UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Virtual Violence:

Militant Imagery, Online Communication, and the Islamic State

PHD DISSERTATION 2018 · SIMONE MOLIN FRIIS

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
PHD DISSERTATION 2018 · ISBN 978-87-7209-209-6

SIMONE MOLIN FRIIS

Virtual Violence:
Militant Imagery, Online Communication, and the Islamic State

SL grafik

Virtual Violence:
Militant Imagery, Online Communication, and the Islamic State

PhD Candidate: Simone Molin Friis

Supervisor: Professor Lene Hansen

Institution: Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen

Project Affiliation: Images and International Security

Funding: Danish Council for Independent Research (Grant Number: DFF – 1327-00056B)

Research Center Affiliation: Centre for Advanced Security Theory (CAST)

Program: 4 + 4 PhD Program (September 2014 – August 2018)

PhD dissertation submitted on August 29, 2018.

PhD dissertation 2018 © Simone Molin Friis
ISBN 978-87-7209-209-6 (Printed book)
ISBN 978-87-7209-214-0 (E-book)
Printed by SL grafik, Frederiksberg, Denmark (slgrafik.dk)

Table of Contents

Abstract 4
Acknowledgements and Funding 5
A Note on Transliteration 7
Word List 8
List of Figures and Tables 13

Introduction 15

1. 'A War of Images': Introducing the Case and Positioning the Study 35

2. 'Violent Visual Strategies': Theorizing Militant Imagery and Online Communication 69

3. 'Analyzing Militant Imagery Online': Research Design, Methodology, and Sub-Studies 103

4. 'Virtual Caliphate': The Islamic State's Media Campaign and Online World 149

5. 'Public Displays of Violence': The Islamic State's Execution Videos 197

6. 'Mobilization to Violence': The Islamic State's Online Mobilizing Techniques 241

7. 'Virtual Battlespaces': Countering Militant Imagery 287

Conclusion 327

Danish Abstract 343
Bibliography 344
A Note on Data 383

Abstract

This dissertation concerns the Islamic State's use of militant imagery and online communication. Militant groups have produced visual communication displaying and promoting violent methods as part of their political struggles for decades, if not centuries. Yet, in recent years, the transformation of the communication and information environment has introduced significant changes in how militant imagery functions on the global stage. Today, modern multiple media and digital technology provide militant groups with new opportunities for shaping their public image and reaching audiences across the globe through dynamic online networks.

The Islamic State has exploited and accelerated the communicative possibilities of the Web 2.0 era as part of its violent political struggle. In many ways, the political significance of the Islamic State lies not only in the group's territorial conquests, but also in its communicative and symbolic power and its ability to shape public imaginaries and reach a global audience through spectacular and violent imagery. Hence, the Islamic State provides a critical case for exploring the transforming security landscape in an increasingly interconnected, digital, and image-saturated world.

To examine the Islamic State's use of militant imagery and online communication, the dissertation conducts a problem-driven, multi-level analysis consisting of four sub-studies, which build on a mixed set of methods and data collection techniques. The first sub-study conducts a mapping of the overall characteristics of the Islamic State's media campaign and online network, focusing on strategy, structure, output, and circulation style. The second sub-study examines the Islamic State's use of public displays of violence, focusing on the group's execution videos. The third sub-study addresses the debate on online radicalization by exploring the Islamic State's online mobilizing techniques aimed at European citizens. Finally, the fourth sub-study examines the measures aimed at countering the Islamic State's online activities and discusses the strategic and democratic challenges of the fight against militant imagery in the digital age.

Through these studies, the dissertation contributes to contemporary academic debates and policy issues on the role of imagery in contemporary security politics, the propaganda strategies of jihadist groups, the virtual dimension of mobilization to violence, and the role of online communication in contemporary warfare.

Acknowledgements and Funding

This project was carried out as part of the 'Images and International Security' research project at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen (2014-2018). 'Images and International Security' is led by professor Lene Hansen and funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research (grant number: DFF – 1327-00056B). I want to sincerely thank my supervisor Lene Hansen and the members of the 'Images and International Security' research group, including Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, Dean Cooper-Cunningham, Jakob Dreyer, Fanny Hue Knudsen, Megan MacKenzie, Iver B. Neumann, Sari Youssef Saadi, Johan Spanner, Alexei Tsinovoi, Natascha Fonnesbech Vogel, He Wei, and Michael C. Williams, for invaluable comments, discussions, and support throughout the last four years.

The research presented in this dissertation has benefited greatly from two research stays at the University of Queensland and the University of Ottawa respectively. I want to sincerely thank Roland Bleiker and the researchers of the IR group at the University of Queensland, including Constance Duncombe, Federica Caso, and Kathryn Brimblecombe-Fox, for hosting me and discussing my research. I am also grateful to Michael C. Williams, Rita Abrahamsen, the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS), and the Security Studies Network (SSN) at the University of Ottawa for allowing me to visit and for valuable comments on the project. These research stays were made possible by a generous elite research travel grant (Eliteforsk) from the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Knud Højgaards Fond and the PhD program at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, also kindly supported my research stays abroad.

Numerous individuals have provided helpful comments on parts of the project. I am immensely grateful to Isabel Bramsen, Maja Touzari Greenwood, and Lars Erslev Andersen for invaluable discussions, support, and comments on drafts and ideas throughout the entire project. Moreover, the project benefited greatly from the comments of Lene Hansen, Michael C. Williams, and Karen Lund Petersen, who read and commented on a draft of the entire dissertation at the final seminar four months before submission. For discussions and comments on papers and drafts, I want to thank Anne Astrup Madsen, Manni Crone, Søren Friis, Troels Engel Gauslå, Tobias Gemmerli, Joseph Hamood, Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, Peter Marcus Kristensen, Stine Møller Kristensen, Helle Malmvig, Susanne Molin

Friis, Stefanie Reher, Gary Schaub, Maria Stage, Rens van Munster, Christian Rostbøll, and the PhD group at the Department of Political Science. I also want to thank various external partners in Denmark and abroad for showing an interest in my work and for thought-provoking conversations.

This dissertation has benefited from excellent research assistance at various stages of the study. I am very grateful to Matthew Cronin, Jakob Dreyer, Joseph Hamood, Sari Saadi, Naser Tahtamouni, and Anna Warrington for invaluable assistance and discussions. Moreover, I want to thank Tobias Bornakke from 'Analyse & Tal' for crucial assistance with a number of scripts in the final phase of the project. Finally, I want to thank Tommy Speedtsberg Andersen for assistance with the front page and Rasmus Molin Friis for discussions on the use of technical film and media terms.

Parts of the research presented in the dissertation have previously been presented in two peer-reviewed articles published in *European Journal of International Relations* and *International Affairs*. I thank the editors of the two journals for allowing me to reuse arguments in my dissertation.

A Note on Transliteration

Arabic words are transliterated using an adjusted version of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* system. Note that for the sake of readability '‌ع' (ayn) and '‌ء' (hamza) are only shown as an apostrophe (') in the middle of words, but not included at the beginning or the end of words. Also note that long vowels are not indicated with a macron and that the definite article (ال) is written 'al-' for both words that begin with a sun letter and words that begin with a moon letter.

Common Arabic words listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (e.g. jihad) are not italicized, nor are the names of groups frequently mentioned in the international media (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra). Moreover, the names of the media entities of the Islamic State and other militant groups always follow the groups' own transliteration, even if the transliteration violates the rules listed here.

When available, the titles of the Islamic State's Arabic, French, and German media products follow the group's English translations. When English translations are not available, the titles are translated into English by the author and checked by a native speaker or a language officer from the Danish military.

Word List

Although key terms will be explained throughout the dissertation, this wordlist summarizes the main foreign and technical terms and can be used for reference while reading, if desired.

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S DISCOURSE

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (أبو بكر البغدادي): The leader of the Islamic State. Born Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri in Samarra, Iraq. Baghdadi assumed leadership of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in May 2010 and was named the caliph of the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014.

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani (أبو محمد العدناني): A senior leader and official spokesperson for the Islamic State. Born Taha Subhi Falaha in Syria and killed in August 2016.

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (أبو مصعب الزرقاوي): The leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) until his death in 2006 and a key figure in the Islamic State's media products.

al-Bayan Radio (إذاعة البيان): The Islamic State's radio. *Bayan* means 'statement' or 'report'.

al-Furqān Media Foundation (مؤسسة الفرقان للإنتاج الإعلامي): The Islamic State's oldest and official media production entity. *Al-Furqān* means 'the criterion' (i.e. the 25th sura of the Quran).

al-Hashd al-Shaabi (الحشد الشعبي): An umbrella organization of various predominantly Shia armed groups fighting the Islamic State. Also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

al-Hayat Media Center (مركز الحياة للإعلام): The Islamic State's international media production entity. *Hayat* means 'life'.

al-Himma Library (مكتبة الهمة): The Islamic State's official library. *Himma* means 'intention' or 'endeavor'.

al-I'tisam Foundation (مؤسسة الاعتصام): One of the Islamic State's central media production entities. *I'tisam* means 'preserving' or 'safe-guarding'.

al-Khilafah (الخلافة): The Caliphate.

al-wala wal-bara (الولاء والبراء): 'Loyalty and disavowal'. The expression defines an antagonistic relationship between those deemed true Muslims and those deemed disbelievers or apostates.

Ajnad Foundation (مؤسسة أجناد): One of the Islamic State's central media production entities specializing in producing Islamic songs, so-called *anashid*.

Amir al-mu'minin (أمير المؤمنين): 'Commander of the Faithful', a title reserved for the early caliphs.

Amaq Agency (وكالة أعماق): News agency linked to the Islamic State. Amaq is a reference to a Syrian town with an apocalyptic status.

Ayman al-Zawahiri (أيمن الظواهري): Current leader of al-Qaeda.

Bay'a (بيعة): Pledge of allegiance.

Caliphate News (أخبار الخلافة): News agency linked to the Islamic State operating on Telegram.

Cubs of the Caliphate (أشبال الخلافة): The Islamic State's army of child soldiers.

Dabiq (دابق): An international magazine produced by al-Hayat Media Center. Like Amaq, Dabiq is a reference to a Syrian town with apocalyptic status.

Dar al-Islam (دار الإسلام): The territory, where Islamic law prevails. Also, the title of a French magazine produced by al-Hayat Media Center.

Da'wa (دعوة): Inviting people to understand the worship of Allah as expressed in the Quran.

Ghazwat (غزوات): 'Raids'. In this dissertation, the term refers to the Islamic State's organization of raids on online platforms.

Hadd (حد), plural: hudud (حدود): Literally 'limit' or 'boundary'. Fixed religious punishments specified in Islamic scriptures.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (هيئة تحرير الشام): 'Assembly for Liberation of the Levant'. A coalition of Sunni militant groups fighting the Syrian regime, including Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna.

Hijra (هجرة): Immigration to the Caliphate.

Hisba (حسبة): Religious police in the Caliphate, who maintain public law and order.

Jabhat al-Nusra (جبهة النصرة): Syrian opposition group linked to al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusra broke its allegiance with al-Qaeda in 2016 and changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The group later became part of the coalition Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Jihad (جهاد): The term 'jihad' comes from the Arabic root verb *jahada* (جَهَدَ), which literally means 'to strive', 'to struggle', or 'to exert effort'. In Islamic theology, the concept is usually understood both as an inner spiritual struggle and an external battle for one's religion.

"Jihadi John": British Mohammed Emwazi, known as "Jihadi John", is one of the Islamic State's most infamous executioners and the ringleader of a group of British IS-militants known as "the Beatles".

Kafir (كافر): Disbeliever.

Khawarij (خوارج): A religious sect that caused disputes among Muslims shortly after the Prophet's death during the First Fitna. The Islamic State's opponents refer to the group as the 'Khawarij'.

Mujahid (مجاهد): A person who engages in jihad.

Murtad (مرتد): Apostate, i.e. one who has turned his back on Islam.

Mushrik (مشرك): Polytheist.

Muwahhid (موحد): Monotheist.

Mahdi (مهدي): Islamic messianic figure.

Nashid (نشيد), plural: anashid (أناشيد): An Islamic chant, hymn, or form of vocal music following a poetic metrical rhythm.

Nashir News Agency (وكالة ناشر): News agency for the Islamic State operating on Telegram.

Nusayri (نصيري): Derogatory term for Alawites, i.e. the religious sect of the Syrian regime.

Rafida (رافضة): 'Rejectionists'. A derogatory term for Shia Muslims used by the Islamic State.

Rumiyah: International magazine produced by al-Hayat Media Center from September 2016.

Shirk (شرك): Polytheism.

Safavid (صفوية): Reference to the 16th - 17th century Safavid dynasty in Persia, which installed Shia Islam in Iran. The term is used by the Islamic State to refer to Shia groups and Iran-backed actors.

Shahid (شهيد): Martyr.

Taghut (طاغوت): Transgressor. The Islamic State uses the term, when referring to political leaders, who do not support the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam and/or who wage war against the group.

Takfir (تكفير): Excommunication. The declaration of a Muslim as an apostate.

Tawhid (توحيد): Monotheism, the oneness of God.

Yaqeen Media Foundation (مؤسسة اليقين): Pro-IS media group.

Wilaya (ولاية): Province, e.g. Wilayat al-Raqqa.[1]

Umma (امة): The Islamic community of believers. *Umma* means 'nation'.

[1] Note that the common noun 'wilaya' is transliterated with the suffix '-t', when part of a proper noun.

TECHNICAL WORDS

Algorithm: A mathematical process or formula that solves a task in a logical manner.

Application Programming Interface (API): A software that accesses the underlying structure of platforms and connects users and servers. APIs provide a way of accessing the social media platform that circumvents the platform's website and instead connects directly to the underlying infrastructure.

Bit.ly: URL shortener.

Bots: Computer programs that mimic and interact with other users on social media.

Browser: Software program primarily used to access content on the World Wide Web in a simplified manner, e.g. Chrome and Firefox.

Clear web: The open, accessible, and searchable part of the Internet. Also known as the 'surface web'.

Counter-narratives: The intentional and direct effort to deconstruct, discredit, or demystify violent extremist messaging through ideology, logic, fact, or humor.

Cyberspace: The total landscape of technology-mediated communication. It includes the Internet, the World Wide Web, phone networks, satellite and cable television, radio, the Global Positioning System (GPS), air traffic control systems, military rocket guidance systems, and sensor networks.

Dark web: An unindexed and unsearchable portion of the deep web that can only be accessed through special anonymity software, such as the Tor browser. Dark web URLs often end in the '.onion' suffix.

Deep web: The parts of the Internet that are not indexed by standard search engines. Access to the content of the deep web is restricted to users with special permissions and privileges.

Domain name: Domain names are used to identify websites on the Internet. The Domain Name System (DNS) translates the domain name into an IP-address.

End-to-end encryption: A form of encryption that prevents even service providers from seeing the content of the communication.

Flagging: A mechanism for reporting offensive content to a platform. It is used on nearly all sites that host user-generated content, including Facebook, Twitter, Vine, Flickr, YouTube, and Instagram.

Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT): A coalition between Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube (Google) to counter terrorist content on their platforms.

Image hashing: The process of constructing a hash value based on the visual content of an image. Image hashing examines the content of an image and constructs a hash value that uniquely identifies an

input image based on its content. Image hashing identifies images that are similar to the human eye, even if they are in different scales.

Internet: A system of interconnected computer networks. The Internet comprises both hardware and software that facilitate data transfer across a network of networks. Functioning primarily as a global data exchange system, it carries a wide range of resources such as e-mail, instant messaging, file transfer, virtual worlds, peer-to-peer file sharing, and the World Wide Web.

IP-address: An 'Internet Protocol' (IP) address is a number that provides an identity to a networked device.

Internet Service Provider (ISP): A company that provides access to the Internet.

ISP-filtering: When an ISP restricts access for a specific IP-address, because it appears on a list over blacklisted IP-addresses.

Machine Learning: The science of getting computers to act without being explicitly programmed.

Redirect Method: A form of algorithm manipulation, which uses AdWords targeting tools and curated YouTube videos to reach people, who actively search for extremist content.

Takedowns: Removal of content and websites from the Internet.

Telegram: An encrypted, free, cross-platform messaging app. Telegram offers features such as channels, chats, and bots, and makes it easy to upload and share videos, text, and voice messages.

Tor browser: An anonymizing software program that enables users to hide their unique IP-address. The Tor browser can be used to access the dark web.

URL: A 'Uniform Resource Locator' (URL) specifies addresses on the World Wide Web.

Virtual Private Network (VPN): A popular Internet security method that allows users to send and receive data, while maintaining the secrecy of a private network. A VPN changes the private IP-address of the user with one provided by the VPN, thereby hiding the physical location of the user.

World Wide Web: An assemblage of files (audio, video, text, and multimedia) each assigned an address, which are connected to one another through the formation of hyperlinks.

Web 2.0: Term used to describe the second generation of the World Wide Web. It refers to the move from static HTML pages to more interactive and dynamic websites and applications that prioritize user-generated content, such as social media.

List of Figures and Tables

Table 0.1: Overview of the Sub-Studies and Guiding Analytical Questions. 23
Table 0.2: Summary of Main Terms. 29
Table 1.1: The Islamic State and its Forerunners. 46
Table 2.1: Transformations of Militant Imagery in the Web 2.0 era. 100
Figure 3.1: Analyzing Militant Imagery Online – Main Analytical Frames and Methods. 117
Table 3.1: Overview of the Sub-Studies and Guiding Analytical Questions. 118
Table 3.2: Overview of the Mapping. 125
Table 3.3: Screening of Edited Videos. 128
Table 3.4: Execution Videos selected for In-Depth Analysis. 128
Table 3.5: Analysis Scheme for Execution Videos. 130
Table 3.6: Speeches of Official Spokespersons. 133
Table 3.7: European Videos selected for In-Depth Analysis. 133
Table 3.8: Selected Magazines. 134
Table 3.9: Analysis Scheme for Online Mobilization. 135
Figure 3.2: Testing Google Cloud Vision. 140
Figure 4.1: Configurations of the Virtual Caliphate. 159
Figure 4.2: The Islamic State's Official Media Entities. 160
Table 4.1: Media Offices in the Provinces (2014-2017). 164
Table 4.2: Local Media Offices producing Edited Videos (January 2018 - May 2018). 166
Figure 4.3: Top Domains from URLs in IS-Telegram Channels (January 2018 to May 2018). 187
Table 4.3: Engagement with Bit.ly Links (January 2018 - May 2018). 189
Table 4.4: Average Clicks per Category. 190
Table 4.5: Speed of User Engagement. 191
Table 4.6: Number of Countries Links are accessed from. 192
Figure 4.4: Visualization of Traffic Data (January 2018 - May 2018). 192
Figure 4.5: Visualization of Traffic Data (excluding April 2018). 193
Table 4.7: Detection. 194
Map 5.1: Location of the Provinces producing Execution Videos (Feb 2015 – Nov 2016). 212
Table 5.1. Categories of Videos. 213
Table 5.2: Videos using Children as Executioners (January 2015 - December 2016). 237
Figure 7.1: Number of Edited Videos (February 2015 - January 2016). 317
Figure 7.2: Number of Edited Videos (June 2017 - May 2018). 317
Figure 7.3: Host/Uploader of Promotional Images for Execution Videos. 324
Figure 7.4: Host/Uploader of Promotional Images for Terror-Promoting Videos. 324

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

On August 19, 2014, shortly after 5 p.m. U.S. eastern time, a video lasting 4 minutes and 40 seconds appeared on the social networking platform Diaspora. The slickly produced video, entitled 'A message to America', purported to show the beheading of the American photojournalist James Wright Foley at the hands of a masked member of the militant group known as the Islamic State. In the video, the black-clad militant – later identified as Mohammed Emwazi – condemned the American government's interference with the Islamic State's internal affairs and announced that the execution of Foley was in retaliation for the airstrikes ordered by U.S. President Barack Obama on August 7, 2014. The actual beheading was not explicitly shown in the video. However, the video did show Emwazi slicing Foley's throat, followed by a shot displaying a beheaded body in a prone position with a head placed on the back, thus leaving little hope for Foley's fate. Ominously, the video ended with the reappearance of Emwazi, this time holding another kneeling hostage (the American photojournalist Steven Joel Sotloff) and warning Obama that 'the life of this American citizen depends on your next decision'.

Image 0.1: 'A Message to America', al-Furqān Media Foundation (August 2014).[2]

[2] Image censored by the author. All faces of victims of executions will be censored in the images shown in this dissertation.

I begin this dissertation with the image of James Wright Foley, clad in an orange jumpsuit and kneeling in the desert next to the black-clad Mohammed Emwazi, because this scene better than anything else encapsulates the theme of the dissertation. 'A message to America' was shared on social media two weeks before I started working on the dissertation, and, in many ways, the video came to determine the course of the project. In the following chapters, I will highlight numerous theoretical, methodological, and empirical reasons for why the theme of this dissertation is important. I will explain how the dissertation contributes to important research agendas, and I will emphasize the novelties and strengths of the analytical approach of the study. However, the original motivation for writing this dissertation – and perhaps the most precise presentation of the relevance of the study – is the image of James Wright Foley and Mohammed Emwazi in the desert, both getting ready to be at the center of a 21st century spectacle of violence.

Theme of the Dissertation

This dissertation is about militant imagery and online communication. Militant imagery, understood as *visual communication displaying or promoting violent methods in support of a political cause*, has been part of the political landscape for decades, if not centuries. Yet, in recent years, the transformation of the communication and information environment has introduced significant changes in how militant imagery functions on the global stage. Today, modern multiple media and digital technology provide militant groups with new opportunities for shaping their public image and reaching audiences across the globe through dynamic online networks. The militant group known as the Islamic State has been exceptionally skilled at mobilizing the new communicative possibilities of the 21st century as part of its political struggle and the group is therefore the focus of this dissertation.

The Islamic State became one of the most urgent issues on the global security agenda during the summer of 2014, when the group announced the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate and conquered significant territory in Iraq and Syria (McCants 2015; Stern & Berger 2015; Ingram 2015; Kilcullen 2016). With astonishing speed, the Islamic State went from being dismissed as a 'JV Team'[3] by U.S. President Barack Obama in January 2014 to be named a threat 'beyond anything we have seen' (U.S. Department of Defense 2014) and 'unlike those we have dealt with before' (House of Commons 2014).

[3] 'JV Team' refers to a Junior Varsity basketball team. Obama's 'JV Team'-comment is from a transcript of an interview conducted on January 7, 2014 by David Remnick and published in the *New Yorker* on January 27, 2014.