New Sociological Perspectives
2022, Vol. 2, No. 2, 83-93
https://nsp.lse.ac.uk/

The Spectacles of Experience: Toward a New Understanding of ISIS's Performative Violence

Nicholas Lovrics*

Abstract

Scholarship on the Islamic State's spectacles of violent brutality are too often misunderstood in popular discourse and scholarship alike; they concentrate on values inherent to Islam that dispose radical groups to performative violence or as attempts to incite military reactions from the West. This article finds such approaches to be historically, theologically, and strategically incoherent. It seeks to synthesize a comprehensive analysis of ISIS's professed doctrine as well as advanced theory on performative violence, ultimately finding that ISIS uses spectacles of violence and destruction to construct for itself an identity distinct not from the West, but from other Muslims and from the leaders of Arab nations. Its strategy is to make evident the group's devotion to Islamic eschatology and its viability as a legitimate caliphate.

Keywords
ISIS, performative violence, eschatology, state-building

* Nicholas has recently completed an MSc Comparative Politcs at the London School of Economics. His scholarship concentrates on the use of political violence. This has covered multiple geographic regions, including the Middle East and Central Africa, as well as myriad conceptual lenses such as the expression of violence, the organization and transformation of insurgencies, and state sponsorship of political violence.

Introduction

The 2014 beheadings of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and their subsequent dissemination on social media by the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) repulsed the world. As the shocking brutality of the beheadings abated, scholars and public commentators alike addressed the performative quality of the films. Unlike typical smut videos, ISIS productions were meticulously scripted, rehearsed, and produced. From a vigorous discourse, a narrative emerged: the videos' mesmerizing cruelty, coupled with their instantaneous diffusion into internet fora, was an instrument intended to induce a moral, political, and, eventually, military response from the West (Hewitt 2018: 2). From that interpretation, ISIS's organizational steadfastness and fortitude is demonstrated to audiences in Europe and North America, thereby facilitating transnational recruitment and revenue generation. Yet, such accounts fail to sufficiently interrogate these videos' communicative aspects, neglecting questions of critical import. Why were they choreographed and professionally edited? Why are they, upon even superficial analysis, rife with imagery and meaning?

Building upon the conceptual frameworks of Friis (2015) and later Euben (2017) who claim that such videos are deliberate acts requiring translation, this essay posits that ISIS's violence is the most salient component of a calculated identity building campaign, constructed to distinguish ISIS from its chief competitors: not the West, but rather other Muslims. Though some (Zech and Kelly 2015) have made similar claims, most scholars of ISIS's performative violence argue that it is directed at Western audiences. My argument has two dimensions: ISIS is a religiously pure, eschatological Islamic authority; and ISIS represents a legitimate governorate, with claims to sovereignty as viable as those professed by recognized governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

This hypothesis will be tested via a discourse analysis of diverse instances of ISIS's performative violence situated within a broader understanding of the group's ideology, history, and media strategy. The remainder of this essay will proceed as follows: first, a brief primer will detail ISIS's origins, its ideology, and objectives, identifying distinguishing characteristics between it and groups often considered adjacent. Second, it will present three competing—sometimes overlapping—streams of scholarship on the subject of ISIS and its performative violence: a neo-Orientalist account that emphasizes essentialist qualities like religion, a deterministic Structuralist account that argues ISIS and its tactics respond to changing social contexts, and a post-Marxist explanation, one that understands ISIS's identity-building, utilizing 'speech act theory' to decipher symbolism within violence and its enactment (Euben 2017: 1010). Lastly, this essay will make its central arguments by analyzing individual videos published by the Islamic State (Euben 2017: 1010).

An investigation of this nature seeks to fill a critical gap in existing scholarship on performative violence. Furthermore, it responds to ISIS's persistence in different iterations in South-East Asia and Eastern Africa despite its military defeat in the Levant, which indicates an enduring need to understand its methods and motivations. In the process of substantiating its arguments, this essay will critically analyze the intersection of violence and legitimacy, making note of its limits, and its applicability to state-building. Additionally, topics such as cultural erasure, sectarian conflict, and religious fanaticism will be discussed.

Concepts and Definitions

This essay is conceptually constructed upon the definitions of Friis and Juris (2005). Performative violence is understood as a 'specific mode of communication through which activists seek to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation' (Juris 2005: 413). Violence as performance is neither a recent nor complex phenomenon; ancient works of drama—Oedipus Rex or Medea—employ this fairly 'primitive method' intended to elicit intuitive responses (Hermanis 2008: 8). Similarly, the application of performative violence to conflict-laden environments precedes ISIS. History is replete with mutilated corpses positioned to intimidate or undermine the will of combatants. More contemporarily, acts of brutality are choreographed, filmed, produced, and disseminated in an act of 'costly signalling' in which a message is conveyed (Friis 2015: 729). However,

myriad objectives beyond merely addressing an audience are achieved through such productions, including to distinguish an in- from an outgroup, constructing a unique identity, and decrying policy. For the purposes of this essay, and specifically concerning ISIS's productions, performative violence is understood not simply as spectacular acts of destruction, but rather as deliberately dramatized acts requiring close reading.

ISIS

At its apex in early 2015, the Islamic State operated as a caliphate (Khalifa) presiding over '40 percent of Iraq and 60 percent of Syria' (Speckhard 2020: 82). The proto-state established taxation systems, judicial courts, police forces, and infrastructure projects. While ISIS's institutionalization of 'government' services is by no means unique among Islamic activist organizations—Hizbullah's services provided to Palestinian refugees, for example—their declaration of a borderless Khalifa extending to more than a dozen affiliated organizations across the globe separates the group from its contemporaries (Gates and Podder 2015: 109). The group attracted upwards of 20,000 foreign fighters, almost 20 percent of which enlisted from the West (Gates and Podder 2015: 110).

Originating from an affiliate of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), its Sunni modernist founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi professed a literalist interpretation of Salafi-jihadism, though theologically distinct from others, like Osama bin Ladin. Poljarevic (2021) understands ISIS ideology as presenting a distinctly pre-historicist approach to Islamic activism, using the group's centralization of takfir (the excommunication of other Muslims) as a tool to understand its development (Poljarevic 2021: 486). The theology of the early Kharijite movement, from which a violent conceptualization of takfir originated, became integral to the political and theological writings of figures such as Sayyid Qutb, who offered a framework to engage in violence 'against perceived ungodliness and apostasy among leadership in Muslim majority polities' (Poljarevic 2021: 498).

While more mainstream organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, rejected this literalist interpretation and chose not to prioritize al-wala' wal-bara' (loyalty and disavowal) in their politics, younger personalities including bin Ladin, Umar Abd al-Rahman, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi 'demonstrated stronger tendencies to excommunicate and justify violence' against adversaries (Poljarevic 2021: 501). The wars of the 1990s in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, the failure of much of the pan-Arab movement, and the permanent installation of American troops in Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War facilitated the institutionalization of these notions transnationally (Gerges 2005: 18). The teachings of al-Maqdisi heavily influenced his pupils, among which was Zarqawi. Unlike their peers, Madqisi and Zarqawi applied takfir to the near-enemy, false governments and apostates in the Muslim world (Poljarevic 2021: 503). During a period of Sunni awakening in Iraq (2006-2010), this theology was operationalized into ISIS.

As mentioned above, ISIS also mobilized systematized propaganda to devastating effect. The group employed sophisticated technologies—those that three years prior had contributed to the mass movements of the Arab Spring—adeptly (Orlova 2018: 8). Among the most salient early instances concerned the 2014 FIFA World Cup during which ISIS published videos of violence under the hashtags 'World Cup,' 'FIFA,' or 'Brazil.' The group also demonstrated capabilities of circumventing efforts at censoring their videos and propaganda, turning to more decentralized means of publication. Its magazine, Dabiq, releases over a dozen issues a year, oftentimes more than forty pages in length. The program concentrates on religious justification for its Khalifa, for Baghdadi as Caliph, its wilayats (administrative authorities), and providing updates on military conquests (Gambhir 2014: 5). The meticulousness with which Dabiq issues are constructed, with thorough and well-argued religious justifications relying on only the 'most reliable' Qur'anic material, is evident (Gambhir 2014: 10). Through Dabiq, Baghdadi makes claims over Muslims, declaring it compulsory for all to make hijrah (emigration to the Islamic State) and pledge ba'ya (allegiance) (Gambhir 2014: 8).

The Contemporary Debate

Three streams reflect scholarly discourse around ISIS and performative violence: the neo-Orientalists, Structuralists, and post-Marxists. This section will critically engage with each approach, outlining their central claims, and noting their deficiencies. It contends that Structuralists effectively explain ISIS and its tactics as reactive to changing social conditions. However, the theories presented by post-Marxists best address the communicative aspects of performative violence. Considered in tandem, a contextually situated and analytically robust theory can be developed.

As a broader political and sociological approach, neo-Orientalism has developed pejorative connotations, leading many to ignore any insights it may present. Indeed, there are those within its tradition, both scholars and pop culture figures, that make fallacious assumptions of ISIS, usually aggregating its ideology with other terrorist organizations or ascribing the brutality of the group to Islam. In an infamous discussion on Real Time with Bill Maher, neuroscientist and author Sam Harris attributed ISIS's tactics to the foundational tenets of Islam, the 'motherlode of bad ideas' (Real Time with Bill Maher 2014: 2:17). However, there is also a well-intentioned, well-informed tradition that simply presents an incomplete interpretation of performative violence. Instead of developing an analytical account of the substance within violent videos, scholars are inflicted by poor assumptions regarding intentions; either ISIS leadership and foot soldiers are irrational, bloodthirsty terrorists, or they are simply attempting to garner a reaction from the West. Such claims become somewhat understandable given that many neo-Orientalists write for more hawkish think tanks or national security organizations.

Baele et al. (2019) situate ISIS within the clash of civilizations model, first proposed by Samuel Huntington. Their ideology is described as occidentalist, 'essentializing [the West's] negativity' (Baele et all 2019: 890). Through an analysis of exclusionary language in ISIS messaging, the article contends that 'civilizational talk' distinguishing ISIS from the West is at the fore (Baele et all 2019: 891). The argument certainly has merit. The executions of Americans Foley and Sotloff—in orange jumpsuits reminiscent of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay—is performed by 'Jihadi John', Mohammad Emwazi, as he addresses Obama, 'the dog of Rome.' In so doing, ISIS 'fulfills the clash' (Baele et al. 2019: 897). Yet, such an argument falls prey to those similar: by centralizing the clash between civilizations, analysts fail to account for clashes within civilizations. Concepts like jihadism are considered a monolith. Proponents of this argumentation fail to recognize that sectarian violence was complicated for ISIS in its early state-building phase and gaining authority over tribal leaders was paramount. Assuming that there is only one outgroup observable in ISIS messaging is conceptually and empirically inaccurate. Divergent scholarly approaches improve upon this deficiency.

More critically, Structuralists (Alexander 2015, Poljarevic 2015, Tite 2015) seek to understand ISIS and its tactics as arising from local contexts. The effective dissolution of local governments and the 'systematic disenfranchisement' of Sunni Muslims regionally created an opportunity for militants like al-Zarqawi; perhaps, ISIS is a natural consequence of decades of subalternism. Rather than ascribing religious conservatism as the paramount cause for the creation of an Islamic State, Poljarevic (2015) claims that some Sunnis chose to amalgamate into the Islamic State through 'pragmatic calculations concerning their collective survival' (Poljarevic 2015: 503). Following the existential crisis that was, for conservative Muslims, the Arab Spring, the creation of ISIS can be seen as their most radical response (Alexander 2015). Simultaneously, ISIS's propaganda must be contextualized to coincide with the unprecedented availability of digital media. Unlike their earliest comparable forebearers, executions in town squares in Babylon, the internet gave groups like ISIS unprecedented circulation power (Friis 2015: 731). ISIS is one instance of combatants operationalizing technology and the 'ensuing increased visual interconnectivity' (Friis 2015: 729).

Unlike neo-Orientalists, Structuralists engage in some critical interpretation of the content of violence performed. Tite (2015) rationalizes such acts as, in part, solidarity, a vehicle through which agency can be recovered (Tite 2015: 184). Unlike random violence, deliberate and calculated destruction is expressive and can seek to affect Foucault's episteme, 'bodies of knowledge within which certain meanings, values, and alignments of power

relations are made possible' (Tite 2015: 186). Through the messaging within performative violence, social capital can be accrued. However, Structuralists may fail to fully link the downstream consequences of such messaging on social and cultural relationships, identities, and movements. A post-Marxist stream of literature fills this void.

Finally, by centralizing the subvisual aspects behind ISIS's performative violence, the post-Marxist approach (Juris 2005; Davis 2009; Friis 2015; Euben 2018) offers a critical perspective. While Structuralists and post-Marxists identify the instrumentalism of ISIS's violence—identifying it as a vehicle through which transnational solidarity can be forged and political identities can be established—several distinctions between the two are evident (Juris 2005: 418). First, the latter's disposition imparts a greater emphasis on the messaging coded within violent performances and the potential consequences of this relationship on state- and identity-building (Davis 2009: 226). Performative violence is not just an instrument, it is a dynamic phenomenon that can take on meanings and consequences of its own. Post-Marxists may also apply a value judgement to the evaluation of performative violence and its effects. At what point does the use of political violence become unjustifiable, the tool of a hegemonizing force imposing their rule over the subjugated (Juris 2005: 414)? As groups like ISIS institutionalize, does its initially counter-hegemonic tactic itself become hegemonic?

From this literature, this essay finds that Friis and later Euben provide the most comprehensive framework through which the symbolic qualities of performative violence can be rationalized. Friis explains the relationship by describing the Foley and Sotloff beheadings as affecting the perceived 'realities and facts of war' within American and British politics (Friis 2015: 727); visual objects affect the 'ontological-political conditions' within which war is understood (Friis 2015: 736). Euben extends the argument further, rationalizing the beheadings of Foley and Sotloff as the 'enactment of retaliatory humiliation' facilitating a 'symbolic transposition' of roles between ISIS and the United States (Euben 2017: 1010). While the impotence of the victims, compelled to deliver a scripted denunciation of the United States, ISIS appears steadfast and invincible as Emwazi towers, enrobed in black (Euben 2017: 1008). As agents of their would-be state, these actions are important contributions toward state-building.

Methodology

This essay advances a counterintuitive claim: that ISIS's performative violence, even that against Westerners, is not intended primarily for Western audiences, but is a tool in a comprehensive policy targeted at regional Muslims. A two-pronged methodology is employed to substantiate this claim. First, a theoretical framework will be outlined. This framework takes inspiration from the post-Marxist debate outlined above, engaging with the communicative and symbolic content within ISIS videos, delineating certain aspects of the Structuralist account to situate the case within social, political, and technological contexts. Second, various instances of ISIS's performative violence will be detailed and analyzed. A discourse analysis, a mode of textual or videographic analysis in which productions are understood within the sociological, theological, or political contexts in which they are produced, will provide scrutinous insights. The videos under analysis were chosen considering several criteria. First, a diverse pool of videos was sampled from the infamous to the lesser known. Though this was intended to cast a wide net reflecting the range of ISIS's performative violence, it may subject this investigation to selection bias. Second, practical considerations limited the scope of analysis. Some videos, though popularized through internet fora, are difficult to find in their original form. Many are clipped, edited, or otherwise tampered with beyond the point of reasonable inclusion.

a) The spectacle of violence: theory

Using ISIS as a case, this essay will now attempt to formulate a new framework through which its performative violence can be understood. Through violent productions, ISIS constructs an artificial social reality that seeks to define the group both as religiously just

and as a legitimate holder of sovereign authority, a classical state in a modern age. Unlike Friis and Euben, this essay finds that ISIS's primary adversary in its performative violence are other Muslims as the majority of examples depict Muslim victims, feature Qur'anic terminology, and are delivered in Arabic.

The mutations of media technologies at the beginning of the Information Age saw the application of digital documentation to similar methods—the recorded 'strategic portrayal of beheadings' is widely believed to have emerged during the Chechnyan War in the 1990s (Friis 2015: 729). However, the lack of a reliable and integrated mode of transmission prevented their widespread dissemination. Similarly, the relationship between violence and media, as well as media's influence in affecting popular discourse is well established. Walter Laquer explained the symbiosis between spectacular violence and media within the context of the war on terror: 'the media are the terrorist's best friend. The act itself is nothing, publicity is all' (Kearns 2020: 83). A further decade later, ISIS capitalized upon the confluence of performative violence and the evolution of technology to reach millions.

ISIS's brand of performative violence includes both instrumental and symbolic components (Juris 2005: 415). Indeed, their ascribed practical intentions, to demonstrate strength and attract recruits, are likely accurate. A similar process is observable in credit-taking among terrorist organizations, whose objectives are usually to gain notoriety or prestige. However, more can be unearthed about ISIS by analyzing its interpretive aspects. First, the mode of documentation, video, is significant. In some ways, as argued by Hanna Kozlowska, these videos represent the modern-day guillotine execution, 'with YouTube as the town square' (Friis 2015: 726). However, unlike state executions of old, these exist in perpetuity, garnering millions of views, being constantly reproduced and retransmitted. To this end, the videos themselves are able to take on meanings and expressions of their own. While the devastating photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib may evoke similar sentiments of outrage or solidarity, the 'temporal requirements' of viewing such videos again distinguishes their relevance as objects of 'signification' (Euben 2017: 1011). In videos, the entire spectacle is observable: the nervous glances of the condemned, the sureness with which the executioners move, the choreographed delivery.

From this interpretability, we understand ISIS's videos as the zenith of performative violence, as an episteme, responding to a 'specific economy of signification' (Juris 2005: 427). The videos create what Lene Hansen deemed 'instant icons' powerful mechanisms through which socio-cultural realities can be altered (Friis 2015: 732). Performative violence, the reclamation of autonomy or destruction of cultural or historical adversaries offers social capital. Through violent means, the dispossessed may achieve the once impossible, to regain control over 'the public sphere' (Mustafa et al. 2013: 1110). Against the backdrop of convoluted and seemingly unending regional conflicts, this reclamation of authority can result in aspirations of statehood.

b) Islamically pure, eschatological

For the Islamic State, the first iteration of this opportunity concerns the groups theological eschatology. Its ideology immerses itself in pre-historicism, taking inspiration from the earliest years of Islam, orienting its practices around the apocalypse. References to the Day of Judgement are rife in ISIS marketing. The name Dabiq refers to a Syrian town at which hadiths speak of the climactic, apocalyptic, battle between Muslims and Rome; the cover of its second edition depicts an ark traversing treacherous seas (Gambhir 2014: 3). Similarly, ISIS's violent acts, even those unpublished, have eschatological motivation. Among the most appalling early acts of the Islamic State was its genocide and systematic enslavement of the Yazidis, an endogamous Kurdish ethnic group indigenous to Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. ISIS messaging indicates that the Yazidi were targeted as an historic enemy, pagan-worshippers (Poljarevic 2015: 508). Similarly, ISIS retaliates against rafidah, Shi'ites who reject al-Baghdadi's caliphal authority. Employing the conception of takfir introduced above, such violence, and its dramatization, is made not just 'ethically permissible' but necessary to respond to legitimate threats to ISIS's eschatological worldview (Tite 2015:

188). Although predecessors like al-Qaeda integrated loose references to the apocalypse in their writings, ISIS's readiness to use violent means to conjure the Mahdi's—a Messianic figure—appearance represents a departure from previous iterations of violent Sunni activism (Poljarevic 2015: 502). Examples of performative violence reinforces this claim.

Rome was prominent in ISIS discourses—the paramount ancient enemy of Mohammad's caliphate and synonymous with its contemporary enemy, Western governments. Simultaneously, the region ISIS sought to govern was also dotted with Greco-Roman ruins. One ruin at Palmyra, in central Syria, bore witness to a later example of ISIS performative violence. In May of 2015, a video released by the group saw twenty-five Syrian officers paraded by ISIS soldiers along the scene of its ancient amphitheatre. Behind the now kneeling victims, a massive billowing flag of the Islamic State adorns the walls of the construction, reminiscent of the Third Reich's banners. The video is played over a nasheed, a hymn of Qur'anic inspiration, as are most other videos that will be discussed. Dramaturgical analysis of the setting, an ancient theatre, itself yields interesting further insights. For hundreds of years, the scene of the amphitheatre was used for similar acts of violence, such as gladiatorial combat, public executions, and festivals following military conquests. Centuries later, the site had become a hub for Syrian Shi'ites, rafidah, to congregate (Orlova 2018: 6). Simultaneously, ISIS manages to co-opt the cultural gravity of both its ancient and contemporary adversaries. What may at first seem a dramatized execution is demonstrably rooted in symbolism. Through this ceremonious process, ISIS manages to affirm its identity and political claims, in so doing erasing distinct cultural histories.

Further place-based violence is evident in ISIS's scorched earth tactics and ruination of the Mosul Museum. Such processes allow ISIS to create new socio-cultural contexts through which their claims can be imposed. In late 2014, ISIS systematized a scorched-earth policy in Kobane and Tell Abyad, burning thousands of acres of arable land (Harmanşah 2015: 171). Such cruelty displaces a sense of collective belonging and memory of the local Shi'ites and Kurds who had typically occupied both cities. Harmanşah (2015) furthers this argument, arguing that the objective is sectarian humiliation, an attempt to detach any pride in alternative cultural and historic views (Harmanşah 2015: 173). ISIS's destruction at the Mosul Museum drew further international condemnation. Immediately, UNESCO decried what it deemed iconoclasm. The widely shared videos show ISIS soldiers using power tools to destroy statues, while a narrator rejects the history encapsulated in the icons, belonging to those that 'were worshipped other than God' (PBS NewsHour 2015). To the Islamic State, any place or idol that operates outside of their alternative history and eschatological theology is not only a competitor but a threat that necessitates by-any-means-necessary retaliation. Evidently, it is necessary when interpreting ISIS's performative violence to not only focus on the 'what' but also the 'where' (Mustafa et al. 2013: 1113).

Lastly, ISIS's pre-historicism is observable in more conventionally violent performance. Throughout 2014, various reports detailed ISIS's crucifixion of perceived traitors to the Islamic State or to Islam. Images appeared of three men in Raqqa, a later five in Mosul, convicted of supplying information to the 'enemy' (Reuters 2016). The biblical character of such executions is distinctly pre-historicist. In another video, ISIS uses explosives to execute ten Syrian soldiers. The video opens in dramatic fashion: ISIS fighters, dressed in black, riding expertly on horses along a misty mountainside (Documenting Reality n.d.). As the production shows the 'heroes' arrive at a line of kneeling captives, a slow-motion scene shows a masterful, hands-free dismount. Following an address to the camera in Arabic, several small explosives are dug into the ground, at which point they are detonated. The beginning of the video inspires questions about the effect of performative violence on ISIS soldiers. Does the utilization of dramatic horse-back riding imply that this dramatized violence is intended to '[fulfill] a warrior fantasy amongst [ISIS] fighters?' (Hewitt 2018: 19).

ISIS's religious purity, specifically eschatological interpretation of Islam, and its alternative history is reflected in its place-based and physical violence. Through the destruction of icons, application of scorched earth tactics, and systematized executions with distinctly religious themes, ISIS demonstrates that among its chief concerns is to bring about the return of the *Mahdi*. Similarly, such analysis indicates that all further investigations of performative violence should not only examine who is being executed and why, but also where and how.

c) The Khalifa

Al-Baghdadi's 2014 declaration of a Caliphate also indicated a departure from prior traditions of Islamic activism; while groups like Hizbullah have purported to desire the establishment of a caliphate, they have also sought to work within existing political systems to achieve one, a process requiring generations. ISIS's aspirations of statehood respond to a sense of disorder and exists in a pseudo-medieval conceptualization. It seeks to establish a universal authority to overcome decentralized power centers, reminiscent of times 'when princely elites, regional warlords, or other territorially circumscribed power-brokers' ruled (Davis 2009: 227). Its conception of stately authority seeks to amend the typical modern formula, 'to make live and let die' with 'to make die and let live' (Orlova 2018: 8). Through performative violence, ISIS makes a practical claim: in every sense, ISIS is a more viable state than its competitors, the governments of Iraq and Syria.

A somewhat paradoxical explanation is that performative violence is utilized to accrue some semblance of legitimacy among ISIS's would-be populace. This essay has already demonstrated that performative violence is used as a tool to demonstrate ISIS's alternative historicism and religious purity. However, does ISIS's ability to impose violence upon others, when governments in Syria and Iraq become impotent and ineffectual, also give the group legitimacy? Recent scholarship (Davis 2009; Duyvesteyn 2016) has attempted to extend classical understandings of legitimate statehood to non-state actors to better reflect a globalized world. Repurposing Max Weber's classical theories of legitimacy, Duyvesteyn emphasizes that it is a culturally-informed conceptualization of legitimacy that is most accurate. It is a 'psychology property, institution, or social arrangement' confirmed when people acquiesce (Duyvesteyn 2016: 671). Additionally, the means through which new political actors justify their legitimacy is open for interpretation. Among the most common avenues for non-state actors to gain 'legalistic legitimacy in the Weberian sense' is through religion (Duyvesteyn 2016: 673). Religion is convenient because it provides access to established moral frameworks and useful institutionalized transnational networks (Baylouny 2020: 144). Second, a moral evaluation of what anarchical conditions would exist for those in Iraq and Syria should ISIS have not declared statehood deserves attention.

Of course, this delineation of performative violence and legitimacy of authority is paradoxical—the common conception is that the ability to use violence, but the decision to withhold it, lends legitimacy. However, when assessing the dire circumstances that defined Syria and Iraq in the early 2010s, the systematic marginalization of Sunnis in both countries, and the absent governments that claimed governance over the region, it becomes clear that its violence is considered necessary to ensure a group's security against its adversaries. It is this security guarantee that provides legitimacy. Baylouny notes that at the height of the 2006 war with Israel, opinions of Hizbullah among Palestinians improved as the group became more violent; for them, the ends justify the means (Baylouny 2020: 145). It is important to remember that Muslims and non-Muslims alike have voluntarily made hijrah to the Islamic State.

ISIS justifies its claims to legitimate sovereignty through practical and theological avenues. It provides social services, security, and governance far better than currently afforded by governments in Libya or Yemen. Further, ISIS's interpretation of takfir is again relevant. Intrinsic within the concept is the issue of sovereignty, God's absolute sovereignty, to determine authority and righteousness (Poljarevic 2021: 492). What remains ambiguous, however, is who is to interpret God's wishes. ISIS exploits this uncertainty, conflating its own authority with the divine. An equally unconventional understanding of ba'ya, allows ISIS to determine a Muslim's identity not upon communal perceptions of their piousness, but rather by his or her 'active theological and political allegiance and recognition of caliphal authority' (Poljarevic 2021: 503). Similarly, throughout Sunni history, the premise upon which siyasa shar'iyya (political commitment and legitimacy) was defined was reactive to 'various political circumstances and conflicts with moral, ethical, and political opinions' (Poljarevic 2021: 489). Returning to the Kharijites, the group was eventually excommunicated, much like ISIS had been, by proto-Sunni leaders who deemed them a danger to the Sunni social fabric (Poljarevic 2021: 489).

Concerning its statehood, ISIS's performative violence seeks to depict the false governments of the region as impotent others. Among the most repulsive instances of ISIS seeking to 'other' regional governments was displayed in its 2015 film, 'Healing the Hearts of the Disbelievers'. A twenty-five-minute production, the video's first half features a professional-style interview of detained Jordanian Air Force pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh detailing the specifics of his flight, taking off from Muqffaq al-Salti airbase in Jordan en route to Raqqah while sophisticated graphics provide a visual representation of his journey (Fox News 2015). Quick cuts alternate between footage of pro-government airstrikes on ISIS targets and bloodied men, women, and children. The production describes the airstrikes as not only an infringement upon the Islamic State's sovereignty, but also as an act of provocation against all pious Muslims. Kasasbeh, now dressed in orange, walks through the rubble of a town square, at which point he is transferred to a cage, head hanging, drenched in gasoline. After nearly two minutes of silence, interrupted only by the sound effect of a quickening and increasingly loud heartbeat, the executioner sets alight flammable material leading to the cage. As Kasasbeh is set alight, he stands solemnly with his face in his hands. Through the ability to impose punishment, ISIS claims a primary privilege of the state. Euben references Foucault's notion of sovereignty professed in *Discipline in Punish*, that which controls 'the power over life and death' is truly sovereign (Euben 2017: 1012).

A second video humiliating regional governments is 'Although the Disbelievers may Dislike It'. Its introduction uses traditional names for regional places and actors, labelling Syria as 'Sham', and the Syrian government as the Nusayri regime, referring to the early Alawite leader Ibn Nusayri (Euben 2017: 1020). The regime's aggression is central to the video, seeking to construct an in-group of Muslims hindered by their provocations. While images of air strikes appear, the narrator proclaims that ISIS 'will never forget our people in Houla [...] in Ghouta [...] in Baniyas' (Word Press Open Source, n.d.). Atop video of twenty-two Syrian prisoners, bent at the waist and led by ISIS soldiers through the desert, the narrator again states that ISIS will 'wage war against the safawi expansion [...] in Iraq [...] and the nusayriyyah in Sham' (Word Press Open Source, n.d.). Led by Emwazi, each ISIS officer takes a knife as a nasheed, likely the verse 'Soon, Soon,' grows ever louder. While the nasheed is evidently eschatological, speaking of the return of a 'wondrous light', it also discusses the Qur'anic verse 16:126 and its writings on qisas, a legal concept in Islamic jurisprudence: essentially, an eye for an eye (NPR 2017). Emwazi addresses the 'soldiers of Bashar' before the heads of each prisoner are ceremoniously sawed off (Word Press Open Source, n.d.). Artificial sounds of knives sawing, and sloshing liquid are heard as blood pools and the heads of the deceased are shown on their own backs. The video concludes with a montage of Muslims from across the globe declaring bay'a to the Islamic State, again reinforcing the significance of allegiance and stately authority to the production. Euben, when discussing the Foley and Sotloff cases, notes that the bodies of the deceased 'become the proverbial body politic' against which ISIS stakes its claims of statehood; this phenomenon is clearly observable in these cases directed against governments in Iraq and Syria (Euben 2017: 1016).

Finally, ISIS's use of public executions, a phenomenon long forgone in most of the world, are noteworthy. Again, these acts of performative violence, like most, are addressing a local Muslim audience. In cities like Raqqah and Mosul, the use of public executions for those deemed to violate ISIS's strict codification of Sharia Law became commonplace. A member of an 'anti-ISIS activist group' in Raqqa told CNN that such executions were so frequent that children had become entirely desensitized to the literal 'waterfall of blood' (CNN 2014). ISIS's public executions reinforce its distinctiveness from other manifestations of government for which state executions are usually undertaken in private (Orlova 2018: 5). ISIS seeks to fundamentally alter what is considered justifiable in a community—it is not its rafidah counterparts in Baghdad, Damascus, or Washington. Through performative violence, ISIS engages in state-building. In its interpretation of Islamic law, 'defense of a legitimate Islamic state' is not only justified, but 'an individual duty, fard 'ayn, that must be fulfilled by every single Muslim' (Euben 2017: 1016). Its glorification of violent 'justice' is akin to other young states attempting to consolidate their authority. Through ISIS's 'reclamation of power [as the] executioner,' it 'summons into existence a community' of Sunni men (Euben 2017: 1013). ISIS becomes a state.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to address a void in scholarship on ISIS and performative violence. It has critically analyzed common conceptions of performative violence as merely instruments of change, and reoriented post-Marxist explanations that emphasize violence as communication away from a Western-centric framework. Through this paradigm, it has argued that ISIS's performative violence aims to distinguish ISIS from other Muslim theological and political leadership by confirming the group's eschatological worldview and aspirations for legitimate statehood. Utilizing a wide conception of performative violence—including acts such as place-based violence—a correlation between ISIS's performative violence and such intentions was established.

How successful was this violent identity-building campaign? Despite the dissolution of its Khalifa, the tenants upon which the Islamic State was founded and operated remain prevalent. To date, ISIS-Khorasan, an Afghani affiliate, wages a brutal campaign against the Taliban in Kabul and throughout Afghanistan's North. In ways distinct from the Taliban, the group's ideology coalesces the pre-modern world with the modern; building a classical state using modern technology to depict performative violence.

References

Abdelaziz, Salma (2014). Death and desecration in Syria: Jihadist group crucifies bodies to send message. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/index.html

Alexander, Anne (January 2015). ISIS and counter-revolution: towards a Marxist analysis. *International Socialism* 145. https://isj.org.uk/isis-and-counter-revolution-towards-a-marxist-analysis/

Anonymous (n.d.). Although the Disbelievers Dislike It. WordPress Open Source. Retrieved on 09 January, 2022. https://videos.files.wordpress.com/w5MruRJ1/untitled-project-sd-480p_std.mp4

Baele, Stephane J., Gregorio Bettiza, Katharine A. Boyd and Travis G. Coan (2018). ISIS's Clash of Civilizations: Constructing the 'West' in Terrorist Propaganda. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 44(11), 887-919. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1599192

Baylouny, Anne Marie (2010). '7. Authority outside the State: Non-state Actors and New Institutions in the Middle East'. *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, edited by Anne Clunan and Trinkunas A. Harold, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 136-152. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804774499-009

Davis, Diane E. (2009). Non-State Armed Actors, New Imagined Communities, and Shifting Patterns of Sovereignty and Insecurity in the Modern World. *Contemporary Security Policy* 30(2), 221-245. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260903059757

Documenting Reality (n.d). ISIS Execute 10 Enemy Combatants with Explosives. DocumentingReality.com. Retrieved on 09 January, 2022. https://www.documentingreality.com/forum/f266/isis-execute-10-enemy-combatants-explosives-210114/

Duyvesteyn, Isabelle (2017). Rebels and Legitimacy; An Introduction. *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28(4-5), 660-685. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2017.1322337

Euben, Roxanne L. (2017). Spectacles of Sovereignty in Digital Time: ISIS Executions, Visual Rhetoric and Sovereign Power. *Perspectives on Politics* 15(4), 1007-1033. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717002134

Fox News (2015, Feb 03). WARNING, EXTREMELY GRAPHIC VIDEO: ISIS burns hostage alive. Fox News. Retrieved on 09 January, 2022. https://video.foxnews.com/v/4030583977001#sp=show-clips

Friis, Simone Molin (July 2015). Beyond anything we have ever seen: beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS. *International Affairs* 91(4), 725-746. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24539201

Gates, Scott and Sukanya Podder (2015). Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance, and the Islamic State. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9(4), 107-116. https://www.prio.org/publications/8913

Gambhir, Harleen K. (2014). Dabiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State. *Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder*, 1-12. https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Dabiq%20Backgrounder_Harleen%20Final_0.pdf

Gerges, F. (2005). Introduction: The Road to September 11 and After. In *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (pp. 16-42). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511512049.002

Harmanşah, Oműr (2015). ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78(3), 1-8. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.5615/neareastarch.78.3.0170

Hermanis, Alvis (2008). Speaking about Violence. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30(3), 8-10. https://www.jstor.org/stable/30135143

Hewitt, Maj A.J. (2018). Daesh and Statehood: Building the Narrative for a Caliphate through Violence. *Canadian Forces College*, 1-26. https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/405/305/hewitt.pdf

Juris, Jeffrey S. (2005). Violence Performed and Imagined: Militant Action, the Black Bloc and the Mass Media in Genoa. *Critique of Anthropology* 25(4), 413-432. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0308275X05058657

Kearns, Erin M. (2020). Terrorism as Communicative and Miscommunicate Violence. *Counterterrorism Yearbook 2020*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Mustafa, D., K.E. Brown, and M Tillotson (2013). Antipode to Terror: Spaces of Performative Politics. *Antipode* 45(5), 1110-1127. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12014

NPR (2017, Jun 29). As ISIS Gets Squeezed in Syria and Iraq, It's Using Music as a Weapon. *Parallels: NPR*. Retrieved on 09 January, 2022. https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/06/29/533803886/as-isis-gets-squeezed-in-syria-and-iraq-its-using-music-as-a-weapon

Orlova, Vasilina. (2018). ISIS: Active Ruination and Performativity of Public Execution. Research Article, 1-24. file:///C:/Users/nicho/Downloads/ISIS_ruins05%20(3).pdf

PBS NewsHour (2015, Feb 27). What Islamic State gains by destroying antiquities in Iraq. PBS NewsHour. Retrieved on 09 January, 2022. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/latest-attack-antiquities-islamic-state-aims-shock

Poljarevic, E. (2021). 'Chapter 21 Theology of Violence-oriented Takfirism as a Political Theory: The Case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)'. In *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004435544_026

Real Time with Bill Maher (2014). Ben Affleck, Sam Harris and Bill Maher Debate Radical Islam. YouTube, uploaded on 06 October 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vln9D81eO60

Reuters (2016). Crucifixions and vice patrols show Islamic State maintains Mosul grip. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-city-idUSKBN1341UJ

Speckhard, Anne and Molly D. Ellenberg (2020). ISIS in their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time—Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13(1), 82-127. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.1.1791

Tite, Philip L. (2015). Expressive Violence: An Introduction to Pain, Politics, and the Monstrous Other. *Journal of Religion and Violence* 3(2), 184-188. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26671460

Zech, S. T., & Kelly, Z. (2015). Off with their heads: The Islamic State and civilian beheadings. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 6(2), 83-93.