islamic State’s ideology and the *legitimisation* of its actions and methods.¹⁷ These goals concern the Islamic State’s attempts to attract new recruits and expand the reach of their ideology, alongside the need to justify its actions and contextualise them within a wider religious and historical context. Thus, long reports discussing the importance of leadership¹⁸ or issues of legality or permissibility within Islam,¹⁹ films discussing the economy,²⁰ and reports depicting governance and the community services overseen by the Islamic State²¹ constitute a compelling and ‘competitive system of meaning’ designed to propagate the group’s ideology, legitimise its actions, and reify the identities of the believer in-group.²² As will be discussed in further detail below, a key factor in the promotion of such goals is the strategic use of nostalgia and its appeal to an idealised Islamic past.

¹⁶ See Stephane Baele, Katharine Boyd & Travis Coan (eds.), *ISIS Propaganda*, p. 88.

¹⁷ Carsten Bockstette, *Jihadist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques*. George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies (2010). Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA512956.pdf> (Accessed May 6th 2022), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ Al-Hayat Media, ‘Imamah is from the Millah of Ibrahim’, *Dabiq*, Issue 1 (June 2014), pp. 20-31.

¹⁹ Al-Hayat Media, ‘The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour’, *Dabiq*, Issue 4 (October 2014), pp. 14-17.

²⁰ Al-Hayat Media, ‘Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar’. Dir/Prod Islamic State (August 2015).

²¹ Al-Hayat Media, ‘Healthcare in the Khilafah’, *Dabiq*, Issue 9 (May 2015), pp. 24-26.

²² Haroro Ingram, ‘An Analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* Magazine’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 51.3 (2016), p. 458.

The second imagined audience are those viewed as the Islamic State's enemies, or 'disbelievers'. Again, there are internal and external dimensions to this out-group. Traditionally labelled as the 'near enemy', the internal dimension consists of the 'apostate' or secular rulers of Muslim-majority nations within the group's immediate geographic sphere of influence.²³ Long before the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings, governments across North Africa and the Middle East held reputations as being undemocratic, deeply unpopular and mired in corruption. With the events of 2011, and subsequent destabilisation in countries such as Libya, Syria and Iraq, the resulting chaos created a breeding ground for further sectarian and political violence. Here, Islamic State propagandists utilise a range of names for this out-group: from 'apostates' and 'rejecters', to 'tyrants' and 'polytheists'. Taken together, they form a singular and composite enemy whose principal goal is to destroy the Islamic State's caliphate. In terms of the external dimension of the out-group, here the emphasis is on 'Western' nations such as the United States, France and Britain, alongside countries who form part of the global coalition against the Islamic State, such as Russia, Israel and India. Traditionally viewed as 'the far enemy',²⁴ the group use labels such as 'Crusaders', 'Christians', 'Jews' or the more general 'the West' to name and classify this out-group. As Brandon Colas has pointed out, much of the non-Arabic language publications referred to above contain materials and content specifically designed for external audiences, with articles by the captured British journalist John Cantlie, together with pieces written by prominent thinktanks, intended for consumption by politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens.²⁵

As Bockstette's work on Salafi-Jihadi strategic communication techniques suggests, a major objective when communicating with those viewed as disbelievers, whether they be internal or external, is the creation of fear and uncertainty.²⁶ This strategy has been explicitly spelled out in

²³ See Fawas Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2005).

²⁴ See Fawas Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (2005).

²⁵ Brandon Colas, 'What Does *Dabiq* Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within *Dabiq* Magazine', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40.3 (2017), p. 178-179.

²⁶ Carsten Bockstette, *Jihadist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques*, p. 12.

operational treatises by ideologues such as Abu Bakr al-Naji, who advocate for spectacular, transgressive and fear-invoking forms of propaganda.²⁷ Islamic State propagandists appear keenly aware of the rich history of stereotypes and negative portrayals of Muslims appearing within Western cultural texts and seek to appropriate them for their own ends. As Andres Ventsel et al point out, the amplification of feelings of danger and the ‘cultivation of a general atmosphere of fear and confusion are seen as key elements of present-day strategic communication’ practices,²⁸ something that enables groups like the Islamic State to exploit and amplify favourable psychosocial conditions in enemy audiences, thus exaggerating threat perceptions.²⁹

	Believers	Disbelievers
Internal	Supporters and sympathisers within the Islamic State’s immediate sphere of influence (e.g. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sinai, West/Central or East Africa, Afghanistan, etc.)	Secular or ‘apostate’ rulers of Muslim-majority nations, and their populations, within the Islamic State’s direct influence.
External	Transnational supporters and sympathisers outside of the group’s influence (e.g. Muslims in America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia). This grouping has traditionally been viewed by Muslims as ‘the Ummah’.	Secular rulers (‘Crusaders’) of non-Muslim nations, and their populations. This grouping has traditionally been described as ‘the far enemy’ by violent Salafi-Jihadi groups.
Major communication goals	Propagation of the Islamic State’s ideology and legitimisation of its methods and violent acts.	Fear, intimidation and coercion of the enemy.

Table 1: The Islamic State’s imagined audiences.³⁰

²⁷ See Abu Bakr al-Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Crucial Stage Through which the Islamic Nation Will Pass*. Trans. Will McCants. Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies (2004).

²⁸ Andreas Ventsel et al, ‘Discourse of Fear in Strategic Narratives: The Case of Russia’s Zapad War Games’, *Media, War and Conflict*, 14.1 (2021), p. 22.

²⁹ Haroro Ingram, ‘The Strategic Logic of State and Non-State Malign “Influence Activities”’, p. 13.

³⁰ This table is based on the work of Gerges (2005), Bockstette (2010) and Herfroy-Mischler & Barr (2014).

Methods and Approach

While scholars have criticised studies that focus solely on textual analysis,³¹ that is, analysis of the language and imagery of terrorist propaganda alone, such approaches are necessary to gain insight into the way the material was meant to be interpreted by audiences.³² In order to interrogate these preferred meanings, the analysis below develops a form of visual discourse analysis³³ that draws upon Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis.³⁴ Here, attention centres on the textual, intertextual and contextual dimensions of media representations to show how meaning is created over time, via layers of discourse, knowledge and power. The focus on images is important because visual modes of communication serve a central, performative role in propaganda narratives. Though we should be careful in overstating their 'power', images and visual representations are significant because they help trigger, often involuntary, cognitive and affective responses in audiences,³⁵ repressing the executive 'control' networks of the brain and stimulating the more primal, 'salience' networks.³⁶ Indeed, while language helps stabilise or 'anchor' the meaning of visuals, images are often more immediate and efficient than text alone, thus helping to conjure deep-rooted, often unspoken, cultural connotations and associations in audiences.³⁷

The analysis centres around propaganda produced between 2014 – 2016; a period that coincided with large territorial and military gains for the Islamic State group in Syria, Iraq and beyond. Adopting an explicitly qualitative approach to the data collection, images were taken from the widely circulated propaganda magazines *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* and *Dar al-Islam*, alongside films such as *Rise of Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar* (2015). Though admittedly selective and subjective in

³¹ Anne Aly, 'Brothers, Believers, Brave *Mujabideen*: Focusing Attention on the Audience of Jihadist Preachers', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40.1 (2017), pp. 62-76.

³² Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge (1993), pp. 507-517.

³³ See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: SAGE (2016), pp. 186-219.

³⁴ See Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold (1995).

³⁵ David Domke et al, 'The Primes of Our Times? An Examination of the "Power" of Visual Images', *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 3.2 (2002), pp. 131-159.

³⁶ Andrew Nierenberg, 'Why Does Propaganda Work? Fear-Induced Repression of the Executive Control Brain Network', *Psychiatric Annals*, 48.7 (2018), p. 315.

³⁷ Richard Popp & Andrew Mendelson, '"X"-ing Out Enemies', p. 205.

nature, focusing on a smaller number of texts in close detail helps uncover symbolic and sub-textual meanings that are often lost in large, quantitative studies of terrorist propaganda. In this regard, the next section seeks to outline two mutually conditioning messaging strategies that have been developed by the Islamic State and targeted towards the two interpretive communities identified above.

Strategic Nostalgia: Imagining a place of ‘romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes’

As we have seen, Islamic State propagandists and ideologues have developed a simple, yet highly effective, messaging strategy that is designed to communicate with two imagined audience groups: namely, ‘believers’ and ‘disbelievers’. When targeting the former, Islamic State media workers deliberately seek to exploit longstanding feelings of anger, humiliation and alienation thought to be felt by individuals within this (in)group. As Roxanne Euben has shown, violent Salafi-Jihadi organisations make continual references to the ‘humiliation of Islam’ in their propaganda, deploying ‘the symbols and rhetoric of emasculation to conjure historical, cultural, and political experiences of powerlessness’ and to highlight the continued legacies of colonialism.³⁸ Such accounts seek to link the experience of Muslims during the Crusades with more recent historical events and processes, such as the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate, the drawing up of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Palestinian dispossession, and the outcomes of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁹ For Islamic State propagandists, however, the solution to such narratives of humiliation is an appeal to an imagined, somewhat romanticised and idealised history; something I refer to as *Strategic Nostalgia*.

According to Bryan S. Turner, nostalgia is characterised by a profound ‘sense of historical decline and loss, involving a departure from some golden age of “homefullness” or longing for

³⁸ Roxanne Euben, ‘Humiliation and the Political Mobilization of Masculinity’, *Political Theory*, 43.4 (2015), p. 513.

³⁹ See Samantha Mahood & Halim Rane, ‘Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda’, *The Journal of International Communication*, 23.1 (2017), p. 20.

‘personal wholeness and moral certainty’.⁴⁰ Here, nostalgic discourse and rhetoric serve a central role in the process of identity construction, whereby ‘history becomes a useful instrument for people to understand who they are, where they come from and where they should be going’.⁴¹ During periods of crisis or uncertainty, moreover, this ‘backward-looking’ perspective serves to further demarcate in/out-group identities, providing a screen on which to project idealised self-images and mobilise usable memories. For example, Myria Georgiou has shown how geographically displaced groups often draw on imagined, heavily idealised pasts as a means to counter the ‘destabilizing effects of globalization’, thus creating a sense of stability when faced with ‘the loss of a home, land or loved ones’.⁴² Crucially, for Georgiou, this turn to nostalgia constitutes an explicitly *political* or *strategic* process of identity construction, whereby romantic, historical and culturally-resonant symbols are ‘used to define a bounded self as distinctly different from other cultural groups’.⁴³

For the Islamic State, this strategic use of nostalgia is most evident in the recurrent figure of the pre-modern, Islamic warrior, or ‘mujahid’. Appearing across the group’s communications output, and typically pictured wearing a mixture of traditional, 7th Century clothing and modern military fatigues, such imagery conjures culturally constructed ideals of honour, bravery and heroism that have long been associated with the first generation of Muslims. **Figure 1** provides an emblematic example of such imagery. Taken from the first edition of the Islamic State’s English-language *Dabiq* magazine, and titled ‘From Hijrah to Khilafah’, the image presents readers with the striking, almost apocalyptic image of a lone rider, sat atop a black horse, and holding the black standard of the Islamic State, emblazoned with the testimony of faith: ‘There is no deity but God, Muhammed is the messenger of God’. While the group’s enemies are likely to view such imagery

⁴⁰ Bryan S. Turner, ‘A Note on Nostalgia’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4.1 (1984), p. 147.

⁴¹ Ezgi Elçi, ‘Politics of Nostalgia and Populism: Evidence from Turkey’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 52.2 (2022), p. 699.

⁴² Myria Georgiou, “Between *Strategic Nostalgia*” and “*Banal Nomadism*”: Explorations of Transnational Subjectivity among Arab Audiences’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16. 1 (2012), p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

through colonial lenses, that is, as backward, exotic, and uncivilised in nature, for those within the believer in-group they are likely to rouse heroic fantasies and exploit ‘traditional Muslim male sensitivities around chivalry, honour, shame and sacrifice’.⁴⁴

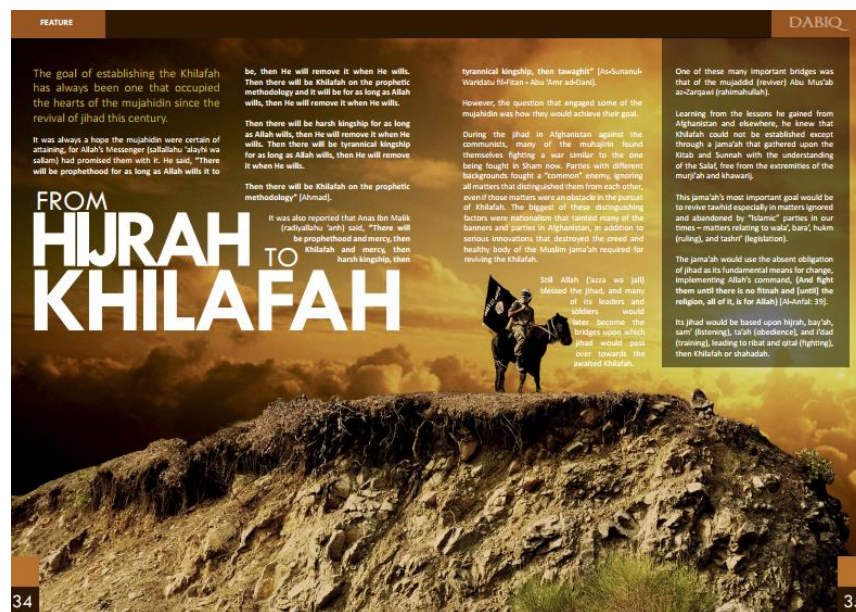


Figure 1: The figure of the pre/modern warrior *mujahid* (© Al-Hayat Media)

Setting aside the semiotic truism that figures pictured from below appear more imposing to viewers,⁴⁵ the layered symbolism surrounding the anonymous rider is explicit in its application of nostalgic themes. The presence of the horse, for example, serves to connote pre-colonial ideals of chivalry, bravery and honour, and thus helps to connect the Islamic State’s contemporary struggle with the first generation of pious Muslims. According to Christopher Anzalone, horses were central to early Muslim territorial expansion and have since become venerated within Arab and Islamic cultural history.⁴⁶ In early Islamic poetry and visual art, notions of ‘[s]peed, prowess, strength and aggressiveness, arrogance and haughtiness, virility, pride and nobility’ were conferred on both animal and rider, with horses strongly connected to the morals and principles of military

⁴⁴ Akil Awan, ‘Religion, Youth and the Effects of ISIS Narratives on Radicalisation in the West’, in *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, 1 (2015), pp. 57-70. Available at:

<https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/from-desert-to-world-cities-new-terrorism.pdf> (Accessed May 19th 2022), p. 67.

⁴⁵ See Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge (1996), p. 146.

⁴⁶ Christopher Anzalone, ‘Equestrianism in Jihadi Cultures’. Available at: <https://ibnsiqilli.com/2019/10/25/equestrianism-in-jihadi-cultures/> (Accessed June 9th 2022).

jihad.⁴⁷ For the contemporary believer, such ideals serve to fulfil some of the existential motivations experienced by Islamic State recruits, offering an empowering, and much-needed, sense of meaning and purpose; specifically, the sense ‘that one is an active participant in a cosmic battle to defend the sacred’ against an all-powerful enemy.⁴⁸ As Akil Awan explains, such imagery constitutes ‘an emphatic rejection of the banality and monotonous inanity of daily life, providing... a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of one’s own trivial existence’.⁴⁹

The presence of the black standard, moreover, evident in no less than 222 images in the group’s *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines alone,⁵⁰ further serves to elicit nostalgic and historical associations, reflecting ‘the battle standards... carried by Muslim forces in some of the earliest armed conflicts in Islamic history’.⁵¹ Although for the group’s enemies, the presence of this colour will conjure notions of protest, rebellion and, importantly, death,⁵² for the believer in-group the colour draws further parallels between the Islamic State and the 8th century Abbasid caliphate; a period widely considered by Muslim historians as the ‘Golden Age’ of Islam.⁵³ Used by a range of violent Salafi-Jihadi groups, according to Will McCants, Islamic State propagandists specifically employ black flags to promote a Manichean worldview, ‘which permits no grey areas between the binaries of right and wrong, believer and unbeliever’.⁵⁴ There is also an important eschatological dimension to the use of this colour, moreover, as scholars of Islam have traditionally foretold that the arrival of the Mahdi, or ‘rightly guided one’, will be marked by the sight of ‘Black Banners

⁴⁷ Jérémie Schiettecatte and Abbès Zouache, ‘The Horse in Arabia and the Arabian Horse: Origins, Myths and Realities’, *Arabian Humanities*, 8 (2017), p. 15.

⁴⁸ Simon Cottee & Keith Heyward, ‘Terrorist (E)Motives: The Existential Attractions of Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34.12 (2011), pp. 963-986.

⁴⁹ Akil Awan, ‘Religion, Youth and the Effects of ISIS Narratives on Radicalisation in the West’, p. 66.

⁵⁰ See Stéphane Baele et al (eds.), *ISIS Propaganda*, p. 98.

⁵¹ Afshon Ostovar, ‘The Visual Culture of Jihad’, in Thomas Hegghammer (ed.), *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2017), p. 88.

⁵² Yuet See Monica Owyong, ‘Clothing Semiotics and the Social Construction of Power Relations’, *Social Semiotics*, 19.2 (2009), p. 202.

⁵³ Afshon Ostovar, ‘The Visual Culture of Jihad’, p. 90.

⁵⁴ Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St Martin’s Press (2015), p. 21.

coming from Khorasan'.⁵⁵ In repeatedly using the colour black in its imagery, therefore, Islamic State propagandists are able to nostalgically construct the group as 'true' successors of the first generation of Muslims, knowingly invoking a 'golden age of heroic virtue, moral coherence and ethical certainty' that occurred prior to the rise of European colonial powers.⁵⁶

An equally important, yet perhaps more subtle, aspect of these *Strategic Nostalgia* practices can be seen in the settings and backdrops against which the black flag-carrying mujahid is situated. This figure is rarely depicted in the urban, metropolitan towns and cities across Iraq, Syria and beyond.⁵⁷ Rather, as can be seen in **Figure 2**, he, for such imagery is always gendered, is most often pictured on horseback emerging out of a series of pristine, pre-colonial, and 'exotic' desert settings. Culturally and semiotically-speaking, desert imagery constitutes an important marker of Arab and Islamic identity and is most often associated with antiquity and an idealised past.⁵⁸ In fact, for some, desert landscapes have long been considered to be the antithesis of 'Western civilisation',⁵⁹ where wild, untamed and primitive desert wastelands stand in opposition to modern, ordered, and civilised metropolitan centres. Within violent Salafi-Jihadi propaganda, in particular, deserts not only serve to further cement the links with the first generation of Muslims,⁶⁰ but also function to perpetuate the Orientalist-inspired myth that Islam materialised from the empty deserts, rather than urban spaces, of 7th century Arabia.⁶¹

Here, however, the use of desert landscapes should not be seen simply as a passive visual backdrop against which the group's propaganda unfolds. Rather, these austere settings should instead be considered as constitutive dimensions of the Islamic State's explicitly male identity, functioning

⁵⁵ See Samantha Mahood & Halim Rane, 'Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda', p. 26.

⁵⁶ Georg Stauth & Bryan Turner, *Nietzsche's Dance: Resentment, Reciprocity and Resistance in Social Life*. Oxford: Blackwell (1988), p. 47.

⁵⁷ See Al-Hayat Media, 'Reflections on the Final Crusade', *Dabiq*, Issue 4 (2014), p. 34, for a brief exception.

⁵⁸ Jala Makhzoumi, 'Landscape in the Middle East: An Inquiry', *Landscape Research*, 27.3 (2002), p. 219.

⁵⁹ Jessica Jacobs, 'Have Sex Will Travel: Romantic "Sex Tourism" and Women Negotiating Modernity in the Sinai', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 16.1 (2009), p. 47.

⁶⁰ See Combatting Terrorism Center Westpoint, 'Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda'. Available at: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Islamic-Imagery-Project.pdf> (Accessed 6th June 2022), p. 27.

⁶¹ Frederick Denney, *Introduction to Islam*. 4th Edition. London: Routledge (2011), p. 69.

aesthetically and, crucially, nostalgically to reassert their hyper-masculine identity as fierce ‘lions’, ‘knights’ or ‘warriors’. As Michael Leyshon and Catherine Brace note when discussing the relationship between fictional, diegetic space and identity: ‘the desert is neither decentred to accommodate action and spectacle nor positioned as a mirror of their condition but is an *active agent* in the forging of new social relationships’.⁶² In this sense, the Islamic State’s repeated use of desert settings provides a stage on which the group’s fighters perform nostalgic identities *and* a cultural referent for their lost power and masculinity. Whether it be via the figure of the lone warrior mujahid or images of loose bands of riders taking part in dramatic raids, the images identified here foreground nostalgic conceptions of hegemonic masculinity that encompass the ideals of risk-taking, self-discipline, emotional control, physical toughness, aggression and violence.⁶³ These ‘wild’, pre-colonial settings and backdrops, therefore, help to subtly animate conceptions of rugged, desert masculinity, alongside a sense of struggle and physical mastery, that is often possessed by those who live in such environments. The implication here is that such landscapes require ‘real’ strength, fortitude and bravery, something that, according to Islamic State propagandists, appears to be lacking in more ‘modern’ and ‘civilised’ parts of the world. The near-total absence of women in the group’s communications output, save for a small number of patronising articles offering ‘advice to our sisters’, can be said to further underscore this view.⁶⁴

⁶² Michael Leyshon & Catherine Brace, ‘Men and the Desert: Contested Masculinities in *Ice Cold in Alex*’, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 14.2 (2007), p. 168 (emphasis added).

⁶³ See Ramon Hinojosa, ‘Doing Hegemony: Military, Men and Constructing a Hegemonic Masculinity’, *Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2010), pp. 179-194.

⁶⁴ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘A Brief Interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajirah’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7 (February 2015), pp. 50-51.



Figure 2: The caliphate's romantic, far-away desert landscapes
(© Al-Hayat Media)

Alongside the use of black, as noted above, the heavy use of sepia tones and digital filters constitutes an additional dimension to the group's use of *Strategic Nostalgia*. While rooted in contemporary social media aesthetics, what Aaron Zelin describes as the 'Instagramification' of terrorist propaganda,⁶⁵ saturating these images in rich, sepia shades or adjusting their brightness, sharpness and colour saturation further underscores the group's nostalgic appeal to history. These techniques can be seen, for example, in the opening sequence to the propaganda film *Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar* (2015), where raw footage of Islamic State fighters is juxtaposed alongside scenes from Ridley Scott's epic historical drama *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) (see **Figure 3**). Here, the temporal boundaries separating the Islamic State's contemporary caliphate and its idealised historical representation are made invisible, as the group's masked foreign fighters appear to battle alongside medieval Saracen warriors in a timeless war against the enemy Crusader.⁶⁶ Within this rapid fire opening sequence, all the elements of *Strategic Nostalgia* can be seen on display; from the representation of the hyper-masculine fighter and use of equestrian symbolism, to the repeated presence of black banners and the stark, empty desert landscapes. Thus, by invoking the figure of the pre-modern *mujahid*, and calling on a range of subtle semiotic devices linked to

⁶⁵ Aaron Zelin, 'Picture Or it Didn't Happen', p. 93.

⁶⁶ Al-Hayat Media, *Rise of the Khilafah: Return of the Gold Dinar*. Dir. Islamic State, Aleppo (September 2015).

equestrian mythology, colour and the vast, evocative desert landscapes of pre-colonial Arabia, Islamic State propagandists subtly draw upon nostalgic myths surrounding the first generation of Muslims whilst also presenting those within the believer in-group an idealised image of an exotic, far-away and, crucially, romantic contemporary caliphate. Crucially, this appeal to a nostalgic, idealised, pre-colonial past is highly significant, because it enables the group to denounce appeals to borders, democracy and national identity that are frequently invoked by political elites across North Africa and the Middle East. In so doing, Islamic State propagandists can thus portray themselves as the ‘true’ inheritors of the religion. At the same time, however, in drawing upon this reservoir of useable memories and semiotic resources, the group knowingly mobilise an essentialised image of the self; one that, importantly, is often rooted in ‘claims of an irreducible *otherness*’ and linked to colonial encounters with the enemy Other.⁶⁷



Figure 3: Juxtaposing scenes from Islamic State’s contemporary war propaganda with scenes from mainstream Hollywood cinema (© Al-Hayat Media)

⁶⁷ Myria Georgiou, ‘Between *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Banal Nomadism*’, p. 25, emphasis added.

Strategic Self-Othering: Visualising the ‘demonic hordes of hated barbarians’.⁶⁸

Appearing alongside such idealised, wistful and nostalgic images, are another set of visual representations. While still rooted in an essentialised self-image, here the emphasis centres around the more reductive, stereotypical and negative aspects of the group’s identity. Indeed, the intended audience of these propaganda images is not so much those viewed as believers, but rather the more diffuse category of disbelievers (e.g. the group’s ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemies in the Middle East and beyond). These images appear to mobilise long-standing stereotypes surrounding Islam and the ‘dangerous Orient’ in a deliberate attempt to harness the fears, insecurities and repressed cultural memories that the out-group are said to associate with such people and places; a practice labelled here as *Strategic Self-Othering*.⁶⁹

According to postcolonial theorist Edward Said, for centuries European artists, historians and politicians viewed ‘the East’, and Islam, through racist ideologies of superiority that reduced diverse peoples and cultures to a reductive, stereotypical mass of threatening figures and locales. This way of seeing and speaking, a process he termed ‘Orientalism’, helped divide the world into the ontologically distinct spheres of ‘the East’ and ‘the West’; a practice knowingly invoked in the Islamic State’s own simplified, binary worldview. Over time, Said argued, portrayals of the East and Islam were reduced to a few archetypal Orientalist ‘myths’ or ‘dogmas’. The most pervasive of these has been the portrayal of Islam as a violent, resurgent, and conspiratorially spreading threat to the Occident.⁷⁰ Thus, from proto-Orientalist paintings depicting the violent expansion of

⁶⁸ See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 59.

⁶⁹ See Jared Ahmad, ‘Picturing the “Hordes of Hated Barbarians”: Islamic State Propaganda, (Self)Orientalism and Strategic Self-Othering’, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 16 (2022), pp. 2935-2957, for an extended discussion of this concept.

⁷⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*; see also Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: The Cultural Logic of Empire*. Chicago: Haymarket Books (2012), pp. 41-62.

Ottoman forces into Europe⁷¹ and colonial representations of hordes of fanatical ‘savages’⁷² to more recent news media portrayals of Middle Eastern and North African refugees as an undifferentiated mass of threatening others,⁷³ the image of Islam as a looming, massified danger has provided a near-constant backdrop to Western cultural and political encounters with Islam.⁷⁴

For the Islamic State, these latent fears, insecurities and essentialised identities provide a deep repository of ideas, images and usable memories that can be leveraged for strategic purposes. In contrast to Said’s one-dimensional view of Oriental agency, the group’s propagandists and media workers can be seen as ‘strategic plagiarists’ who have a deep understanding of Western cultural forms and media logics.⁷⁵ In much the same way that the Islamic State skilfully appropriate nostalgic themes and pre-colonial symbols to communicate with the believer in-group, they also *recontextualise* Orientalist discourses and imagery in order to influence those viewed as disbelievers.⁷⁶ And, in so doing, the group are able to temporarily construct a collectivised subject position and instrumentalise stereotypical dimensions of its identity for political purposes, thus skilfully mobilising the weight of culture *against* culture.

Textually speaking, the group’s description of its own fighters as ‘soldiers of terror’⁷⁷ or ‘bloodthirsty knights’,⁷⁸ alongside the portrayal of its violence as a form of ‘*just* terrorism’,⁷⁹ serves to demonstrate awareness of the notion of *Strategic Self-Othering*, as they represent a conscious attempt to portray the Islamic State’s actions as barbaric and cruel, yet necessary and religiously

⁷¹ See Daniel Viktus, ‘Early Modern Orientalism: Representations of Islam in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe’, in David Blanks & Michael Frassetto (eds.), *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other*. New York: St Martins (1999), pp. 207-230.

⁷² See John Springhall, ‘“Up Guards and at Them!” British Imperialism and Popular Art, 1880–1914’, in John MacKenzie (eds.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press (2017), pp. 49-72.

⁷³ See Lilie Chouliaraki & Tijana Stolic, ‘Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee “Crisis”: A Visual Typology of European News’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 39.8 (2017), pp. 1162-1177.

⁷⁴ See Elizabeth Poole & John E. Richardson, *Muslims and the News Media*. London: I. B. Tauris (2010).

⁷⁵ Haroro Ingram, ‘An Analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* Magazine’, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Lilie Chouliaraki & Andreas Kissas, ‘The Communication of Horrorism: A Typology of ISIS Online Death Videos’, *Critical Studies in Media and Communication*, 35.1 (2017), pp. 24–39.

⁷⁷ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Soldiers of Terror’, *Dabiq*, Issue 8 (March 2015), pp. 17-19.

⁷⁸ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Forward’, *Dabiq*, Issue 15 (July 2016), p. 7.

⁷⁹ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Just Terror’, *Dabiq*, Issue 12 (November 2015), p. 3.

legitimate. The repeated claim, moreover, that ‘Islam is the religion of the sword not pacifism’ further serves to support this view,⁸⁰ celebrating the Islamic State’s otherness and its embrace of ‘blood-red swords’.⁸¹ More crucially, however, these statements are visually supported through the repeated use of images portraying its fighters wilfully indulging in ‘uncivilised’ forms of violence, such as beheadings, mass executions and religiously sanctioned punishments. In fact, for Islamic State media workers, this explicit and graphic ‘barbarism’ constitutes a clear rejection of the ‘humane’ or ‘liberal’ forms of violence carried out by Western nations,⁸² which is often *invisible* to their own populations,⁸³ and a deliberate attempt to ‘terrify the disbelievers in their own homes’.⁸⁴ The Islamic State shows what its enemies are often unable to see, and, in so doing, purposefully claim a rich tradition of cultural representations of ‘Otherness’.⁸⁵

Figure 4 provides several graphic illustrations of these *Strategic Self-Othering* practices, whereby disbeliever audiences are presented with a series of images depicting the bloody aftermath of violent beheadings by foreign fighters and volunteers. Despite constituting a relatively small percentage of the Islamic State’s propaganda,⁸⁶ in selecting and foregrounding these images the group seeks to deliberately target disbelievers (both internal and external) in an attempt to promote fear, uncertainty and terror. In this sense, the use of images depicting Europeans, and other foreign fighters, has been specifically designed to maximise their psycho-social impact on audiences and exacerbate fears about the threat posed by the migrant Other within Western democracies. In fact, research shows that Islamic State propagandists push the more violent and transgressive aspects of its propaganda in the aftermath of attacks in European cities or in response to territorial losses

⁸⁰ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7 (February 2016), pp. 20-24.

⁸¹ See Al-Hayat Media, ‘From Our Sisters’, *Dabiq*, Issue 9 (May 2015), p. 47.

⁸² See Michael Dillon & Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Live*. London: Routledge (2009).

⁸³ See Simone Molin Friis, “Beyond anything we have ever seen”: Beheading Videos and the Visibility of Violence in the War Against ISIS’, *International Affairs*, 91.1 (2015), pp. 725-746.

⁸⁴ Al-Hayat Media, ‘Interview with Abu Sa’d at-Trinidadi’, *Dabiq* (July 2016), p. 69.

⁸⁵ This position is explicitly outlined in an article by the Islamic State. See Al-Hayat Media, ‘Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You?’, *Dabiq*, Issue 15 (July 2016), pp. 30-33.

⁸⁶ Scenes of brutality and graphic violence make up around 13.8% of the images appearing within *Dabiq* magazine, for example. See Shahira Fahmy, ‘The Age of Terrorism Media: The Visual Narratives of the Islamic State Group’s *Dabiq* Magazine’, *International Communication Gazette*, 82.3 (2020), p. 277.

in a deliberate attempt to scare disbelievers and exacerbate levels of uncertainty surrounding terror threat levels.⁸⁷



Figure 4: The Islamic State's *Strategic Self-Othering Practices* (*Dabiq* 2015, p. 55; *Dar al-Islam* 2015, p. 105; *Rumiyah* 2016, p. 1) (© Al-Hayat Media).

While no doubt inspired by modern propagandists and ideologues, the strategic value of such images lies in the way they draw upon, and intensify, entrenched fears and discourses surrounding the ‘dangerous Orient’. In particular, a core feature of these *Strategic Self-Othering* practices rests on way they invoke the Orientalist-inspired myth that Muslims have a ‘predisposition’ to brutal, lascivious violence.⁸⁸ From the very first European encounters with the Orient, Islam offered a psychological screen on which to project simplified fears and fantasies about the Other, which, importantly, enabled artists, politicians and academics to construct a collectivised self-identity.⁸⁹ During these early encounters, cultural representations depicted Oriental subjects as invading ‘hordes of hated barbarians’ who were,⁹⁰ in part, ‘fond of beheading and other cruel forms of punishment and torture’.⁹¹ Here, European Orientalist painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Henri Regnault revelled in graphic depictions of cruelty and despotism, whereby the Oriental Other functioned as a canvas on which to project a range of anxieties. As

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 279. See also Jesse Wozniak et al, ‘The Evolving Self-Presentation of the Islamic State, from *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah*’, *The Social Science Journal* (Online first 2020), pp. 1-14.

⁸⁸ See Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, pp. 52-55.

⁸⁹ See Said, *Orientalism*.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹¹ Daniel Viktus, ‘Early Modern Orientalism’, p. 220.

can be seen in **Figure 5**, the latter's macabre *Execution without Judgement under the Moorish Kings* (1870) offers an exemplary point of comparison. Depicting a physically imposing and indifferent executioner, the painting foreshadows themes invoked in the Islamic State's own propaganda 'art'. The transgressive nature of Regnault's work, a piece renowned for the level of detail the artist gave to the blood and its potential effects on viewers,⁹² is echoed in the group's carefully-staged violence and the way its photo-propagandists enhance the saturation and vibrancy of images to make the gore appear more real.⁹³ In this regard, Islamic State propagandists demonstrate a keen awareness of the fact that, for most Western audiences, their only encounter with extreme violence is most often through the, equally enhanced, medium of cinema. Regnault's painting was also deliberately designed to place the viewer in a subordinate position, inviting them to simultaneously fear and fantasise about the muscular executioner.⁹⁴ The sheer size of this figure, in contrast to the bloodied, prostrate victim, moreover, is visually echoed in the way the fighters in Islamic State propaganda are often digitally-enhanced to give audiences the impression that they tower over their bowed, submissive victims.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, while Regnault's Moor is pictured in orange robes, for the Islamic State it is its victims who are now clothed in such colours. Here, the use of the bright orange jump-suit serves to draw powerful visual parallels with the abuse of Muslim prisoners in places such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, thus serving as a timely 'reminder of the group's resistance to Western imperialism' and the ongoing legacy of the colonisation of Muslim lands.⁹⁶ Despite these sartorial differences, the parallels between the cold, methodical, and casual nature of such imagery is self-evident.

⁹² See Marc Gotlieb, *The Deaths of Henri Regnault*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2016).

⁹³ See for example Simon Copeland, 'Islamic State, Filters and Photoshop', *Crest Security Review* (Autumn 2021). Available at: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/islamic-state-filters-and-photoshop/> (Accessed July 20th 2022).

⁹⁴ James Smalls, 'Menace at the Portal: Masculine Desire at the Homoerotics of Orientalism', in Joan DelPlato & Julie Codell (Eds.), *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures*. London: Routledge (2016), p. 34.

⁹⁵ See Al-Hayat Media, 'A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross', Dir./Prod. Islamic State (February 15th 2015).

⁹⁶ Patrick Richey & Michaela Edwards, 'It's More than Orange: ISIS's Appropriation of Orange Prison Jumpsuits as Rhetorical Resistance', in Michael Krona & Rosemary Pennington (eds.), *The Media World of ISIS*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2019), pp. 177.

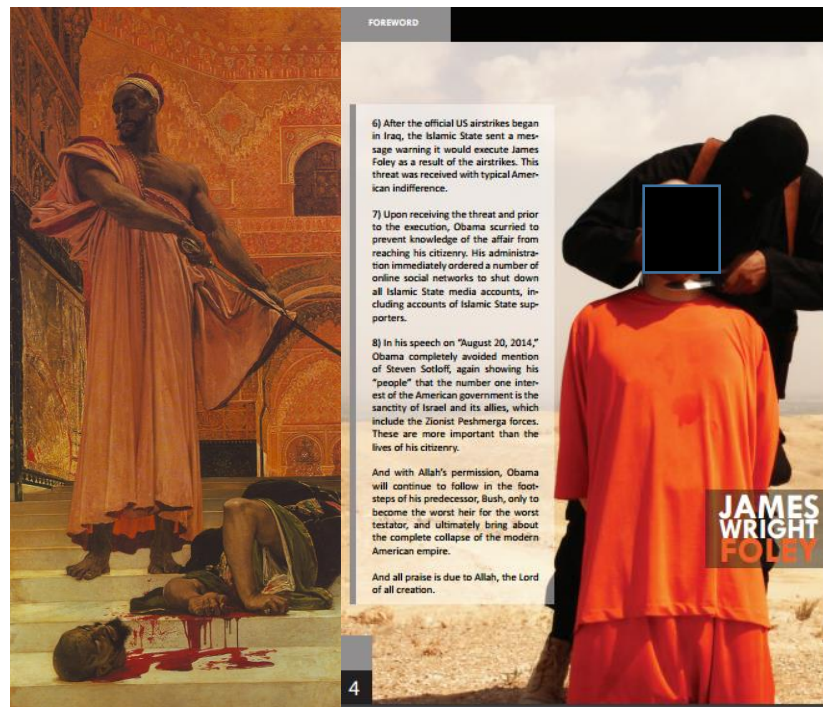


Figure 5: Contrasting Henri Regnault's *Execution without Judgement under the Moorish Kings* (1870 – © Wikimedia Commons) with the Islamic State's own 'art' (2014 – Al-Hayat Media)

In fact, despite being targeted towards different imagined audiences, it is here where the parallels between *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Strategic Self-Othering* start to become apparent. This is because both practices are inspired by a rhetoric of humiliation, alongside associated feelings of hatred, vengeance and the desire for retaliation, in the way that they seek to restore balance and recuperate 'a lost sense of agency' for the group's followers.⁹⁷ The Islamic State's strategic use of nostalgia seeks to draw explicit parallels between the first generation of pious Muslims, evoking identities rooted in an idealised, mythical past, thus restoring 'the proper hierarchical ordering of men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim, the dominant and submissive'.⁹⁸ At the same time, the self-Othering practices identified above serve to call upon deep-seated fears and imagined pasts that disbeliever audiences associate with the 'dark', 'uncivilised' and 'dangerous Orient'. In the context of today's post-truth environment, a period characterised by growing levels of social and political polarisation and disenchantment, Orientalist-inspired fears and insecurities dominate

⁹⁷ Roxanne Euben, 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilization of Masculinity', p. 505.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

narratives put forward by populist and far-right political parties. In short, as Amanda E. Rogers notes, we see the Islamic State precisely how the group wants to be seen: to believer audiences it presents the image of a powerful, legitimate, romantic *mujahid* warrior, who is poised to bring dignity and self-determination to a historically humiliated in-group. To disbelievers, it offers the endless image of barbaric violence and uncivilised evil.⁹⁹ These encounters with the enemy allow the group not only to harness the power of media against media, but more precisely to use the force of culture against culture.

Conclusion

In much the same way that the boundaries separating war and terrorism have weakened in the years after the attacks of September 11th 2001, so too have the representations of the enemy. This chapter has sought to explore these shifting boundaries by focusing on the Islamic State's use of visual propaganda. As we have seen, the group's identity-based messaging serves to construct two imagined audiences – 'believers' and 'disbelievers' – and two distinct messaging strategies; what have been termed, *Strategic Nostalgia* and *Strategic Self-Othering*. These strategies enable Islamic State propagandists to legitimise their violence to potential recruits from the in-group, providing them with an opportunity to 'remake themselves as heroic figures, belonging to an exalted elite',¹⁰⁰ while, at the same time, leveraging Orientalist-inspired fears and insecurities that are thought to exist within the collective memories of its enemies.

Such practices have implications for wider debates surrounding contemporary encounters with the enemy and the weaponisation of new communication technologies. In a context characterised by growing levels of economic instability, the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim/immigrant sentiment, and rising mistrust towards democratic institutions, alongside a questioning of the very notion of 'Truth' itself, these strategic communication practices provide

⁹⁹ Amanda Rogers, 'Evil™ - Islamic State, Conflict-Capitalism, and the Geopolitical Uncanny', *Critical Studies on Security*, 6.1 (2018), p. 120.

¹⁰⁰ Simon Cottee & Keith Heyward, 'Terrorist (E)Motives', p. 977.

actors from a range of political and ideological backgrounds an opportunity to play on audiences' emotions and deeply held sense of identity and (ontological) security.

In fact, there is evidence of an emergent, strategic embrace between violent Salafi Jihadi and far-right extremist groups. Iconic propaganda that invokes nostalgic images of hyper-masculine, 7th Century mujahid warriors battling with powerful European Crusader knights helps to sustain a mutually legitimising relationship that sees violent Salafi-Jihadi and far-right extremist organisations increasingly reliant upon one another for ideological sustenance. As Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass note, in such a situation 'alleged enemies feed rhetorically into one another's interests as each side perceives political advantage in the very existence of the other'.¹⁰¹ *Strategic Nostalgia* thus supports a wider narrative employed by the two groups that they are each involved in a collective, sacred and cosmic battle to defend the in-group against the threat posed by the out-group. The use of *Strategic Self-Othering* practices, moreover, further serves to reinforce this strange embrace, with the Islamic State's strategic use of violent, essentialised and stereotypical imagery functioning to legitimise exclusionary and racist rhetoric that highlights the incompatibility of Islamic cultural practices with a seemingly monolithic European identity. Though some scholars have called attention to the shared discourses and strategic interplay that exists between violent Salafi-Jihadi and far-right extremist groups,¹⁰² much more research is needed into the visual and iconographic aspects of such a mutually sustaining relationship. Furthermore, given the increased exposure to online, extremist content that citizens around the world have experienced during recent Covid lockdowns, it is vital that we better understand the way visual images are used to help to construct 'realities' that appear more *real* or desirable than reality itself. This is because, as social

¹⁰¹ Joseba Zulaika & William Douglass, 'The Terrorist Subject: Terrorism Studies and the Absent Subjectivity', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1.1 (2008), p. 29.

¹⁰² See for example Donald Holbrook, 'Far Right and Islamist Discourses: Shifting Patterns of Enmity', in Max Taylor et al (Eds.), *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*. London: Bloomsbury (2013), pp. 215-238; Meili Criezis, 'Intersections of Extremisms: White Nationalist/Salafi-Jihadi Propaganda Overlaps and Essentialist Narratives about Muslims', *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies*, 2.1 (2020), pp. 88-96.

theorists such as Slavoj Žižek¹⁰³ and Zygmunt Bauman remind us,¹⁰⁴ future wars are set to be characterised by an inability to distinguish between friends and enemies, allies and adversaries, so we need to find ways of understanding precisely where, and how, those realities intersect so that we can construct alternative, more peaceful images of, and encounters with, Others.

¹⁰³ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso (2002).

¹⁰⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*. London: Polity (2006).