

Chapter 1

ISIS AND THE THEATRE OF HORROR

The Pornography of Jihadism

In his 2008 book *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism*, the historian Michael Burleigh observes in passing that jihadist martyrdom videos have a similar structure to porn movies. He doesn't dwell on the point, although he does allude to the climactic "money shot": in the jihadist case, the moment when the bomber detonates his explosives.¹

In light of the many ISIS propaganda videos that have circulated this summer [2014], Burleigh's point deserves further analysis and refinement. One of the most striking aspects of the more violent among these videos—especially the beheading videos of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff—is their pornographic quality. They are primal and obscene and gratuitous. And, like most modern porn videos, they are instantly accessible at the click of a mouse. Indeed, ISIS videos have attracted such a large audience online that the U.S. State Department recently launched its own YouTube channel to counter their appeal, superimposing words of mocking condemnation over graphic images of ISIS's brutality, entirely missing the point that ISIS appeals to potential recruits in part *because* of its exorbitant violence.

Jihadists proclaim a fierce opposition to Western modernity, condemning it as soulless, corrupt, materialistic and depraved. But this has not prevented them from exploiting modern technological advances in fields from weaponry to communications. Nor, evidently, has it stopped them from watching porn. The stash of X-rated material recovered from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad after his killing by U.S. commandos in May 2011² may have raised eyebrows among some Western journalists, but it was scarcely news in counterterrorism circles. C. Christine Fair, an assistant professor at Georgetown University, wrote on her Facebook page at the time that the U.S. government "has recovered terabytes of the stuff from terrorist computers."³

In any case, the conventions of jihadists' hardcore film productions unmistakably resemble those of porn. And just as porn has evolved over time, so too has the jihadist propaganda video.

In a 2001 essay on the American porn industry, the British novelist Martin Amis makes a distinction between two types of mainstream American

pornography: features and gonzo. “Features,” Amis explains, “are sex films with some sort of claim to the ordinary narrative: characterisation, storyline.”⁴ Or, as a porn industry executive explained to Amis regarding features: “We don’t just show you people fucking ... We show you why they’re fucking.” Gonzo, by contrast, doesn’t: “It shows you people fucking,” Amis writes, “without concerning itself with why they’re fucking.” He concludes: “Gonzo porno is gonzo: way out there. The new element is violence.”

Violent jihadist propaganda videos can similarly be classified in terms of features and gonzo, with narrative-rich depictions of typically goal-oriented violence in the former category, and narrative-light displays of ostentatious destruction and killing in the latter.

The origins of jihadist features can be traced to the wave of martyrdom videos that came out of Palestine in the mid-1990s. These productions tended to be long—some running to more than an hour—and obeyed a narrative of revenge in which the weak and righteous ultimately triumph over the powerful and unjust. Invariably, the movie featured a bomber whose family had been killed by the Israelis and who plays the role of avenger and martyr. You knew where he was headed and how it would end, but you also knew why, because the bomber himself would tell you: He would look into the camera and read his scripted testimony.

These videos are commemorative and celebratory, focusing on the life and sacrifice of the martyr, who is lionized for his courage and honor. In *The Road to Martyrs’ Square*, Anne Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg’s rich ethnography of Palestinian suicide bombing, the authors write, “You will never understand anything about the lure of martyrdom, the centerpiece of intifada cosmology, until you realize that someone who has decided to take that path as his own sees himself not only as an avenging Ninja, but also as something of a movie star, maybe even a sex symbol—a romantic figure at the very least, larger than life.”⁵ Martyrdom videos, which command huge audiences in Palestine, are instrumental in promoting and sustaining this whole illusion.

Gonzo productions are of a more recent vintage and appear to have their origins in Iraq just after the American-led invasion in 2003. These videos are short—some lasting no more than 12 seconds—and low-budget, making use of a single camera and only the most rudimentary editing skills, mirroring the rank amateurishness that is a hallmark of gonzo porn. They typically depict improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on American or Iraqi government forces, but they don’t overly concern themselves with why those attacks are happening. Rather, the emphasis is on the spectacle of destruction itself, often replayed over and over, mirroring a technique utilized for the “money shot” in gonzo porn. Reviewing a random sample of videos produced by 10 insurgent groups in Iraq between 2004 and 2006, Arab Salem of the University of

Arizona's Artificial Intelligence Lab and his co-authors reported in 2008 that a large proportion showed IED or rocket attacks. These videos, they wrote, were "often filmed in real-time"—showing attacks as they happened—"instructional [taking the viewer inside the planning and attack execution process] ... and low budget."⁶ Nine of the 10 groups they examined produced these kinds of videos.

Like Palestinian martyrdom videos, gonzo "shorts" are in a sense celebratory, but the object of celebration isn't a human life and its passage into paradise; it is a human death or several human deaths. There is an overtly sadistic element to these videos, a glorifying of destruction for its own sake. In some, you can hear the enraptured voice of the faceless cameraman,⁷ much like in point-of-view gonzo porn movies before and after the finale. These videos are designed to inspire both jihadist foot-soldiers and potential recruits. Much like porn, they also appear tailored to a mass audience with a limited attention span.

ISIS's visual propaganda crosses, and in some cases combines, the categories of features and gonzo. There are features like the technically sophisticated *Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah*, where the emphasis is on brotherly solidarity, faith and Islamic justice. The message in this and similar features centers firmly on the goal rather than the means of jihadist violence, yet all the while the promise of menace—many of the foreign fighters interviewed are brandishing machine guns—is never far from the surface.

In another video [*Clanging of the Swords, Part 4*], which blurs the feature-gonzo boundary, there is some stunning aerial footage of the city of Fallujah and embedded reportage of ISIS's recent road to power in northern Iraq.⁸ But there are also some truly jaw-dropping montages of executions filmed with the most basic hand-held cameras. This hour-long video fuses the high production values of jihadist features with the raw and anarchic spirit of gonzo.⁹

And then there are ISIS's out-and-out gonzo productions. These are short, low-budget and decidedly thin on narrative. The Sotloff video released in September [2014] is the latest example of this shocking genre. In both this and the Foley video, the executioner gives a brief explanation for what he is about to do—"I'm back, Obama, and I'm back because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State, because of your insistence on continuing your bombings"¹⁰—but the focus is less on the rationale than on the grisly act itself. It is no accident that the killer in each video beheaded his victim with a short blade and deployed the sawing motion favored by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006: demonstrations of raw fanaticism, power and unrestrained brutality. It is a paradigmatic example of what Mark Juergensmeyer has described, in his book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious*

Violence, as “performance violence”: a public, theatrical, “symbolic statement aimed at providing a sense of empowerment,” and not at achieving any strategic goal.¹¹

In recent months, there has also been a proliferation of amateur violent propaganda from ISIS and its supporters, ranging from photographs of bodily mutilation to grainy videos of executions filmed on cell phones. This visual and sickeningly macabre material is made and distributed by ISIS fighters themselves and represents a purer kind of gonzo. A few weeks ago, for example, Abdel Majed Abdel Bary, a 23-year-old from Britain, uploaded to Twitter a picture of himself holding up a severed head. The caption read: “Chillin’ with my homie or what’s left of him.”¹² Other jihadists have similarly made use of social media to publicize their atrocities.

Zarqawi was a pioneer of this particular brand of gonzo. His network, originally known as Tawhid and Jihad, publicly released more than 10 beheading videos between September 20 and October 7, 2004, in addition to the video, circulated in May of that same year, believed to show Zarqawi himself beheading the American businessman Nicholas Berg.¹³ Given ISIS’s promise to behead more Western civilians, these kinds of videos may yet become the group’s signature production.

Like gonzo porn, ISIS’s beheading videos are way out there. But the new element isn’t violence. The new element is degradation. Walter Laqueur, the esteemed historian and luminary of terrorism studies, writes of the “barbarization of terrorism,” where the enemy “not only has to be destroyed, he (or she) also has to suffer torment.”¹⁴ ISIS represents the apotheosis of this development, completing the degradation of the enemy by filming the whole process. But the group’s propaganda also signifies a new phase in how terrorist acts are communicated and disseminated to the wider world. Forty years ago, the international terrorism expert Brian M. Jenkins remarked that “terrorism is theatre.”¹⁵ What Jenkins could not have envisaged at the time was the speed and ease with which images of terror can now be produced and distributed. Nor could he have imagined just how prevalent and grotesquely pornographic terrorist theater has become, and how radically gonzo the groups are who stage it.

The Atlantic, September 12, 2014

Islamic State’s Willing Executioners

We knew it was coming, because the masked killer in the David Haines beheading video, released three weeks ago by Islamic State, warned us that it would be.¹⁶ But it is still profoundly shocking. We know the purported rationale. “We take this opportunity to warn those governments that enter this evil alliance of America against the Islamic State to back off and leave our

people alone,” declared the killer in the Steven Sotloff video.¹⁷ But a rationale doesn’t kill. A human being does, often in concert with other human beings.

The conventional wisdom in liberal-dovish circles is that violence is “socially determined,” a product of deeper historical, economic or cultural forces over and above the individual.

A second conventional liberal wisdom is that human beings are fundamentally violence-averse and are by nature naturally predisposed to cooperation rather than conflict. When or if violence occurs, it is the corrupting nature of society to which we must look for blame, not our human nature.

The emergence of ISIS and its intensifying barbarism over recent months—the televised beheadings, the mass executions and the brutalization of children—invites us to reconsider these twin liberal pieties and to confront some unpalatable truths: namely, that not only are we hard-wired for killing, but are intoxicated by the killing spectacle and the God-like power it radiates.

The idea that violence is shaped by the broader social context in which it occurs is by no means false and can tell us much about rates of violence in any given place and time. Yet it is ill-equipped to explain the specific tenor and nature of ISIS’s murderous violence. Certainly, there is an instrumental logic to it: awesome violence has worked for ISIS, terrifying Iraqi government forces into abandoning their posts in the north of the country and propelling it to the front pages of international newspapers and prime-time television. But there is also a richly expressive quality to ISIS’s violence which resists reduction to a means-ends logic. ISIS has killed not just with savagery, but with a demonic creativity, energy and exuberance. This is vividly in evidence in its execution videos and the recent photos uploaded to twitter of ISIS fighters posing with severed heads.¹⁸

In *Ordinary Men*, a classic study of Reserve Police Battalion 101’s role in the open-air slaughter of countless helpless Jewish civilians, of both sexes and all ages, in occupied Poland between 1941 and 1942, Christopher Browning found that 80–90 percent of the Battalion’s 500 conscripts—men from all walks of life and many middle-aged—participated in the killing.¹⁹ According to Browning, the men were anti-Semitic, but they were not fanatics. Far more important than ideology, he contends, was conformity to the group or peer pressure and the desire for praise, prestige and career advancement. Equally important, too, was the fear of social ridicule, of being seen to be weak or cowardly for not killing.

In *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Daniel Goldhagen rebukes Browning’s study for failing to explain the initiative, zeal and cruelty of those who participated in the killings.²⁰ It is a strong critique.

Primo Levi writes of “useless violence,” violence “with the sole purpose of creating pain” and “always disproportionate to the purpose itself.”²¹ Levi recognizes what today’s liberal doves don’t want to see: that killing can be a

drug which doesn't just inflict death and terror, but intoxicates the people who do it. As Professor Joanna Bourke has argued, killing can be a divine delight.²² ISIS alerts us once again to this demonic secret.

The social psychologist Albert Bandura, a professor emeritus at Stanford University, argues that "it requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce heinous deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can be led to do extraordinarily cruel things."²³ Really? Everything we know about the Western recruits to ISIS suggests otherwise: they were not coerced or indoctrinated into joining, but actively signed up on their own initiative. As Shiraz Maher, a Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Radicalization, has pointed out, many are "self-starters" or "self-radicalizers."²⁴ They are there because they want to be there.

Abdel Majed Abdel Bary, a 23-year-old from London, whom British Intelligence officials believe²⁵ may be the masked killer in the beheading videos of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines and, most recently, Alan Henning²⁶ was not "led" into Syria and ISIS. And he was not "led" to saw off the heads of three innocent civilians, as is now suspected. None of this was forced on him. He willed it. And he must have worked very hard for it, catapulting himself to the elite status of ISIS's beheader-in-chief.

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Abdel Bary's conviction that doing jihad and killing infidels is right. But there is also no doubting just how empowering all this must be for a former non-entity from Britain. He was once a minor aspiring rapper. Now he is a holy warrior who has made it to the big time.

"I'm back, Obama," the masked killer said in the Sotloff beheading video. Just how much must he have loved uttering those words.

"Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. *I* happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences," proclaims Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*:²⁷ a sentiment Abdel Bary would no doubt share—and would probably love to say, too.

And we can be certain that there are many more like Abdel Bary, waiting in the wings, desperate to prove their worth and become the new rock stars of global jihad.

We need to stop talking about indoctrination and start talking about intoxication and how spectacular violence, and the power and prestige and notoriety it confers on those who can master it, is its own cause.

"We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint," says one of the protagonists of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain*, adding that this is "inherent ... defining."²⁸ Among the innumerable casualties of ISIS's violence is the wishful idea that this isn't so and that the fury comes from outside.

The Jerusalem Post, October 6, 2014

ISIS and the Intimate Kill

It isn't all shock and gore. Sometimes, it's mock and bore. Consider the video that ISIS released a few weeks ago [October 27, 2014] of the British hostage John Cantlie "reporting" from the besieged town of Kobani on the Syrian-Turkish border.²⁹ The video's theme is the unreliability of Western media coverage of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, expressed in a tone of mocking contempt. The larger theme is the invincibility of ISIS and the duplicity and weakness of the West. The video opens with some striking aerial footage of war-ravaged Kobani, filmed from a drone. But it's a big yawn thereafter.

On Sunday [November 16, 2014], however, ISIS released what is arguably its most horrifying beheading video [*Although the Disbelievers Dislike it*] to date,³⁰ reverting to the shock-and-gore doctrine that has come to define it. The viewer doesn't see the actual beheading of American aid worker Peter Kassig, but is shown his severed head, lying at the feet of the suspected British terrorist known as "Jihadi John." The scene is preceded by the mass beheadings of 22 men whom ISIS claims are members of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's armed forces. The victims are paraded about by knife-wielding jihadists and the camera lingers on the hostages' faces as they kneel, stricken with terror. The pounding of heartbeats commences, just one of the video's many special effects. Then the cutting starts, all at once. Unlike in ISIS's previous beheading videos, there is no merciful cutaway. The viewer sees everything.

It is worth pausing to consider the logic behind this staged mass beheading and how it differs from the notorious doctrine that defined the opening stages of the 2003 war in Iraq: "shock and awe."³¹ Comparing the two tells us something important about ISIS and its reverence of the intimate kill—and ours, too.

Face-to-face killing isn't the same as killing at a distance. It is sensually different. And it is harder.

When the navigator of the *Enola Gay*, the first plane to drop an atomic bomb, returned from that historic mission, he recalled that he "had a bite and a few beers and hit the sack."³² The death and destruction that his mission visited on the Japanese city of Hiroshima was staggering, resulting in around 135,000 casualties.³³ Yet Theodore Van Kirk claimed to have lost not a single night's sleep over his actions.³⁴ Whereas when William Manchester, a U.S. Marine and veteran of World War II, killed a Japanese soldier at close range, he vomited over himself and was convulsed by feelings of remorse and shame.³⁵

Many scholars agree that violence is difficult, and that killing is especially so. In *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* Randall Collins, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, writes that "everyone thinks violence is easy to perform, whether one brags about it, fears it, or hopes to eliminate it."³⁶ But

the reality, Collins argues, is very different: “It is hard ... and most people are not good at it, including those who are doing the bragging and swaggering.”³⁷ This is because violence goes against people’s “physiological hard-wiring.” Killing at close range, he says, is especially challenging: “There appears to be a special difficulty in confronting another person face to face and sticking him with a knife-edged blade.”³⁸

The idea that violence is difficult was first developed by S. L. A. Marshall, a U.S. Army historian during World War II. Marshall found, through research that remains controversial,³⁹ that typically only 15 percent of frontline troops fired their guns in combat, reaching 25 percent in the most effective units. Collins, who draws on Marshall, argues that the main barrier to killing is what he calls “confrontational tension,” and that what soldiers most fear in combat situations is not the prospect of dying but of killing. “It is easier to put up with injury and death than it is to inflict it,” he writes.⁴⁰

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, agrees: “There is within most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man.”⁴¹ According to Grossman, distance is the crucial variable in killing: the nearer the “kill target,” the harder it is to do, whereas “from a distance, I can deny your humanity; and from a distance, I cannot hear your screams.”⁴²

Or as the eminent Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it in his classic study *Modernity and the Holocaust*, “It is difficult to harm a person we touch. It is somewhat easier to afflict pain upon a person we only see at a distance. It is still easier in the case of a person we only hear. It is quite easy to be cruel towards a person we neither see nor hear.”⁴³

In recent months, ISIS fighters have seemingly turned this scholarly consensus on its head. They have made killing look easy. And they have mastered the art of the intimate kill. The staged beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and, now, Peter Kassig are shocking examples of this. But they are only the tip of a colossal iceberg of depravity and sadism.

From the outside, the group’s actions look insane. But they aren’t. There appears to be a point to the brutality. It is meant to be polarizing. It is meant to force people to take sides. It is meant to provoke a wider war—a war that ISIS is convinced it will win.⁴⁴

“We must make this battle very violent,” wrote the Islamist strategist Abu Bakr Naji in his 2004 book *The Management of Savagery*. Naji—whose thinking paralleled that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has since morphed into ISIS—argued that merciless violence was necessary for the creation of a “pure” Sunni caliphate. Softness, he warned,

spelled failure, citing the example of the Companions of the Prophet, who “burned [people] with fire, even though it is odious, because they knew the effect of rough violence in times of need.”⁴⁵

The conventional wisdom holds that ISIS’s savagery will be its undoing—that it will alienate ordinary Muslims, and that without their support the group cannot succeed. But what this view overlooks is that ISIS’s jihad, as its progenitor Zarqawi well understood, isn’t about winning hearts and minds. It is about *breaking* hearts and minds. ISIS doesn’t want to convince its detractors and enemies. It wants to command them, if not destroy them altogether. And its strategy for achieving this goal seems to be based on destroying their will through intimate killing. This, in part, is what the group’s staged beheadings are about: they subliminally communicate ISIS’s proficiency in the art of the intimate kill. And this terrifies many people, because they sense just how hard it is to do.

The beheadings also serve as a dramatic counterpoint to al-Qaeda’s use of remote IEDs in attacks, and to Western shock-and-awe-style military campaigns. The subtext of the videos appears to be: *You—America and your allies—kill with drones and missiles. We—the true Muslims—kill with our bare hands. You hide behind your military hardware and lack the courage to fight. We stand here tall, holding aloft our swords and the Quran. We will conquer you because our will is greater than yours, because there is nothing we will not do in defense of our just and holy cause.*

One could argue that there is precedent in Islamic theology and history for this kind of ruthlessness.⁴⁶ But one must also acknowledge that there is precedent for it also in the “civilized” West. Consider the logic behind the Allied shock-and-awe “area bombings” of German cities during World War II, where thousands of innocent civilians were murdered for the purpose of ending the war and stopping the advance of fascism in Europe.⁴⁷ Or the logic behind the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “The policy of attacking the civilian population in order to induce an enemy to surrender or to damage his morale,” wrote the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, “seems to have been widely accepted in the civilized world.”⁴⁸

ISIS has transmuted the shock of intimate killing into a mythical aura. A Kurdish man fleeing ISIS and the Syrian town of Kobani, for instance, recently told a British newspaper, “IS are animals. They’re not human. They have a bloodlust the like of which I’ve never seen—it’s as if they enjoy killing. They revel in cutting heads off—it’s like their trademark.”⁴⁹

ISIS is terrible and terrifying. Despite its recent setbacks on the battlefield,⁵⁰ this is now the dominant media narrative about the group both within and outside the Muslim world. It’s exactly the narrative ISIS wants to promote.

The Atlantic, November 17, 2014

ISIS and the War on Children

So this is the new face of jihadist terror: an angelic-looking boy, with a tiny frame and delicate features, no more than 10 years old. In the video [released on January 13, 2015⁵¹], in some ways arguably ISIS's most shocking yet, we see him, shadowed by a bearded jihadist, walk toward two men—and shoot them in the back of the head. The men, who identify themselves in the video as Jambulut Mamayev and Sergey Ashimov and whom ISIS accuses of spying for Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), are at least three times the age of their assassin. The video, which is entitled "Uncovering an enemy within" and has yet to be independently verified, ends with the young executioner raising his hand up in triumph before trampling over the corpses and walking away.

It is the same boy who featured in an earlier ISIS video showing the training of child soldiers in Kazakhstan. In that video, he introduces himself, in Kazakh, as "Abdullah" and says, "I will be the one who slaughters you, O kuffar [non-believer]. I will be a mujahid, inshallah."⁵²

Barely a week goes by now without some terrible jihadist-sponsored slaughter. Last month [December 2014], it was the massacre of 148 people, including 132 children, at the Army School in Peshawar. The killers, sent by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), systematically gunned down the children before "martyring" their own squalid lives.⁵³ Jihadists have murdered children before, but rarely on this scale.⁵⁴ The attacks provoked an outpouring of grief and anger in Pakistan, as well as strident international condemnation.

This month [January 2015], just over half way through, has brought more terrible news: the killings in France last week at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and in a kosher supermarket and, at the same time, Boko Haram's deadliest attack to date, in which more than 2,000 Nigerians are reported to have been killed.⁵⁵

It has also brought horrifying news of what may yet become an emergent trend in jihadist circles: the weaponization of children. In addition to the release of ISIS's video with the Kazakh boy, on January 10, a girl believed to be around 10 approached the entrance to a crowded market in Maiduguri, a city in Nigeria's Borno State, and detonated the explosives attached to her body, killing herself and at least 19 others.⁵⁶

We have known for some time that ISIS, in addition to kidnapping and sexually abusing women and girls from Iraqi minorities, has been brutalizing young children in its bases in Syria and Iraq. According to a United Nations report published in November, children in Raqqa, ISIS's stronghold in Syria, have been forced to watch screenings of execution videos and to participate in public stonings.⁵⁷ It is also widely known that ISIS has created a large and sophisticated apparatus for recruiting and indoctrinating children, deploying

boys as young as 14 to fight in battles and to carry out suicide missions.⁵⁸ However, it is deeply shocking to see the harvest of this brutalization so soon and in High Definition.

The brutalization of children in war is not new, of course. The Taliban, for example, was well-versed in the fundamentals of it, forcing children to watch public beheadings, just as ISIS has done. Nor is the jihadification of children exactly novel. In Palestinian society, for example, it is perfectly common to see children in propaganda material brandishing weapons that literally dwarf them.

But the Taliban, however depraved, didn't use children as executioners, much less film them carrying out executions. Although Palestinian insurgent groups have recruited teenagers as young as 16 for suicide missions, they have never sought to enlist children as young as 10. And in stark counterpoint to ISIS, Palestinian insurgents have been very keen to deny any such accusations.

The deployment of pre-pubescent children in suicide missions is an innovation. And so is the casting of a young child as executioner in a jihadist snuff movie. It is yet another taboo broken, yet another boundary crossed.

Classical Islam is clear and emphatic on the point: Killing innocents is an absolute moral wrong. The Quran (5:32) holds, "We decreed to the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind." According to one accredited hadith, the Prophet Mohammed is reported to have said, "Set out for jihad in the name of Allah and for the sake of Allah. Do not lay hands on the old verging on death, on women, children and babes. Do not steal anything from the booty and collect together all that falls to your lot in the battlefield and do good, for Allah loves the virtuous and the pious."

Over the past decade and a half, jihadists have effectively rendered the prohibition against killing innocents all but meaningless, widening the scope of "combatant" to include anyone who offers the remotest support to their enemies. Al-Qaeda, for example, included within the category "combatant" not only all military personnel and their staff but also all voting-age Americans. Even so, it never defined children as a legitimate target for attack.

Al-Qaeda pushed the boundaries by taking its jihad to the global stage and justifying the murder of civilians in distant "infidel regimes." The new generation of jihadists has pushed the envelope even further, not only by justifying the murder of children, but also by turning them into murderers. Their jihad is a punk jihad, where anything goes and where the only real currency is spectacular and graphic violence.

The killings last month in Peshawar represent a dramatic ratcheting up of jihadist permissiveness, sending the terrifying message that children are now

legitimate targets for attack. This month's carnage in Nigeria and the release of the ISIS video featuring a child as chief executioner introduces yet another layer to the miasma of jihadist permissiveness that is menacing both Muslim and non-Muslim societies.

Children are now on the front line as never before, both as victims and as perpetrators of jihadist horror. It is hard—and disquieting—to imagine what the next horrifying innovation will be. But you can bet ISIS and their co-thinkers are working on it right now.

National Post, January 20, 2015

ISIS and the Logic of Shock

On Tuesday [February 3, 2015], ISIS released another snuff movie: the ritualized burning to death of a captured Jordanian pilot.⁵⁹ It is arguably the most shocking ISIS video to date. But then *every* major video ISIS puts out is *arguably the most shocking ISIS video to date*. The film of the mass beheading of some 22 Syrians last year, which ended with the display of the severed head of an American aid worker, was, at the time it was released, arguably the most shocking ISIS video to date. And so was the video, released last month, featuring a child as chief executioner in the slaughter of two men confessing at gunpoint to be Russian spies.

This is the demonic nature of the Islamic State's terrorism: Each act of atrocity must eclipse the previous one. The group's brand of terrorism is like a drug: You need to keep ramping up the dose to sustain the pleasure high. For ISIS and organizations like it, that high is global publicity.

In a classic paper on terrorism and religion published in 1984, David C. Rapoport wrote that terrorism is "a crime for the sake of publicity. When a bomb explodes, people take notice; the event attracts more attention than a thousand speeches or pictures."⁶⁰ In an *Atlantic* article two years later, Conor Cruise O'Brien similarly remarked that:

The combating of terrorism is not helped by bombastic speeches at high levels, stressing what a monstrous evil terrorism is and that its elimination is to be given the highest priority. I'm afraid that the most likely terrorist reaction to such a speech, whether it comes from a President, a Secretary of State, or other important official, is: "You see, they *have* to pay attention to us now. We are hurting them. Let's give them more of the same." And it all helps with recruitment. A movement that is denounced by a President is in the big time. And some kind of big time is what is most wanted by the aggressive and frustrated, who constitute the pool on which terrorist movements can draw.⁶¹

ISIS has been repeatedly denounced by President Obama, as well as roundly condemned by many other world leaders, including, most recently, King Abdullah of Jordan, who castigated it as a “deviant criminal group” and vowed to take revenge for the murder of the pilot Muath al-Kaseasbeh.⁶² ISIS has thus made it to the big time, and continues to draw large numbers of recruits from a wide spectrum of countries.

Rapoport’s point that terrorism is “a crime for the sake of publicity” remains as true today as it was two decades ago. But it is not guaranteed that “[w]hen a bomb explodes”—or a shooting occurs—people take notice.” For one thing, it depends on the identity of the victims. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France last month, claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, captured headlines all over the world. In marked contrast, Boko Haram’s reported slaughter of hundreds of civilians in Nigeria days before didn’t generate nearly the same level of global media attention.⁶³ This dynamic helps explain why ISIS has invested so much effort in staging carefully choreographed and slickly produced execution videos of Western hostages—and those, like Muath al-Kaseasbeh, participating in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State—and why, conversely, it has expended so little effort in creating its many grainy and chaotic video montages showing the execution of Iraqi Shiites.

The film of Kaseasbeh’s execution has global shock value, but one also senses that it was an intimately personal project for ISIS. In recent months, coalition forces have been bombing the Islamic State in its strongholds. This is starting to hurt. And for much of the video, the dominant narrative is of humanitarian suffering caused by coalition bombing raids, graphically symbolized in footage of charred babies and children. The message, to the world as well as the people in the Islamic State’s dominion, seems to be: *We will take revenge for the hellish inferno unleashed on us by unleashing it on our tormentors in turn.*

Frantz Fanon theorized in *The Wretched of the Earth* that violent action can be viewed as a form of catharsis for the perpetrator, particularly when the perpetrator feels he has suffered grave abuses or been condemned to live under tyrannical oppression. “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force,” he wrote. “It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction, it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”⁶⁴ This offers insight into ISIS’s reported decision to publicly screen its latest video in Raqqa,⁶⁵ an Islamic State stronghold in Syria and a target of coalition aerial firepower—where one presumes catharsis is urgently needed.

Another qualification to Rapoport’s point is in order: When a bomb explodes, people are apt to take notice, *but not for long*. Since Rapoport published his article, the rise of the Internet has meant that there is simply too much information out there vying for attention. The web has undoubtedly been a boon to terrorist groups, helping them disseminate their messages to

an ever-wider audience. But it has also hindered them in that they must now compete with the world's cacophony of other voices. And this, unfortunately, has served to reinforce the demonic logic of ISIS's brand of terrorism, which requires not only surpassing previous atrocities, but trumping other global news events.

O'Brien remarked in his *Atlantic* article that "one surefire way of attracting instantaneous worldwide attention through television is to slaughter a considerable number of human beings, in a spectacular fashion, in the name of a cause." This, too, needs updating: Today, to borrow from O'Brien, one surefire way of attracting instantaneous worldwide attention through the global media is to slaughter a considerable number of *children* in the name of a cause. The Pakistani Taliban, which deliberately targeted an Army School in Peshawar last December [2014], has apparently embraced this new axiom. Another alternative is to deploy kids as terrorist assassins—to use them as suicide bombers or executioners in propaganda movies, as ISIS has done. Another boundary crossed, another headline guaranteed.

This, as the last point suggests, isn't just a quantity issue in terms of people killed. It is also a quality issue relating to the *how* of killing. It is killing with sadistic and extravagant creativity, in High Definition. This is perhaps the main thrust of the inexorable logic of today's terrorist organizations. And no group appears to understand this better than ISIS's leaders, who first shocked the world by staging the beheadings of Western hostages, using not swords, as is customary in the Islamic tradition, but six-inch knives—so as to prolong the agony of their victims; who kept the momentum going by evolving to the horror show of staged mass beheadings; who pushed the envelope yet further by creating a video in which a child is used as executioner. And now the group has produced the theatrical spectacle of burning alive a Jordanian pilot. The film is arguably the most shocking ISIS video to date—until the next one.

The Atlantic, February 6, 2015

Why It's So Hard to Stop ISIS Propaganda

"We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media," Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's second-in-command, purportedly wrote in a 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who led al-Qaeda in Iraq at the time.⁶⁶ The previous year, Zarqawi's network, originally known as Tawhid and Jihad, had publicly released more than 10 beheading videos, including a video believed to show Zarqawi himself beheading the American businessman Nicholas Berg. This was bad publicity. Zawahiri cautioned his hot-headed field commander, and risked alienating Muslims.

Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, but the hyper-violent form of sectarian jihad he pioneered emphatically lives on in the form of ISIS, the direct descendent of al-Qaeda in Iraq. While the group hasn't exactly followed Zawahiri's counsel about winning hearts and minds, it has proven fantastically adept at exploiting new social media to disseminate its message. Indeed, it is no exaggeration—although it may now be clichéd—to say that as well as being one of the most savage terrorist groups in the world today, ISIS also has the slickest propaganda. Its media arm al-Hayat has produced hundreds of films, ranging from three-minute beheading videos to hour-long features improbably combining elements of travelogue, historical documentary and atrocity porn. Many are high-quality productions involving Hollywood-style techniques and special effects. One video, titled *Clanging of the Swords, Part 4*, drew particular praise from the late *New York Times* media critic David Carr, who wrote, “Anybody who doubts the technical ability of ISIS might want to watch a documentary of Fallujah that includes some remarkable drone camera work.”⁶⁷

“Media is more than half the battle” also happens to be the motto of the U.S. State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), founded in 2010 as the world’s first government-sponsored enterprise not run by an intelligence agency to counter online jihadist propaganda.⁶⁸ The phrase is emblazoned across the opening PowerPoint slide in all CSCC presentations, according to the CSCC’s coordinator Alberto Fernandez. Alongside this quote is a second one, taken from the purported memoir of the American jihadist Omar Hammami, who until his death in 2013 was a leader in the Somali Islamist militant group al-Shabab: “The war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm, and knives.” Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sounded a similar theme in describing the office’s mission a year after it was founded; it was vital, she said, to diminish the appeal of terrorism, and the CSCC was focused on “undermining terrorist propaganda and dissuading potential recruits.”

“It’s not about Louis Armstrong and isn’t jazz great and America loves Muslims,” Fernandez told me over a coffee recently, describing what he saw as the general tenor of previous public-relations efforts at the State Department after 9/11. “It’s not about quoting the secretary of state, because that’s boring, that’s lame. Our focus is not on the positive message. What we do is counter-messaging. We’re the guys in the political campaign that [do] negative advertising. We’re in people’s faces.”

Despite joining the fray relatively late, the CSCC is now at the forefront of what Hammami and Fernandez have both called “the war of narratives,” and has produced well over 50,000 online “engagements” in four languages—Arabic, Urdu, Somali and English. An engagement in the State Department’s

terminology can be anything from one of the hundreds of “mash-up” videos the team assembles out of pre-existing footage—in many cases from ISIS’s own videos—to tweets or graphics highlighting the depredations and hypocrisies of the jihadists.

In addition to this, the CSCC’s so-called digital outreach team (DOT) crashes various online forums to troll ISIS sympathizers and regularly jumps onto pro-ISIS Twitter hashtags. For example, in April last year, an ISIS supporter created an Arabic hashtag translating to “#accomplishmentsofISIS.” Almost immediately the Arabic DOT used the same hashtag to post a series of sarcastic references to ISIS’s “accomplishments” at, variously, “starving people of #Aleppo,” “destroying mosques in #Raqqa,” “crucifixion of young men,” and “squatting, looting and damaging homes.” All of these messages linked to incriminating YouTube videos detailing ISIS atrocities in Syria. The CSCC has even entered into dialogue, if it can be called that, with actual jihadists, including Hammami, with whom Fernandez said it “exchanged barbs” in Arabic over Twitter. “He was clearly troubled,” Fernandez recalled. “I felt sorry for him. He was killed by al-Shabab, not the Americans. We actually referred to his death in one of our videos—‘see what happens if you join these guys.’”

But unlike their counterparts at the hard military end of the battle against ISIS, the American foot soldiers in the war of narratives are at a considerable disadvantage relative to their jihadist adversary.

ISIS has beheading videos. The CSCC doesn’t. Beheading videos are shocking and repugnant. But they are also weirdly fascinating—and they go viral for this reason. The CSCC’s videos, by and large, are not shocking or repugnant, still less fascinating—and don’t go viral for this reason. ISIS’s métier is shock and gore, whereas the CSCC’s, to put it unkindly, is more mock and bore, more Fred Flintstone than Freddy Krueger. Shock and gore, needless to say, is where the action is—and hence where the Internet traffic tends to go. “You’re never going to be able to match the power of their outrageousness,” Fernandez said, conceding this disadvantage.

ISIS has a vast network of “fanboys,” as its virtual supporters are widely and derisively known, who disseminate the group’s online propaganda.⁶⁹ (ISIS ennobles them with the title “knights of the uploading.”) They are dedicated, self-sufficient, and even, Fernandez said, occasionally funny. And they are everywhere on Twitter, despite the social-media network’s efforts to ban them. Fernandez described the group’s embrace of social media as “a stroke of genius on their part.” The CSCC doesn’t have fanboys.

More crucially, ISIS has a narrative. This is often described by the group’s opponents as superficial or bankrupt. Only it isn’t. It is immensely rich. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation estimates that of the

20,000 or more foreign jihadists believed to have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, around 100 are from the United States.⁷⁰ These fighters may be naive or stupid, but they didn't sacrifice everything for nothing. John Horgan, a prominent scholar of terrorism, told me that people who join groups like ISIS "are trying to find a path, to answer a call to something, to right some perceived wrong, to do something truly meaningful with their lives."

The CSCC doesn't have a narrative—not one, at any rate, remotely comparable in emotional affect and resonance to that of ISIS. No one is more sharply aware of this than Fernandez himself. "ISIS's message," he said, "is that Muslims are being killed and that they're the solution ... There is an appeal to violence, obviously, but there is also an appeal to the best in people, to people's aspirations, hopes and dreams, to their deepest yearnings for identity, faith and self-actualization. We don't have a counter-narrative that speaks to that. What we have is half a message: 'Don't do this.' But we lack the 'do this instead.' That's not very exciting. The positive narrative is always more powerful, especially if it involves dressing in black like a ninja, having a cool flag, being on television, and fighting for your people."

In his biography of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein Ray Monk discussed Wittgenstein's decision to enlist in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. It wasn't really about patriotism, Monk suggested. Rather, Wittgenstein "felt that the experience of facing death would, in some way or other, improve him ... What Wittgenstein wanted from the war was a transformation of his whole personality, a 'variety of religious experience' that would change his life irrevocably."⁷¹ One of the greatest challenges in counterterrorism today is working out how to create a narrative that directly speaks to a similar kind of longing among potential terrorists—and channels that longing in a nonviolent direction. As Scott Atran argues in *Talking to the Enemy*, "In the long run, perhaps the most important counterterrorism measure of all is to provide alternative heroes and hopes that are more enticing and empowering than any moderating lessons or material offerings."⁷²

The more immediate, but no less intractable, challenge is to change the reality on the ground in Syria and Iraq, so that ISIS's narrative of Sunni Muslim persecution at the hands of the Assad regime and Iranian-backed Shiite militias commands less resonance among Sunnis. One problem in countering that narrative is that some of it happens to be true: Sunni Muslims *are* being persecuted in Syria and Iraq. This blunt empirical fact, just as much as ISIS's success on the battlefield,⁷³ and the rhetorical amplification and global dissemination of that success via ISIS propaganda, helps explain why ISIS has been so effective in recruiting so many foreign fighters to its cause.

Zawahiri was right: Half the battle is media. But the other half—the reality on the ground—is the more important part of the equation. And as long as

that reality supports ISIS's narrative, its message will continue to appeal to disaffected Sunnis both within and outside the Muslim world. This is not lost on Fernandez, either: "Saying ISIS is bad is not good enough. There has to be change on the ground. Messaging can shape and shade, but it can't turn black into white."

The Atlantic, March 2, 2015

The Cyber Activists Who Want to Shut Down ISIS

In August 2014, a Twitter account affiliated with Anonymous, the hacker-crusader collective, declared "full-scale cyber war" against ISIS: "Welcome to Operation Ice #ISIS, where #Anonymous will do it's [sic] part in combating #ISIS's influence in social media and shut them down."⁷⁴

In July [2015] I traveled to a gloomy European capital city to meet one of the "cyber warriors" behind this operation. Online, he goes by the pseudonym Mikro. He is vigilant, bordering on paranoid, about hiding his actual identity, on account of all the death threats he has received. But a few months after I initiated a relationship with him on Twitter, Mikro allowed me to visit him in the apartment he shares with his girlfriend and two Rottweilers. He works alone from his chaotic living room, using an old, battered computer—not the state-of-the-art setup I had envisaged. On an average day, he told me, he spends up to 16 hours fixed to his sofa. He starts around noon, just after he wakes up, and works late into the night and early morning.

No state intelligence agency assigned Mikro this work. He answers to no one and uses methods that are not only ethically ambiguous, but also beyond any kind of democratic oversight and accountability. Nobody even knows what he's doing except for his girlfriend and a motley crew of dedicated operatives. His neighbors just think he's a recluse. To his friends, he's a computer nerd.

Unbeknown to any of them, Mikro is the "operations officer" for GhostSec, a group with the self-declared mission of targeting "Islamic extremist content" from "websites, blogs, videos, and social media accounts," using both "official channels" and "digital weapons." The group claims to have disrupted or taken down more than 133 ISIS-linked websites by overwhelming their servers with fake traffic from multiple sources.⁷⁵ (This is called a Distributed Denial of Service, or DDOS, attack.)

More spectacularly, GhostSec also claims to have thwarted a July 2015 jihadist attack on a Tunisian market by passing information to a private security company called Kronos Advisory, which then gave it to the FBI. Michael S. Smith II, one of Kronos's founders, confirmed this over the phone. He made sure to add that GhostSec is "not working for me or with me per se ... We are

collaborating in gathering and presenting information that is valuable to counterterrorism officials.”

Mikro said he played a leading role in uncovering the plot. “I was told by one of my hunters, ‘Look into this.’ And from there we built up the case.” He also showed me a set of screenshots from the dark web listing ISIS donation pages that, he said, were taken down shortly after GhostSec had identified them. He was deliberately vague about how the group came across these pages, why and when they were taken down, and what his role as “operations officer” actually involves.

In February Mikro founded a second group called CtrlSec. It’s closely related to GhostSec; both groups originate from Anonymous, and they share personnel and resources. But Mikro told me CtrlSec is no longer affiliated with Anonymous, a non-hierarchical organization that prohibits its members from soliciting financial support from outsiders. “We have a structure,” Mikro explained. “We have a leadership, we have roles, and we need money.”

CtrlSec’s sole mission is to eliminate pro-ISIS accounts on Twitter. A study by the Brookings Institution fellow J. M. Berger and the data scientist Jonathon Morgan found that in the last four months of 2014, at least 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by ISIS supporters, potentially reaching an audience of millions.⁷⁶ They also found that ISIS-supporting accounts had an average of about 1,000 followers each and that ISIS supporters on Twitter were far more active than ordinary Twitter users.

Mikro evaded questions about CtrlSec’s methods in the same way he evaded logistical questions about GhostSec. When I asked whether CtrlSec uses algorithms to identify pro-ISIS Twitter activity, he was adamant that it does not. Instead, he insisted, every suspect tweet and Twitter account is tracked down manually by one of the group’s 28 operatives, many of whom can read Arabic. I asked him what criteria these operatives use to determine pro-ISIS sympathies and he replied, “You need two eyes and brain.” When I probed him further, he said, “We are trained to see indicators ... Also, we monitor the well-known accounts to pick up new supporters.” Mikro claimed that CtrlSec identifies 200 to 600 pro-ISIS Twitter accounts a day.

Once the group is satisfied that it has identified a pro-ISIS account, it adds the account in question to its “blacklist,” which it tweets out in automated installments. The group then asks its followers to flag the blacklisted accounts for Twitter. (Under the company’s rules, users can be suspended if they “promote violence against others” or post “excessively violent media.”) “The purpose of this account is to expose ISIS and Al-Qaida members active on Twitter,” explains CtrlSec’s Tumblr page. “Whether they should be reported or not isn’t our decision: it’s your decision.”

It's hard to predict just how much it would cripple ISIS if its promoters were banned from Twitter altogether. As *The Atlantic's* Kathy Gilsinan has argued, ISIS's capacity to mobilize unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters may have more to do with its real-world military successes than the doggedness of ISIS "fanboys" on Twitter.⁷⁷ And suspended users frequently return to set up new Twitter accounts.

Still, Berger, one of the authors of the Brookings report, says there is "substantial evidence" that account suspensions seriously limit the group's reach, given how effective Twitter is as an instrument for disseminating information to vast audiences across the globe.⁷⁸ In Berger's "6-Point Plan to Defeat ISIS in the Propaganda War," co-authored with the Harvard terrorism scholar Jessica Stern, the sixth and last point is, "Aggressively suspend ISIS social-media accounts."⁷⁹ He and Stern conclude that "suspensions do limit the audience for ISIS's gruesome propaganda." Berger has also noted that even when banned pro-ISIS users resume their efforts under new usernames, they suffer from the negative "impact of time lost to the process of creating new accounts and waiting for followers to find them."⁸⁰

Mikro claimed that since February, CtrlSec has helped remove 60,000 to 70,000 pro-ISIS Twitter accounts. These are astonishing numbers (and ones that top Berger and Morgan's estimate of total pro-ISIS accounts). When I pressed Mikro on how he arrived at the figure, he wouldn't elaborate. Early on, he said, he tried to share his blacklist directly with Twitter. "But they never got back to us," he told me. This still exasperates him. "If they would cooperate with us, it wouldn't take more than a couple of days to shut [ISIS] totally out. They are shutting down in waves," he continued. "Suddenly 2,000 accounts are gone, 5,000 accounts are gone, and then [ISIS] can go two weeks with no suspensions, and then 10,000 accounts are gone."

In March, Twitter suspended over 2,000 pro-ISIS accounts,⁸¹ earning one of its founders, Jack Dorsey, several death threats.⁸² However, Mikro believes it's no coincidence that "every target they take down has been tweeted by us." (I contacted Twitter to find out whether it has used CtrlSec's lists to identify pro-ISIS accounts for suspension, but I have yet to receive a response.)

As I pressed Mikro on his *modus operandi*, he showed me a Twitter account that had just made it onto his blacklist. Its tweets contained a lot of ISIS insignia, and I could readily make out the distinctive logo of ISIS's media arm, al-Hayat, in some of the screenshots. Many of the photos depicted the kinds of medieval atrocities that have become ISIS's trademark.

He opened a folder containing a collection of ISIS atrocity porn. "This is what I have to deal with every day," he said, clicking on scores of photos of beheadings and other highly stylized massacres. "I was looking at these over breakfast this morning." One of the photos he showed me was of a child,

around 8 or 9, dressed in military garb, holding a severed head. Another was of a head on a spike. I suddenly felt an urge to be elsewhere.

Then Mikro showed me an excruciatingly vivid photo of a severed human neck. It had been sent to his Twitter inbox by a self-professed ISIS supporter and addressed personally to him. There were no words attached, just the gut-wrenching gore. Mikro said he'd lost count of the death threats he'd received. "I don't really take them seriously," he said. Then he added, "I know it's very real, but I can't let it affect me, because I'm up to my neck in shit already with this. If they figure out who I am ... they would do anything to come here and take me down." He showed me, with not a little pride, a hit list posted online by ISIS supporters in which CtrlSec held first place.

Before he became a counter-jihadist, Mikro spent years trying to figure out exactly who he wanted to be. He was a boisterous and badly behaved child, always in trouble at school. He said his mother's boyfriend disliked him and threatened to leave her if she didn't put him in foster care. "I woke up one morning and I wanted to go out but noticed the front door was locked. So I asked, 'What's happening?' And my mum told me I was going away for a couple of weeks. But when you're told to pack everything you have, you start to smell that it's more than a week."

He said he "went crazy" and "started kicking down the door. I was going totally maniac and went into my room and started crushing everything. And then the child welfare came, and they actually called the police. And there came a guy with a helmet and shield in through the door, with a couple of police officers behind. They fucking handcuffed me and carried me out to the police vehicle and drove me off to the child-welfare office. I was 12 years old." The "couple of weeks" away turned out to be six years.

Mikro insisted he doesn't feel hostility toward his mother now. She was troubled, he explained, always blowing the rent money to feed her gambling habit. There's clearly more to the story than this, but he was reluctant to say more about it. "I felt rejected," he told me simply. "I still feel it. But I've learned to live with that."

Initially, Mikro moved in with a Christian family, where "I was forced into believing in God." After a year, he was placed with a Muslim family from Turkey and expected to follow the Islamic faith. He recalls being made to fast during Ramadan. "I used to walk to school instead of taking the bus and used the money to buy food because I was so fucking hungry." He said he tried being a Muslim: "I actually found the Muslim belief much more calming than the Christian." But now, he concluded, "Religion isn't for me."

Mikro's placement with the Muslim family didn't last long anyway. After he was caught using drugs, he was transferred to "a house in the middle of nowhere, with a bunch of troubled teenagers." It was there that Mikro's life

changed forever. “I remember it really clearly because it has haunted me in every court I have been in.” The quarrel was over a girl who had been assaulted by one of the boys in the house. Mikro said he and two friends tried to confront the boy but were stopped by a group of care workers before they could exact revenge. “One of them ... I’m not proud of it, because he was a really nice guy and he was just trying to make us think logically, when I look back at it. We dragged him to the ground and kicked him several times. He cracked, like, six ribs. He didn’t break it, but he did serious damage to his spine. He stopped working with youths after that. The doctor said that if we’d kicked him one more time in the chest, he’d be dead.”

For this crime, as well as resisting arrest after the incident, Mikro was sent to a high-security adult prison, where he spent six months. He was the youngest inmate there, just 16. Once out, “They put me in an apartment. I had nothing to do. I like drugs. And it was just going downhill from there. I was selling weed—and other heavy drugs.”

As I listened to Mikro tell his story, it dawned on me that his biography, with its multiple personal grievances and setbacks and trials, mirrors that of the aggrieved and alienated jihadist. I shared this observation with him, and he readily agreed. “I come from the same shit,” he said.

The U.S. Department of State has made its own efforts to beat ISIS at the Twitter game. Earlier this year [February 2015], I interviewed Alberto Fernandez, then in his final week as the head of the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). Fernandez spoke with disarming honesty and acuity about the myriad difficulties of derailing ISIS’s narrative and blunting its appeal among disaffected and marginalized Sunni Muslims. At the time, the CSCC was under fire for its “Think Again Turn Away” campaign, which the terrorism analyst Rita Katz had harshly denounced as inept and “embarrassing” in an article in *Time*.⁸³ “We don’t have a counter-narrative,” Fernandez acknowledged. “We have half a message: ‘Don’t do this.’ But we lack the ‘Do this instead.’”

CtrlSec’s approach is far more straightforward. It is not about countering or repudiating a “narrative.” It is not about engaging with the undecided—the so-called “fence-sitters”—about the legitimacy of jihadist violence. It is not about winning hearts or changing minds. Rather, it is about shutting down the message at its source. And unlike the CSCC, CtrlSec has a clear metric for success: suspended Twitter accounts.

One criticism leveled against activists like those involved with CtrlSec is that they’re casting too wide a net and targeting non-ISIS accounts. Mikro acknowledged that this happens, but insisted that it’s rare and that mistakes are quickly corrected. For example, some parody ISIS accounts that initially fell afoul of CtrlSec were added to the group’s “whitelist” to prevent future mistakes.

A related criticism is that Twitter suspension undermines the democratic ideal of free speech. “That’s bullshit,” Mikro fired back before I could finish articulating the complaint. “Why should somebody who doesn’t let other people practice free speech have free speech? We’re saving lives.”

I tried to get Mikro to tell me more about what’s driving him. State counter-terrorism agents are usually paid for their efforts, but this man devotes a huge amount of time and energy to his calling without any financial reward—and at no small personal risk. He told me he was spurred to action by the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January: “I had to do something. You can’t kill so many people over a fucking drawing.” He realized then, he said, that “sooner or later, if you don’t do shit, it’s gonna be your problem, too.”

But when I asked him what was going on in his life at the time, he said, “I was doing nothing.” CtrlSec has clearly filled that void. “I no longer know what else to do,” he reflected. “If I didn’t do this, I’d do exactly the same thing: I would sit at home, smoke weed all day. Only difference now is that I actually feel like I’m doing something productive.” When I asked him how he felt when he heard the news about the thwarted plot in Tunisia, he said, “That was like an orgasm, seriously.”

Not long after I returned to the U.K. from visiting him, Mikro sent me a text message. “Something big is happening,” he wrote, adding, “it’ll be a long night.” His ominous words were followed by a smiley face.

The Atlantic, October 8, 2015

Translating ISIS’s Atrocity Porn

By ISIS’s customary gonzo standards, a recent video [released on January 4, 2016] depicting the execution of five men accused of spying for the British government was relatively tame, and the gore quotient minimal.⁸⁴ No one’s head was cut off and ceremoniously placed on their contorted and ravaged torso. Nobody was subjected to the horror of being set on fire in a cage; or drowned in a cage;⁸⁵ or being run over by a tank;⁸⁶ or being tied to the back of a speeding car;⁸⁷ or having their heads literally ripped off.⁸⁸ For ISIS, the video was, indeed, positively muted.

Yet it remains profoundly disquieting, especially for the Western English-speaking audience at which it was primarily aimed. This, in part, is to do with the British accent of the executioner-in-chief in the video, and what it signals: apostasy, defection. It says, “*I grew up where you grew up, I learned to speak how you speak, and I lived where you lived—and yet I reject you and everything you stand for.*”

What the man—believed to be Abu Rumaysah—with the British accent in fact said was: “Oh British Government, oh people of Britain—know that ...

we will continue to wage jihad, break borders and one day invade your land where we will rule by the Sharia ...” He also warned: “you will lose this war, as you lost in Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁸⁹

This is, of course, a concrete threat, aimed at the British government, its citizens, its armed forces and their collaborators. But the greater threat comes from that British accent, because it raises the spectre of the “enemy within,” and undermines confidence in the presumed superiority of Western values: If *this* person has defected, then who else has? And who else *might*? At the same time, the British accent transmits and supports ISIS’s narrative of the global “caliphate,” with a truly transnational appeal and make-up.

But the chief reason for the disquiet raised by the video isn’t the British-accented killer; it’s the British-accented *kid*. He appears at the very end of the video, after the victims have been shot. He is very young—around four years old—and is dressed in military-style fatigues. He warns, in English: “We are going to go kill the kaffir (non-believers) over there.” Reports suggest that he may be the son of Khadijah Dare, a British woman who left for Syria several years ago,⁹⁰ although, for ISIS and its various audiences, his identity is less important than his meaning.

This isn’t the first time ISIS has used a child in its atrocity porn. In January last year [2015] it released a video of an angelic-looking Kazakh boy, no more than 10 years old, shooting to death two men, also accused of spying. And in July [2015] it released a video of a mass-execution carried out by a group of teens in Palmyra’s Roman Theatre.⁹¹ But this is the first time a child has featured in an ISIS video issuing a threat in English against the British government and people.

What is the child doing and what does he symbolize? He is first and foremost reading a script, and, like the many other children ISIS has hijacked or captured, he doesn’t know what he is doing.⁹² He is a victim, an instrument of ISIS’s brutal and ruthless will. He is also, more crucially for ISIS, a prestige symbol, enlisted to communicate strength and endurance, both to ISIS’s rank and file and to their enemies. Given its recent military setbacks and losses, this message has special urgency for ISIS: *We are still here*, the group is saying, *and we will prevail, whatever you throw at us*.

The militarized ISIS child is the perfect vehicle for expressing this point, since he is a graphic symbol of, or testament to, the strength and tenacity of the ISIS worldview, and how it has found root and replication in the very young. He also symbolizes continuity, reassuring existing ISIS fighters that once they have perished in battle their fight will live on through the blood and sacrifice of their young.

This is disquieting enough, but the real disquiet comes from the boundary-transgression the use of the child in this video signifies. Children, the world

over, represent innocence and purity and life in all its great potential. Casting a child in a snuff movie is a massive affront to these ideals and the very meaning of childhood. In this sense, it arouses the same disquiet as that provoked by the eroticization of children and pedophilia.

It's hard to know what species of feelings ISIS most wanted to elicit in its British audience: feelings of revulsion and disgust or feelings of fear and terror. The former would suggest a punitive intent with no additional motive, whereas the latter would point to a more instrumental logic, whereby the aim would be to undermine support for military strikes against ISIS, and spread fear among ISIS's own internal enemies who would help facilitate these attacks. It is, of course, eminently possible that ISIS wants to foment both.

What is also unclear is just how effective shock and horror, to say nothing of terror, are as a mode of political communication. Shocking or horrifying images may well capture the headlines, but it's an open question whether they work as tools of intimidation. In the long-run, they may just provoke feelings of anger and the desire for revenge.⁹³

National Post, January 25, 2016

The Jihad Will Be Televised

In *Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist*, the author, who purports to have been a member of a left-wing militant group, vividly conveys the excitement and pressures of living underground as a secret operative. There are questions about the book's authenticity—the author, who identifies himself only by the pseudonym Giorgio, declares that “what I write here can't be true, it can only be truthful”—but there's a telling detail in his description of mission preparation. “I would never set out to undertake a proletarian expropriation”—a communist-inflected euphemism for a robbery—“if I didn't feel that I was dressed right.”⁹⁴

For today's wannabe jihadists, whether “inspired” or “directed” by groups like ISIS, style—be it in the form of a righteous beard or a voluptuous application of kohl eye makeup⁹⁵—also matters. But perhaps not as much as celluloid, and for a certain kind of Islamized Giorgio the capture of atrocities on film matters almost as much as their actual commission. The British writer Neal Ascherson, in his foreword to *Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist*, referred to the “sinister frivolity of Italian urban terrorism.” In the case of ISIS and its so-called “lone wolf” emulators, “sinister narcissism” seems to be the more appropriate formulation.

One evening this month [June 2016], in the French town of Magnanville about 35 miles outside of Paris, Larossi Abballa, a 25-year-old Moroccan Frenchman, ambushed an off-duty police officer outside his home and stabbed

him to death. He then broke into the house and murdered the officer's wife with the same weapon.⁹⁶ Minutes later he recorded himself live on Facebook with his phone, boasting of his deed and declaring his allegiance to ISIS.⁹⁷ A police SWAT team stormed the house and fatally shot Abballa, but his image and voice lived on: ISIS's Amaq news agency, which described Abballa as an "Islamic State fighter," later uploaded to YouTube an edited version of the live video.

Abballa's attack took place less than 48 hours after Omar Mateen slaughtered 49 people at a gay hangout in Orlando, Florida, and wounded many more. Mateen's horrifying legacy is quantitative in nature: No other individual mass shooter in American history has killed more people in a single rampage.⁹⁸ Abballa's legacy, by contrast, is qualitative: He is the first terrorist to broadcast live at the scene of his atrocities.⁹⁹ And his actions may portend a horrifying new genre of terrorist theater: live streaming political murder. Jason Burke of *The Guardian* was right: "It may not be long," he wrote in February, "before an individual attacker, or a terrorist group, produces a live stream of an attack, with images broadcast from the point of view of the killer."¹⁰⁰ Or rather Burke was partially right: Abballa did not live stream the actual moment of slaughter, although it seems only a matter of time before a terrorist will attempt to do so.

ISIS has revolutionized jihadist propaganda by creating a visually distinct pornography of pain that combines high production values with intimate atrocity. Unlike its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, whose signature production was the IED mash-up video, ISIS has become notorious for staging obscenely graphic, High Definition atrocities. These theatrical events drastically narrow the distance between the viewer and the victim, bringing the latter squarely into the foreground. ISIS doesn't just want to show the viewer the spectacle of a tank or truck exploding; ISIS wants to show the viewer the spectacle of a human body being savaged, up close. It is precisely this quality of horrifying intimacy that is the new element in ISIS propaganda—and a key to its global dissemination. This is the primordial secret, no longer well kept: The killing act is a spectacle people want to see.

Yet for all its malevolent creativity, not even ISIS "central" in Iraq and Syria has live streamed from a murder scene. There are structural reasons for this. To project an image of total power and control in its execution videos, ISIS must make killing look effortless and competent. This calls for heavy post-production editing—and hence rules out the live spectacular. In addition to this, live streaming is precarious from a security perspective, since it risks giving away the location of the atrocity. But for sheer horror, live streaming is hard to beat, because it further narrows the distance between viewer and victim: The killing may be happening in a distant place, but it isn't happening in any distant past. It is happening *now*.

By live streaming from the scene of his crime, Abballa also points to a new and growing trend in jihadist propaganda: the terrorist as auteur.¹⁰¹ It is likely that Abballa, who had proven links to terrorism, would have watched ISIS propaganda.¹⁰² But he was no mere spectator, and by filming in the immediate aftermath of his attack he propelled himself into the ranks of creator, producing his own brand of do-it-yourself ISIS propaganda.

Facebook quickly removed Abballa's footage and disabled his account. Had it not done so, it is a near certainty that people would have watched in large numbers, transfixed by the horror unfolding in front of their eyes, just as thousands searched online for the beheading video of the American engineer Nick Berg after it was posted online in May 2004. (The video was an early, and then-rare, example of the genre later perfected by ISIS.)

As the anthropologist Frances Larson writes, "There have always been people ready to watch executions, and ready to enjoy the spectacle."¹⁰³ Or as Susan Sontag has more piercingly put it, "It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked."¹⁰⁴ One possible reason for this, cited by the intellectual historian Karen Halttunen, is the secret comparison we make between ourselves the person who suffers, and the satisfaction of prizing our own good fortune that results from this.¹⁰⁵ Another possible reason, discussed in J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, is related to what the author calls, invoking the Bible, "the lust of the eye": the urge to see "the novel, the unusual, the spectacular."¹⁰⁶

"Terrorist attacks," Brian M. Jenkins observed over 40 years ago, "are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press."¹⁰⁷ The goal is publicity, which is itself a strategic asset that can be used for all sorts of purposes, such as winning recruits or putting an issue on the political agenda. Jenkins also remarked on how the "willingness and capability of the news media to report and broadcast dramatic incidents of violence throughout the world enhances and even may encourage terrorism as an effective means of propaganda."¹⁰⁸ Today, with the advent of the internet and social media, that willingness and capability has increased markedly, and with it a further possibility discussed by Jenkins has materialized: namely, ever "more extravagant and destructive acts" of terrorism.¹⁰⁹

It is easy to condemn the news media for its fascination with terrorism and for "playing into the hands of the terrorists" by giving them the publicity they crave. Yet audiences, too, collude in this. We denounce the killers, yet we are riveted by their awesome violence and their convoluted life-histories.¹¹⁰ They are the classic folk devil we love to hate—and endlessly talk about. Terrorists know this and draw encouragement from it, as does the international news

media with which they are in a dark symbiosis. Which is why the jihad will be televised—and you and I will be watching.

The Atlantic, June 28, 2016

ISIS and the Little Monsters

The so-called Islamic State has seemingly done the impossible: earlier this month [January 2017] it released what is arguably its most shocking and abhorrent atrocity video yet.

This is quite a statement, of course: ISIS has made a lot of truly shocking and abhorrent atrocity videos. Some of these depict mass beheadings, burnings, drownings and stonings—all in horrible High Definition close-up. The new video, titled “Made Me Alive with His Own Blood,” features the murder of a broken and defenceless man at the hands of a three-year-old boy. A. Three. Year. Old.

There is something unedifying about rating ISIS videos for their shock impact, just as there is something off about marvelling at their “slickness” and sophistication. But the latest atrocity video represents a qualitative shift in depravity, and it is important to understand why and what it means.

It is well known that ISIS has created a vast and sophisticated apparatus for recruiting and indoctrinating children into its brutal ideology, and this isn’t the first time ISIS has used children as executioners in its videos. One of these, released in January 2015, showed a 10-year old Kazakh boy shooting to death two men accused of spying. Another, released in July that same year, showed boys as young as 13 or 14 executing 25 Syrian soldiers in an amphitheatre in the ancient city of Palmyra.

But this latest atrocity video features not a boy, but a very young child. This is new: a radical innovation in political atrocity that goes beyond the paradigm of what we conventionally understand as terrorism. For this isn’t terrorism, commonly understood. This is *horrorism*: a form of violence so monstrous and transgressive that it corrupts our most fundamental notions of what it means to be human and civilised.

According to the political philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who has written a book on the subject, horrorism “has nothing to do with the instinctive reaction to the threat of death,” and everything to do with “an instinctive disgust.”¹¹¹ Horrorism, in other words, arouses not fear or terror, but rather a deep repugnance that sickens us to our stomachs.

And few things are as disgust-evoking as the image of a three-year-old shooting to death a helpless and traumatised man. There are two central reasons for this. First, it violates our deepest beliefs about the innocence of children. For ISIS, the militarised child reflects the power and durability of its

ideology: the caliphate may be shrinking,¹¹² but its essential foundations are in good condition. For everyone else, this child represents the defilement of a purity to which we accord an almost sacred status.

Second, it presents a grotesque asymmetry: between the smallness of the killer and the magnitude of the deed he is forced to commit. It just doesn't add up: murder is such a heinous act, and yet here is a killer who has only just learned to walk and can barely hold a gun.

The image of the infant jihadist unnerves in other ways, too, subliminally reminding us of that most horrifying of all monsters: the demonic child. In *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, the English scholar Karen J. Renner estimates that there are over 600 films in which "some kind of arguably evil child" is portrayed, with almost 400 made since 2000.¹¹³

One of the most disquieting movies in this genre is Stanley Kubrick's 1980 adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Shining*. The central character of the movie—Jack Torrance, played by Jack Nicholson—descends into madness and tries to kill his wife and son. But it's the son, Danny, who is the more unnerving presence, seemingly in communion with a silent and ominous supernatural force. He sees and hears things. And what he sees and hears is horrifying, like the two little Grady girls, who in one second invite him to come and play and in the next lie on the floor in a pool of blood, having been butchered to death. Or like the elevator whose doors release an ocean of dark blood.

Children, as Stephen King has observed, can be "uncivilised and not very nice." They are unruly and impressionable, and in some ways strange and "other." So it's not surprising that they serve as a repository of our fears. The monstrous child motif in horror movies mercilessly plays on these. And so, it seems, does ISIS, with its endless stream of videos featuring the so-called "cubs of the caliphate."

One of the biggest stories on ISIS since it came to global prominence in mid-2014 centred on three British teenage schoolgirls who had absconded to Islamic State-controlled territory in February of 2015. One classmate described the girls as "studious, argumentative and driven."¹¹⁴ The youngest, who was 15 at the time, apparently used to be a fan of the reality TV show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. Another had reportedly danced "in her teenage bedroom" the night before she left for Syria.

Yet, for all their reported ordinariness, the girls had somehow fallen under the "spell" of ISIS to become "jihadi brides." According to Britain's then-Prime Minister David Cameron, they had been "brainwashed in their bedrooms."¹¹⁵ Keith Vaz, the then-chairman of Parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee, said in a special hearing to which the families of the girls were invited that what had happened was "every parent's nightmare."¹¹⁶

This story, despite the haziness of the details about the girls' motives and how they became radicalised, was instantly generalised into a moral fable about innocent children and their vulnerability to ISIS's ideology. But what it really resembled was a script from a horror movie about teenage girls and demonic possession: a shadowy, evil force had inscribed itself into their minds—via an electronic screen—and turned them into sex-mad, husband-chasing, ideological fanatics, whose parents could no longer recognise them. They were once just “ordinary teenagers.” And then they entered the jihadist twilight zone and became “jihadi brides,” whose mouths frothed with monstrous bile.

As the caliphate shrinks, ISIS's ability to conduct large-scale terrorist attacks will correspondingly diminish. But it will continue to horrify us with its sickening videos of jihadist children, stirring up deep, primordial fears about our own mysterious and ever-so-impressionable children.

Vice, January 31, 2017

Why Do We Want to Watch Gory Jihadist Propaganda Videos?

What does prolonged exposure to jihadist online propaganda do to us?

One popular answer, especially among politicians, is that it radicalizes our thoughts and transforms us into terrorists.

A more nuanced answer, put forward by terrorism scholars, is that while sustained exposure to extremist online material is not in itself a sufficient cause of radicalization, it can reinforce existing assumptions and beliefs that are already tending toward the extreme.

Yet in even the most robust scholarship on online radicalization, there is a conspicuous lack of data on how the most important variable in online radicalization—namely, the audience for extremist material—understands and engages with that material.¹¹⁷

For the past 18 months, I have been conducting research on how young adults in the West perceive and react to Islamic State propaganda videos. I myself have watched hundreds of hours of these videos, including scenes of horrifying violence and cruelty. Without a doubt, this has been detrimental to my spiritual well-being; I've had night terrors. Yet none of this was imposed on me. I willingly—sometimes excitedly—exposed myself to this material, including and especially the very worst of it. This has given my research a personal dimension: Why do I want to watch? What is it about the Islamic State that so captivates me?

Last September [2016], the criminologist Jack Cunliffe and I started an online survey to test audience responses to official English-language Islamic State videos. The idea behind the survey was simple: Ask ordinary young

adults to watch these videos—which we edited to exclude scenes of graphic violence—and then get them to tell us about that viewing experience.

Despite the ethical and legal challenges in doing this research (Britain's 2006 Terrorism Act makes it a criminal offense to disseminate terrorist propaganda), our survey went ahead. We collected more than 3,000 responses and will be presenting our findings at the Terrorism, Crime, Culture conference in Copenhagen this week [October 5, 2017].¹¹⁸

Around 1,300 survey respondents were from North America and about 1,000 were from Britain. The remainder came from all over the world. Their mean age was 30, with a big clump—around 1,800—between 18 and 26. Most (67 percent) were male. Thirty-six percent identified as having no religion, 17 percent identified as Christian and 4 percent identified as Muslim.

A vast majority—93 percent—reported a negative attitude toward the Islamic State, and just 1 percent said they had a positive view of the group. Six percent reported that they were neutral. Of the 34 people who reported a positive attitude toward the Islamic State, five were Muslims.

It did not surprise us that a vast majority of respondents expressed a negative attitude toward the Islamic State or that those who held a positive view of the group said almost uniformly positive things about the videos embedded in the survey. Nor was it surprising that most respondents were impressed by the technical quality of the Islamic State videos. They are sophisticated and movie-like in style.¹¹⁹

What did surprise us was that a significant number of those who held a negative attitude toward the Islamic State were still receptive to its utopian message, while still larger numbers exhibited a curiosity about watching the kind of “slick” and horrifying atrocity porn for which the group has become notorious.

We were furthermore surprised by respondents' reported exposure to the Islamic State's videos. Fifty-seven percent said they had watched an Islamic State video before, beyond clips shown on TV and in online news material. Of this number, an even more remarkable 46 percent said they had seen more than 10 Islamic State videos. This may well say more about the selection biases of our sample than about young adults' exposure to the Islamic State—or it may not. A recent Policy Exchange report showed that the ease with which Islamic State videos can still be viewed on the internet, despite the pushback from social media companies, is quite remarkable.¹²⁰

Responding to a clip from an Islamic State video in which a handsome, strong-looking fighter hands out toys to young children dressed in colorful clothes, around a third of respondents expressed positive judgments about the physical strength and moral character of the fighter. And a not insignificant number—28 percent—said the video gave them a “warm feeling,” and this

percentage drops to only 26 percent when restricted to those who proclaim to feel negatively about the Islamic State.

This was in marked contrast to respondents' reaction to a clip from a mass-beheading video in which a group of Islamic State fighters marches Syrian Army captives to their execution. Just 3 percent of our respondents said the video overall made them "feel good." A vast majority reported feelings of discomfort, disgust and fear.

Still, only 11 percent of our survey respondents said that the video bored them, suggesting that for the majority, while staged mass beheadings may be unpleasant to watch, they nevertheless make for compelling viewing. Indeed, when asked if they wanted to view the video to its grisly completion, 33 percent said yes. Less than half—44 percent—said definitively that they didn't want to see the video to the end.

Given the nature and size of the sample, our survey is not representative and does not warrant firm generalizations about young people's engagement with Islamic State videos. But it does yield some suggestive findings, not least of which concerns the dark power of this propaganda.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust* the legal scholar William Ian Miller observes that "something makes us look at the bloody auto accident, thrill to movies of horror, gore, and violence; something makes porn big business and still draws people to circus sideshows."¹²¹ It isn't clear what that something is, but it can be certain that the Islamic State understands the basic dynamic, because for all the disgust, discomfort and fear that its beheading videos evoke, something makes us—or many of us, at least—want to look.

Perhaps more important, our survey suggests that even among those who hold a negative view of the Islamic State, the softer image of the group cultivated in so much of its propaganda seems to resonate positively among a significant number of people.

The broader question of how exposure to the Islamic State's online content features in the radicalization of jihadists is not answered in our research. It may, in fact, be unanswerable, given how difficult it is to disentangle the myriad causal threads in the complex process by which someone becomes radicalized. But there is still much that can be learned about the role and affective impact of jihadist propaganda.

The New York Times, October 5, 2017

Inside Europol's Online War Against ISIS

In January [2018] I travelled to Europol's heavily fortified HQ in The Hague to interview members of the EU's Internet Referral Unit (IRU), an innocuous-sounding name for a group that spends most of its time trawling the internet

for beheadings, bomb-making manuals, hysterical incitements and all the rest of it.

Despite the recent collapse of ISIS's "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq, the IRU is still busy. And, in any case, ISIS has far from gone away. Just a few months ago its Sinai faction released a new 23-minute video,¹²² and around the same time ISIS's media centre al-Hayat—famed for its "slick" English-language videos—released a clip showing what appeared to be a woman fighting in frontline combat.¹²³

The IRU was established by Europol—the law enforcement agency of the EU—in July 2015. Its main business is to spot jihadist online material and then flag this to the relevant internet service provider for removal—although it doesn't have any legal power to compel the internet providers to follow its requests. Still, according to a July 2016 Europol press release, in the first year of the IRU's operation 91 percent of the total content referred—over 11,000 pieces of material across some 31 online platforms in eight languages—was removed following requests from the IRU.¹²⁴

The IRU is a small operation, with around 30 members. I spoke with four of them to find out what they do and how they cope with the stress of watching copious amounts of jihadist propaganda. For security reasons they cannot be identified by their real names—I can't even tell you where they're from or how old they are—so I've used pseudonymous first names throughout.

What is an average day like at the IRU? Usually, it starts with an alert of web-links to check. The material on them is then assessed, and if it's deemed referable a referral will be made. The assessment, along with the relevant content, is then uploaded to the "Check-the-Web Portal," Europol's giant digital library of jihadist online propaganda.

What kind of content does the IRU flag? The priority, *Anna explained to me, is anything that threatens violence against European countries and civilians. But the IRU also refers non-violent extremist material, which, in the case of ISIS, can be anything from a photo report of an old dude picking grapes to a video describing the structure of the caliphate. Not all the internet platforms the IRU works with are willing to censor this kind of stuff—and some, Anna told me, only suspend graphically violent material. I gently suggested that these companies may have a point, and that "extreme" ideas should be protected under the principle of free speech, but Anna was adamant: it's all pernicious, because it's all part of the same recruitment drive.

What the IRU doesn't flag is non-jihadist propaganda. According to *Celine: "We don't go out of the terrorist organisations that were listed by the EU, and we don't go for material produced by terrorist organisations that are not calling for violent jihad ... Not left, not right, no other kind of terrorism, only violent jihad." This will no doubt be seen as controversial by those who

think the counter-terrorism efforts of Western governments, especially those of the Trump administration, are disproportionately focused on Muslims.

The IRU has good relationships with most of the internet companies it works with, but Telegram—ISIS's preferred secure messaging app—isn't one of them. Anna told me that the company rarely responds to referral emails. In September 2015 Telegram's founder and CEO, Pavel Durov, reportedly mocked calls to remove ISIS channels from the app: "I propose banning words. There's evidence that they're being used by terrorists to communicate," he said in a post on the Russian social networking site VKontakte.

On November 18, 2015, just days after the Paris attacks—and following mounting political pressure from Western governments—Telegram removed 78 pro-ISIS channels from its platform.¹²⁵ This was a departure from its previous hands-off approach, and in response ISIS supporters declared war on Telegram. But they didn't leave the platform; they just stopped using its public channels, and moved to private ones instead, which are harder to monitor. This, Anna said, has made the IRU's job a lot more difficult, because you need an invitation to join a private channel, or to be added by the person who created it.

As part of an ongoing research study on the attractions and repulsions of violent images, I've spent the last year interviewing people who take voyeuristic delight in viewing the very worst of what the internet has to offer: videos of beheadings, torture, suicides and other things I cannot possibly mention here.

Like a first love, they all fondly remember their first gore video: the one that made them cringe and want to look away, all the while beckoning them to look ever closer; the one that enraptured them and made them search for more. And everyone has their favourite: the most shocking and sickening video they have ever seen; the one that delivered the all-elusive cringe they felt on watching their beloved, unforgettable first.

At the IRU, it's the same, minus the amorality. All the operatives I spoke with could recall the first atrocity video they saw on the job, and within a heartbeat they could all name the video that most shocked and sickened them.

"I don't know if you can make a hierarchy in the most disturbing stuff," said Celine, "but for me the worst are the ones with the children. When you see a kid of two years old with a gun, executing someone in a playground in Syria, this is insane, disgusting, horrible."

*Nicolas, the only male member of the team I spoke with, mentioned the same video: "Actually, the most shocking video is this tiny kid in the playpen. They give him a gun and let him shoot someone in the head. When you see kids it's always hard, because they're victims too."

For Anna, the one ISIS video she can't forget is of a beheading of a Russian intelligence agent: "This is a video I remember because you see his face, and

there are tears running from his eyes, he's speaking really calm, he doesn't seem nervous—and then they execute him. But they show it in detail.”

And for *Layla, the worst of the worst is a video of a mass beheading of Syrian Army troops. “It made me sick, literally—I threw up,” she said. “Everybody in that video is trapped, the prisoners, but also the foreign fighters because you see their faces, they can't go back, it's over for them. Everybody's trapped, except the guy [“Jihadi John”] in the balaclava.”

“My job,” Layla added, “is to look at that knowing that I couldn't do anything.”

If you're going to do this line of work, it's pretty clear what you need. You need a high tolerance for blood and gore, and an equally high tolerance for boredom and bullshit: most ISIS videos, for all their widely touted “slickness” and narrative skill, are monotonous and annoying, often with ridiculously portentous voice-overs.

Back in 2014, when ISIS videos felt trailblazing and hair-raising, I must confess to a shameful feeling of exhilaration every time a new major release was announced—but that feeling soon faded, and now I can barely watch the stuff. “We have to watch it, all the way through,” said Celine when I alluded to the temptation to hit the fast-forward button.

What else do you need? You need to be battle-hardened from a daily grind of real-life violence, so that its online incarnation doesn't look quite so horrifying. “For me,” Anna confided, “I'm coming from law enforcement, so I've seen some stuff already ... Let's say I had a tough job before.” Celine echoed this: “I was already exposed to the violence of jihadi terrorist organisations.” She recalled the immediate aftermath of a horrific suicide attack she had witnessed prior to joining the IRU. “This was way more difficult than watching the videos.”

You need to be able to compartmentalise, so that the day-job doesn't bleed over into the life-job. “I'm just trying to delete this the moment I see the image,” Anna said, referring to ISIS beheading videos, adding, “I'm not taking this home with me.” Or, as Celine put it, “I know how to close the door.”

Crucially, you also need a sense of humour: you need to be able to laugh at the humourless jihadi be-headers and blowhards. “I do make black humour, but it depends on who I'm with,” Nicolas said, without going into detail. Layla gave me the details, of which I can only report the following:

“There was another video in which a foreign fighter was being interviewed, and a guy walking in the background suddenly fell into a hole—it was Monty-Pythonesque,” she said, laughing. “We watched that many times.”

Celine relayed a similar story:

There were two guys claiming an attack, but they still needed to kill two people ... We were disturbed by the beheading and the nonsense of the narrative. I was sitting next to my colleague and he said, "But the guy [one of the ISIS executioners] has mascara on, no?" We then started joking about how you need to be fresh and young when you do the jihad. This is stupid, but it helps.

Members of the IRU also use a range of distancing techniques to shield themselves from the abyss they're looking into. One such technique is to routinise the work of watching, so that it becomes a mechanical, programmed operation, where the focus is on the segmented detail of the video rather than on the cruelty and suffering depicted in it. "I have to put on my professional hat," Celine told me. "I need to be precise: we are collecting evidence—it is important to pay attention to the detail, the camera they used, the way it was filmed, where it was filmed, the behaviour of the person acting, the clothes, every detail has an importance."

Similarly, Nicolas said: "I know how the video will end, but the gory part of the video I'm not interested in. I look at it not as a voyeur—I'm not a voyeur. What I'm looking for is: what's his discourse? What's the message he wants to deliver? So I focus more as an investigator, and not as a person getting affected by what I'm watching. So, from the beginning, can I identify a person? Can I identify an environment behind? Who's the hostage? And I do abstraction ... I never put a face on the dead body."

Nicolas said he learned this last technique from a surgeon he knew in his previous job as a cop. "If you put a face on the body, you will get affected."

Another technique is to apply what Layla called "filters." For videos, Layla said, "you can watch it first without the sound, and then you can listen to it without watching it, so you don't associate the images with the sound." Does this work? Not for beheadings: "The sound-effects are very good, the gurgling and everything."

In a recent survey on ISIS videos I carried out with the criminologist Jack Cunliffe,¹²⁶ we found that 57 percent of our 3,000 respondents had seen an ISIS video before, beyond clips shown on TV and in online news material. Of this group, 46 percent said they had seen more than ten ISIS videos. This may well say more about the selection biases of our sample than about young adults' exposure to ISIS—or it may not. Either way, it's a remarkable statistic. And what cannot be doubted, despite the recent pushback from social media companies, is the ubiquity and accessibility of ISIS-related content on the internet.

One survey respondent, an American-Muslim woman in her early twenties who contacted me about the survey, told me:

They've [ISIS] really upgraded *nasheeds*. It's not your father's nasheed music. It's not boring, like those al-Qaeda propaganda vids, or really any Arabic political videos. That German nasheed was fire. Twerk-able. Milly Rock-able. Overall, all of their videos seem surreal. I have a hard time believing they're some crazy-ass terrorist group. It looks like an action film. It was hard for me to be scared, even though some were graphic. Sometimes I had to remind myself that this is real, created by a real terrorist group.

The German nasheed she was referring to was the soundtrack to a graphically violent 2015 ISIS video calling for jihadist attacks on Western cities. Has this woman become desensitised, a passive consumer of the pornography of pain? Or is ISIS-staged violence so preposterously monstrous and slickly-produced that, for Western audiences, it doesn't look properly real?

For counter-terrorism experts and policy-makers, the most urgent question about ISIS videos is whether they are radicalising. But a no less important issue is the spiritual cost they incur on the countless number of people who come into contact with them. It is probably incalculable.

"We have faith in what we do," Nicolas said. But, for all the IRU's efforts, the tide of jihadi-snuff culture can't be stopped. And, for the rest of us, it may already be too late.

**Names have been changed.*

Vice, April 10, 2018

NOTES

Preface

- 1 Alberto M. Fernandez, “Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks,” The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers, October 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IS-Propaganda_Web_English_v2-1.pdf, 9 (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 2 Olivia Becker, “ISIS Has a Really Slick and Sophisticated Media Department,” *Vice*, July 12, 2014, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/isis-has-a-really-slick-and-sophisticated-media-department> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 3 Quoted in Haroon Siddique, “Jihadi Recruitment Video for Islamist Terror Group Isis Features Three Britons,” *The Guardian*, June 21, 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/20/jihadi-recruitment-video-islamist-terror-group-isis-features-britons> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 4 See Rod Nordland, “Captured ISIS Fighters’ Refrain: ‘I Was Only a Cook,’” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/world/middleeast/iraq-islamic-state-kurdistan.html> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 5 Scott Atran, “The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict across Cultures,” *Current Anthropology*, 57/13 (June 2016), 192.
- 6 Ibid., 197.
- 7 Kevin McDonald, *Radicalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

Chapter 1 ISIS and the Theatre of Horror

- 1 Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 503.
- 2 See Mark Hosenball and Tabassum Zakaria, “Pornography found in bin Laden Hideout,” *Reuters*, May 13, 2011, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-porn/exclusive-pornography-found-in-bin-laden-hideout-officials-idUSTRE74C4RK20110513> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 3 Quoted in Asra Q. Nomani, “Osama bin Laden’s Porn and Muslim Hypocrisy on Sex,” *The Daily Beast*, May 14, 2011, available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/osama-bin-ladens-porn-and-muslim-hypocrisy-on-sex> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 4 Martin Amis, “A Rough Trade,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2001, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/mar/17/society.martinamis1> (accessed June 28, 2018).

- 5 Ann Marie Oliver and Paul F. Steinberg, *The Road to Martyrs' Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72–73.
- 6 See Arab Salem et al., “Multimedia Content Coding and Analysis: Unraveling the Content of Jihadi Extremist Groups' Videos,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31 (7) (2008), 613.
- 7 See Dexter Filkins, “The Death of Steven Sotloff,” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2014, available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/death-steven-sotloff> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 8 See Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 2014, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 9 See Bruce Wallace, “ISIS has Mastered High-end Video Production in its New Propaganda Wing,” *PRI*, September 11, 2014, available at: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-11/isis-has-mastered-high-end-video-production-its-new-propaganda-wing> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 10 Quoted in “New ISIS Video Purports to Show Beheading of Another U.S. Journalist,” *CBS*, September 2, 2014, available at: <https://washington.cbslocal.com/2014/09/02/new-isis-video-purports-to-show-beheading-of-another-us-journalist/> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 11 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), xi; see also 124–28. In subsequent articles I sought to qualify this, arguing that ISIS videos served both expressive and instrumental purposes—that they were animated by both a need to (de)humiliate and a desire to electrify supporters and intimidate enemies.
- 12 See “British Hip Hop Jihadist Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary Poses in Syria with Severed Head,” *Huffington Post*, August 14, 2014, available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/08/14/british-hip-hop-jihadist-abdel-majed-abdel-bary-syria-severed-head_n_5677555.html?guccounter=1 (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 13 Mia Bloom, “Even al-Qaeda Denounced Beheading Videos. Why the Islamic State brought them Back,” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2014, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/08/22/even-al-qaeda-denounced-beheading-videos-why-the-islamic-state-brought-them-back/?utm_term=.05e224f5d29a (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 14 Walter Laqueur, “Anarchism and Al Qaeda,” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, December 23, 2007, available at: <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/45933> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 15 Brian M. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare,” RAND Corporation, 1974, available at: <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P5261.pdf>, 4 (accessed June 25, 2018).
- 16 This is a reference to the staged beheading of British aid worker Alan Henning (see Ian Cobain et al., “Isis Video Shows Murder of British Hostage Alan Henning,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/03/alan-henning-isis-syria-video-murder> (accessed June 26, 2018). Henning was the fourth Western hostage killed by ISIS, following the filmed beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff and David Haines. In what became a convention in the ISIS execution videos of Western hostages Henning was shown at the end of the Haines beheading video, kneeling before “Jihadi John” in an orange

- jump-suit (see Raya Jalabi, "David Haines Video has Marked Similarities to Sotloff and Foley Killings," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/14/david-haines-video-similarities-sotloff-foley-killings> (accessed June 26, 2018).
- 17 See "Islamic State Murders US Journalist Steven Sotloff," *Channel 4 News*, September 2, 2014, available at: <https://www.channel4.com/news/is-video-shows-beheading-of-steven-sotloff> (accessed June 26, 2018).
 - 18 See David Brown, "Briton Seen Holding Up Severed Head," *The Times*, August 14, 2014, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/briton-seen-holding-up-severed-head-vh3stmn7v3s> (accessed June 26, 2018).
 - 19 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
 - 20 Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Final Solution* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
 - 21 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and The Saved* (London: Abacus Books, 1989), 83.
 - 22 Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
 - 23 Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement," in W. Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 1990), 182.
 - 24 See "Reddit: Shiraz Maher Conducts Reddit AMA at /r/SyrianCivilWar," ICSR, December 3, 2013, available at: <http://icsr.info/2013/12/reddit-shiraz-maher-conducts-reddit-ama-rsyriancivilwar/> (accessed June 26, 2018).
 - 25 Wrongly, as it turned out: ISIS's beheader-in-chief was in fact Mohammed Emwazi.
 - 26 See Becker, "ISIS Has a Really Slick and Sophisticated Media Department."
 - 27 Thomas Harris, *Silence of The Lambs* (London: Arrow, 1989), 24.
 - 28 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 242.
 - 29 See Alice Speri, "New Islamic State Video Shows Hostage John Cantlie Allegedly Reporting from the Ground in Kobane," *Vice*, October 27, 2014, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/new-islamic-state-video-shows-hostage-john-cantlie-allegedly-reporting-from-the-ground-in-kobane> (accessed June 28, 2018).
 - 30 See Shiv Malik, "Isis Video Appears to Show Hostage Peter Kassig Has Been Killed," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/16/isis-beheads-peter-kassig-reports> (accessed June 28, 2018).
 - 31 David Bromwich, "The Meaning of Shock and Awe," *Huffington Post*, March 9, 2013, available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-bromwich/the-meaning-of-shock-and-_b_2844688.html (accessed June 28, 2018).
 - 32 Quoted in Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 209.
 - 33 See http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mp10.asp (accessed June 28, 2018).
 - 34 See Greg Botelho and Kevin Conlon, "Last Crewman of U.S. Plane that Dropped A-bomb on Hiroshima Dies at 93," *CNN*, July 31, 2014, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/29/us/enola-gay-crew-member-dies/> (accessed June 28, 2018).
 - 35 See Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 247.
 - 36 Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 24.
 - 37 Ibid.
 - 38 Ibid., 78.

- 39 See John Whiteclay Chambers II, "S. L. A. Marshall's Men Against Fire: New Evidence Regarding Fire Ratios," *Parameters*, Autumn 2003.
- 40 Ibid., 74.
- 41 Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995), 4.
- 42 Ibid., 102.
- 43 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 155.
- 44 See Aaron Zelin, "The Massacre Strategy: Why ISIS Brags about its Brutal Sectarian Murders," *Politico Magazine*, June 17, 2014, available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/the-massacre-strategy-107954> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 45 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, translated by William McCants, May 23, 2006, available at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>, 74 (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 46 Nina Rastogi, "Decapitation and the Muslim World: Is There Any Special Significance to Beheading in Islam?," *Slate*, February 20, 2009, available at: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2009/02/decapitation_and_the_muslim_world.html?via=gdpr-consent (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 47 See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 254.
- 48 Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1 (2) (1972), 127.
- 49 Quoted in Vanessa Altin, "Inside Kobane: Drug-crazed ISIS Savages Rape, Slaughter and Behead Children," *The Mirror*, October 11, 2014, available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/inside-kobane-drug-crazed-isis-savages-4423619> (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 50 See Martin Chulov, "Latest Islamic State Horror Masks a Week of Defeats," *The Observer*, November 16, 2014, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/16/islamic-state-video-week-defeats?CMP=share_btn_tw (accessed June 28, 2018).
- 51 See Michael Martinez, "ISIS Video Claims to Show Boy Executing Two Men Accused of being Russian Spies," *CNN*, January 15, 2015, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/14/middleeast/isis-video-boy-execution-russian-spies/index.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 52 See Tom Wyke and Darren Boyle, "ISIS Release Shocking New Video of Child SOLDIERS from Kazakhstan Being Trained with AK47s," *Mail Online*, November 22, 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2845531/ISIS-release-shocking-new-video-child-soldiers-Kazakhstan-trained-AK47s.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 53 See Jon Boone, "Agony and Anger as Pakistan Buries Dead after School Attack," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/17/agonny-anger-pakistan-buries-dead-school-attack> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 54 Kathy Gilsinan, "Terrorist Attacks on Schools Have Soared in the Past 10," *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2014, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/interatlantic/archive/2014/12/terrorist-attacks-on-schools-have-soared-in-the-past-10-years/383825/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 55 See Monica Mark, "Boko Haram's 'DEADLIEST Massacre': 2,000 Feared Dead in Nigeria," *The Guardian*, January 10, 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/09/boko-haram-deadliest-massacre-baga-nigeria> (accessed June 30, 2018).

- 56 See Adam Nossiter, "In Nigeria, New Boko Haram Suicide Bomber Tactic: 'It's a Little Girl,'" *The New York Times*, January 10, 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/world/africa/suicide-bomber-hits-maiduguri-nigeria-market.html?ref=world> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 57 See "UN Commission of Inquiry: Syrian Victims Reveal ISIS's Calculated use of Brutality and Indoctrination," <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15295> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 58 See Arango, "A Boy in ISIS."
- 59 Alistair Dawber et al., "Isis Video Shows Death of Jordanian Hostage Muath al-Kasaesbeh," *The Independent*, February 3, 2015, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-video-purports-to-show-jordanian-pilot-hostage-moaz-al-kasasbeh-being-burned-to-death-10021462.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 60 David C. Rapoport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *The American Political Science Review*, 78 (3) (1984), 660.
- 61 Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Thinking about Terrorism," *The Atlantic*, June (1986). available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1986/06/thinking-about-terrorism/305045/> (accessed June 25, 2018).
- 62 Quoted in "Jordan pilot hostage Moaz al-Kasasbeh 'burned alive,'" *BBC News*, February 3, 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31121160> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 63 See Matt Schiavenza, "Nigeria's Horror in Paris's Shadow: Why a 10-year-old suicide Bomber Isn't Front-page News," *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2015, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/boko-harams-quiet-destruction-of-northeast-nigeria/384416/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 64 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 122.
- 65 See Jethro Mullen et al., "Jordanian Pilot's Father: 'Annihilate' ISIS," *CNN*, February 5, 2015, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/04/world/isis-jordan-reaction/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 66 David Ensor, "Al Qaeda Letter called 'chilling'."
- 67 David Carr, "With Videos of Killings, ISIS Sends Medieval Message by Modern Method," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2014, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/business/media/with-videos-of-killings-isis-hones-social-media-as-a-weapon.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 68 Brian Knowlton, "Digital War Takes Shape on Websites Over ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2014, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/middleeast/us-avidly-rebuts-isis-propaganda-on-arab-social-media.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 69 See esp. J. M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 70 See Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *ICSR*, January 26, 2015, available at: <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- 71 Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 112.
- 72 Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to Be Human* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 290.

- 73 See esp. Kathy Gilsinan, "Is ISIS's Social-Media Power Exaggerated?" *The Atlantic*, February 23, 2015, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/is-iss-social-media-power-exaggerated/385726/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 74 See <https://twitter.com/TAPAlerts/status/505937525312356352> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 75 See Taylor Luck, "Have US Laws Created an Online Haven for Islamic State Propaganda?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 25, 2015, available at: <https://m.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0825/Have-US-laws-created-an-online-haven-for-Islamic-State-propaganda> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 76 J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, March 2015, available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 77 Gilsinan, "Is ISIS's Social-Media Power Exaggerated?"
- 78 J. M. Berger, "Taming ISIS on Twitter: More than a Game of Whack-a-Mole," CNN, April 2, 2015, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/13/opinions/isis-twitter-crackdown/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 79 Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, "A 6-Point Plan to Defeat ISIS in the Propaganda War," *Time*, March 30, 2015, available at: <http://time.com/3751659/a-6-point-plan-to-defeat-isis-in-the-propaganda-war/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 80 Berger, "Taming ISIS on Twitter."
- 81 See Brian Ross et al., "Twitter Escalates Its Own ISIS Battle: 2,000 Accounts Suspended Last Week," *ABC News*, March 2, 2015, available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/twitter-escalates-isis-skirmish-2000-accounts-suspended-week/story?id=29335434> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 82 See Alex Hern, "Isis Threatens Twitter Employees over Blocked Accounts," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/mar/02/isis-threatens-twitter-employees-over-blocked-accounts-jack-dorsey> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 83 Rita Katz, "The State Department's Twitter War with ISIS Is Embarrassing," *Time*, September 16, 2014, available at: <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 84 See Aisha Gani and Ewen MacAskill, "Suspected UK extremist and English-speaking Boy Warn of Attacks in Isis Video," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/islamic-state-hostage-video-shows-young-boy-and-jihadi-warning-of-attacks> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 85 See Taylor Berman, "Graphic Execution Video Shows ISIS Drowning, Immolating Prisoners," *Gawker*, June 23, 2015, available at: <http://gawker.com/graphic-execution-video-shows-isis-drowning-immolating-1713379881> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 86 See Nicole Rojas, "Islamic State Execution: New Video Shows Isis Crushing Prisoner under Tank," *International Business Times*, October 26, 2015, available at: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/islamic-state-execution-new-video-shows-isis-crushing-prisoner-under-tank-1525630> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 87 See Adam Withnall, "Isis Video Showing Libyan 'Spy' Dragged to Death behind a Speeding Truck Betrays Disturbing New Trend," *The Independent*, October 20, 2015,

available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-video-showing-libyan-spy-dragged-to-death-behind-a-speeding-truck-betrays-disturbing-new-trend-a6701521.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).

- 88 See Shiraz Maher, "Burning the Earth: Isis and the Threat to Britain," *The New Statesman*, November 16, 2015, available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2015/11/burning-earth-isis-and-threat-britain> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 89 See Lizzie Dearden, "Isis Video: Full Transcript of 'A Message to David Cameron'," *The Independent*, January 5, 2016, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-video-full-transcript-of-a-message-to-david-cameron-siddhartha-dhar-isa-dare-a6797671.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 90 See Aisha Gani, "London Man says Child in Isis Video is his Grandson," *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/04/child-isis-video-son-london-woman-grandfather-lewisham-channel-four> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 91 See Lin Jenkins, "Isis Video Shows Killing of Syrian Troops at Palmyra Amphitheatre," *The Observer*, July 4, 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/04/isis-video-killing-palmyra-amphitheatre> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 92 See John Horgan and Mia Bloom, "This Is How the Islamic State Manufactures Child Militants," *Vice*, July 8, 2015, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/this-is-how-the-islamic-state-manufactures-child-militants> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 93 See Max Abrahms, "Why Groups Use Terrorism: A Reassessment of the Conventional Wisdom," April 22, 2015, available at: <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2015/04/22/why-groups-use-terrorism-a-reassessment-of-the-conventional-wisdom/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 94 Giorgio, *Memoirs of an Italian Terrorist*, trans. Antony Shugaar (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 64.
- 95 See Alex Perry, "Once Upon a Jihad," available at: <http://reprints.longform.org/perry-once-upon-a-jihad> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 96 Alissa J. Rubin and Lilia Blaise, "Killing Twice for ISIS and Saying So Live on Facebook," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/15/world/europe/france-stabbing-police-magnanville-isis.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 97 See Lizzie Dearden, "France Police Stabbing: Facebook Live Video Shows Isis Supporter Who Killed Officer and Wife Calling for More Attacks," *The Independent*, June 14, 2016, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/video-shows-isis-supporter-who-stabbed-french-police-officer-and-wife-to-death-paris-magnanville-a7081816.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 98 See Matt Vasilogambros, "Was Orlando the Deadliest Mass Shooting in U.S. History?," *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2016, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/orlando-deadliest-mass-shooting/487058/> (accessed June 30, 2018). This, alas, must now be revised: on October 1, 2017 Stephen Paddock gunned down on a crowd of concertgoers from his Las Vegas hotel room, killing 58 and injuring almost 500 (see "Deadliest Mass Shootings in Modern US History," *CNN*, May 23, 2018, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/16/us/20-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-u-s-history-fast-facts/index.html> (accessed June 30, 2018)).

- 99 See Caitlin Dewey and Sarah Parnass, "For the First Time an Alleged Terrorist has Broadcast a Confession in Real Time on Facebook Live," *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/06/14/for-the-first-time-an-alleged-terrorist-has-broadcast-a-confession-in-real-time-on-facebook-live/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 100 Jason Burke, "How the Changing Media is Changing Terrorism," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/how-changing-media-changing-terrorism> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 101 See Jason Burke, "Theatre of Terror," *The Observer*, November 21, 2004, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2004/nov/21/features.review7> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 102 See "Who was French Police Killer Larossi Abballa?," *BBC News*, June 14, 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36526067> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 103 Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (New York: Liveright, 2014), 69.
- 104 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 41.
- 105 Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *The American Historical Review*, 100 (2) 1995), 309.
- 106 Gray, *The Warriors*, 29.
- 107 Jenkins, "International Terrorism," 4.
- 108 Ibid., 7.
- 109 Ibid., 12.
- 110 See, for example, "A Glimpse of Omar Mateen's Past, from School Reports to Job Dismissal," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2016, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/18/us/omar-mateen-documents.html?_r=0 (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 111 Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 8.
- 112 See Tim Lister, "Terror Export Fears as ISIS 'Caliphate' Shrinks," *CNN*, July 11, 2016, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/11/middleeast/isis-territory-analysis-lister/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 113 Karen J. Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 1.
- 114 Quoted in Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "Teenage Girl Leaves for ISIS, and Others Follow," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2015, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/25/world/from-studious-teenager-to-isis-recruiter.html> (accessed June 21, 2018).
- 115 Quoted in Greenwood et al., "Police Spoke to Schoolgirl Jihadi Brides in December."
- 116 Quoted in Laura Smith Spark, "UK Girls' List for Syria Trip: Makeup, Bras, Epilator," *CNN*, March 10, 2015, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/10/europe/uk-missing-girls-syria/index.html> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 117 See esp. Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(1) (2017).
- 118 See Simon Cottee and Jack Cunliffe, "Watching ISIS: How Young Adults Engage with Official English-language ISIS Videos," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2018).

- 119 See Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style," *Jihadology*, July 6, 2015, available at: <https://jihadology.net/2015/07/06/guest-post-isis-and-the-hollywood-visual-style/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 120 Martyn Frampton et al., *The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online*, Policy Exchange, 2017, available at: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-New-Netwar-2.pdf>, 15 (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 121 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 112.
- 122 See "New video message from The Islamic State: 'The Failed Confrontation—Wilāyat Saynā'," *Jihadology*, March 23, 2018, available at: <https://jihadology.net/category/the-islamic-state/wilayat-sina-sinai/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 123 See "New Video Message from The Islamic State: 'Inside the Caliphate #7'," *Jihadology*, February 7, 2018, available at: <https://jihadology.net/2018/02/07/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-inside-the-caliphate-7/> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 124 See "Europol Internet Referral Unit One year On," July 22, 2016, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-internet-referral-unit-one-year> (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 125 See Ellie Hall, "Telegram App Shuts Down 78 ISIS-Related Channels," *Buzzfeed News*, November 18, 2015, available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/elliethall/telegram-app-shuts-down-78-isis-related-channels?utm_term=.jbryWerKD#.xulMnE3e4 (accessed June 30, 2018).
- 126 Cottee and Cunliffe, "Watching ISIS."

Chapter 2 The Meaning and Appeal of Jihadist Violence

- 1 Martin Amis, *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* (London: Knopf Jonathan Cape, 2008).
- 2 Bernard-Henri Levy, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* (London: Duckworth, 2003), 82.
- 3 Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo Delinquente* (Milan: Hoepli, 1876).
- 4 See Souad Mekhennet and Adam Goldman, "'Jihadi John': Islamic State Killer is Identified as Londoner Mohammed Emwazi," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2015, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jihadi-john-the-islamic-state-killer-behind-the-mask-is-a-young-londoner/2015/02/25/d6dbab16-bc43-11e4-bdfa-b8e8f594e6ee_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.17a8d512e5a6 (accessed June 21, 2018).
- 5 Cesare Lombroso, *Comptes-Rendus du VI-e Congrès International D'Anthropologie Criminelle* (Hachette BNF, 1906), XXXI.
- 6 Leon Radzinowicz, *Ideology and Crime* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 48.
- 7 See Heather Saul, "'Jihadi John': Mohammed Emwazi was 'Extremely Kind, Gentle, Beautiful Young Man', says Cage Director," *The Independent*, February 26, 2015, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/jihadi-john-mohammed-emwazi-was-an-extremely-kind-gentle-beautiful-young-man-says-cage-director-10073338.html> (accessed June 21, 2018).
- 8 According to one news report on Emwazi, "a school picture captured what appeared to be an angelic smile" (Brian Ross, Rhonda Schwartz and Rym Momtaz, "Officials: Mom Knew Her Son Mohammed Emwazi Was 'Jihadi John'," *ABC News*,

ISIS and the Pornography of Violence

Simon Cottee



ANTHEM PRESS

Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
www.anthempress.com

This edition first published in UK and USA 2019
by ANTHEM PRESS
75–76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
and
244 Madison Ave #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

© Simon Cottee 2019

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of both the copyright
owner and the above publisher of this book.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-78308-965-9 (Hbk)
ISBN-10: 1-78308-965-2 (Hbk)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78308-968-0 (Pbk)
ISBN-10: 1-78308-968-7 (Pbk)

This title is also available as an e-book.