

This is How We See the War. Counter-narratives of the Conflict in Contemporary Jihadist Visuality

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Abstract

Contemporary warfare, especially from a Western point of view, is more and more an issue of distance, surgical strikes, machine vision and collateral damages. This image of a technical and “clean” war has been largely criticized from a theoretical point of view by the forensic approach promoted by Weizman. In his inspections in war zones, he stresses the importance of a new sensibility towards the indexical nature of photography, promoting the necessity of a counter-narrative towards the Western ideology of war. After addressing these theoretical issues in the context of the contemporary debate in image theory, the essay will focus on how contemporary jihadism ends up adopting the same approach towards images, in order to produce a personal and specific counter-narrative of warfare. The re-appropriation of Western war images and the production of specific visual outputs by groups such as the so-called Islamic State, has a strong political value. This will be demonstrated analyzing images and videos produced by the Islamic State that are largely unknown to the Western public. Here IS’ shows a different face of contemporary warfare, constructing a complex and multi-layered counter-narrative that focuses on concepts such as victimhood and brutality.

Keywords: Terrorism; Islamic State; Visual Culture; Forensic Architecture; Jihad.

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When the Islamic State led by al-Baghdadi released the video portraying the beheading of the reporter James Foley in summer 2014, both the political discourse and the generalist information immediately condemned those horrific images, pointing out in particular their extreme and shocking content. The highly choreographed nature of that spectacle of decapitation highlighted a strong desire to aestheticize the act of killing and yet, at the same time, a great knowledge of the contemporary visual technologies. Western media were surprised by this unforeseen capacity of using the infrastructure of participative web by a group of jihadist militants: were they something more than just some “barbarians” that were trying to reject modernity? The hangman, Jihadi John, acted a crucial part in this mediatic spectacle, performing a new image of the terrorist that made him far more monstrous and disturbing (Chandrasekaran and Prephan 2019). His gory gesture points to a deep and complex symbolic value in Western culture: beheading is indeed a form of complete annihilation, that literally decapitates the hierarchy of the body parts removing the most important one and thus revealing at the same time the constitutive obscenity of the human. As noted by Kristeva in a highly influential work (2014), beheading implies the revelation of a radical form of abjection, the surprising appearance of a grotesque and perturbing inwardness. It is a gesture that, as noted by some scholars, helps to redefine the notion of warrior masculinity in contemporary warfare (Puar 2007), especially because it is an act that is bloody, highly carnal and material, something that needs to be done by an expert and remorseless killer, as proved by the final images of this kind of videos.¹ Therefore, the most radical aggression perpetrated by those images would then be towards the Western way of imagining and visualizing the war in the contemporary age as something that have less and less to do with the physical dimension and the actual possibility to experience the image of dead bodies. Foucault (1995) pointed out that one of the key element of what he labelled a modern sensibility towards death has to do with its exclusion from the field of the visible; as we will try to demonstrate, IS organizes his visual communications around a new visibility of death and violence, while acting inside the paradigm of modernity. Could this specific trait be the strongest attack towards Western imaginary?

The aim of this paper is to provide a general sketch of two different way of framing and visualizing contemporary conflicts, while proposing some hypotheses about a specific aspect of IS’ video production. Much more work is required in order to fully understand the complexity of the Islamic State political project and its relationship to visual communication (Baele, Boyd and Coan, 2020) and many issues would require a specific knowledge of islamist and jihadist Arabic literature (one crucial step in this sense will be to better understand the reception of IS’ images in the wider Islamic context). Nevertheless, this first step into the realm of IS’ visibility will provide some new insights on the programmatic value that the war and its representations have for the Islamic State.

1 Genealogies

To fully understand how radical the peculiar counter-narrative of the war proposed by the Islamic State in its video production is, it may be useful to briefly summarize the main theoretical elements that helped to outline the way in which the Western conception of contemporary warfare has been shaped. Later on, we will analyze more thoroughly specific attempts to counter-narrate this experience. It is a kind of experience that is somehow connected with the images that were produced during the wars as if it exists a kind of anthropological connection between the act of taking an image and the one of taking a life (Grespi 2017: 102-111). The presence of photography in war scenarios was somehow crucial in order to define the specificity and some of the cultural uses of the medium (Grazioli 2000: 57-64; Marra 2017: 14-19) as it has been made evident by the well-known photographs by Roger Fenton. During the Crimean War, he was the first to produce a new way of visualizing the war, relegating the death outside of the frame. As noted by Sontag: “Fenton went about rendering the war a dignified all-male group outing. [...] Fenton’s memorial photograph is a portrait of absence, of death without the dead” (2003: 40).

The exclusion of the dead body from the visual horizon of the war started to become a more and more common element in the Western experience of conflicts: the radical obscenity of the corpse must be outdistanced and

1. *A Message to America* (August 19th, 2014), *A Second Message to America* (September 2nd, 2014), *A Message to the Allies of America* (September 14th, 2014).

kept out of the gaze, because it is too shocking.² The idea that the brutal aspect of the war is something that we are not supposed to see, also concerns who is directly involved in the conflict. In an essay, which remains very useful in order to understand the cultural impact of World War I on visual culture, Benjamin (1999) identifies the cause of the shocks reported by many soldiers lined up in the trenches in the impossibility to have a real experience of war itself. At the same time, World War I also helped to define a new way of visualizing the war zone through the extensive use of aerial photography. It was with the purpose of having a tactical advantage in battle, that a new point of view was sought. What is at stake here is a process of prosthetic unveiling of the invisible and of a progressive verticalization of the military gaze (Virilio 1989).

This new spatial and visual organization of the conflict implied a progressive abstraction of the images from reality: distance allows a better visualization of space, but also excludes the possibility to detect the human element, making less ethically questionable the act of killing, maybe dropping a bomb or a missile.³ It is a whole range of issues that was firstly presented during the massive wars of the 20th century, but only acquired a proper theoretical status during the last decade of it. I am referring specifically to the first Gulf War, during which the idea of war as a (televsual) spectacle was codified (Scurati 2003).⁴

The visual economy of the conflict was dominated (and synthetized) by two main images. On the one hand we have the green low-fi images of the night bombings over Baghdad, while on the other the strange iconic output of the smart bombs, that were able to produce a mortal long-shot of their target, culminating with its destruction (Franklin 1994: 92; Stahl 2018: 21-38). Both are a sort of aseptic, almost abstract images, where the brutality of war is made invisible, or barely imaginable. This new kind of war is not less violent or pledged to kill less people; it is just narrated through the images of it as victimless, virtuous and surgical.

The promise – inscribed in the images of the conflict – to produce a new technically empowered visibility and therefore a more precise and less destructive war, led to a sanitized visuality, where the fetishization of the machine goes together with a disappearance of the dead body (Gusterson 1991; Petley 2003). This set of issues, somehow anticipated by the intuitions of Virilio on the automation of perception and on the gazeless vision (1994), assume nowadays a fundamental theoretical and political value, in war scenarios in which the use of drones is more and more pervasive. Even without discussing a literature that is very vast,⁵ what is important to note here is that the drone is somehow the last incarnation of a typically Western attitude towards the visual imagination of conflicts. The distance between the pilot and his target and the impossibility to visualize its suffering became the distinctive elements of this perspective on war.

The questions that we need to ask now are: how can we criticize this dehumanized vision of war as visual scholars? Are there any other ways to frame and visualize contemporary war? What politics of visuality is inscribed in the way in which jihadist groups produce images? We will try to answer to some of these issues by analysing the ways in which the Islamic State performs a certain narrative of war through its video production. Since a part of this narrative is based on a new protagonism of the concept of proof and war evidence, a small *detournement* in the concept of “forensic turn” can act as a useful theoretical introduction. After all, the work of resignification carried out by Weizman and his team is evident in many of the videos of the Islamic State that we will analyse later on.

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2. This observation somehow predates a more general attitude towards death in contemporary society, that many sociologists date back to the second half of the XXth century, as noted by Ariès (1974), Bauman (1992) and Elias (2001). More generally, the obscene character of the dead body is a recurring element of Western imagination, that dates back to ancient Greece. Even if this issue goes far beyond the limits of the present study, it is important to notice that many fictional works connected with the depiction of acts of killing have shaped our attitude towards death, as highlighted by the explorations of Teodorescu (2015) in literature.
 3. This is particularly true considering the case of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that somehow represented the epitome of this issue. On this topic, see the highly informative notes of Anders (1963).
 4. It is of course true that the role of television was vastly debated during the Vietnam conflict (Hallin 1989; Cumings 1992: 83-102; Hoskins 2004: 13-44). Nevertheless, the specific traits of the Gulf War deeply reconfigured the visual economy of armed warfare; in this sense, as noted by Scurati (2003), while Vietnam was the first TV-war, the Gulf offered the occasion for the first truly televsual war.
 5. See at least Chamayou (2015) and Wall and Monahan (2011).

2 Counter-narratives (I): War Evidences

For many years now, Eyal Weizman and his team are conducting a complex research with the aim of counter-narrate the Western visual interpretation of contemporary warfare. His work seems to be particularly interesting because, by adopting a highly transdisciplinary methodology, he directly deals with the images produced by military drones, showing what it is usually left off-screen, the obscenity that they exclude, the brutal aftermath of their usage. Specifically, as he rightly demonstrated, the primary problem in the analysis of drone images has to do with the so-called threshold of detectability, a limit beyond which the elements of an image are indistinguishable and become a sort of visual noise: “when the size of an object recorded on the negative [...] is close to the size of the material element that records it [...] it is a condition that I refer to [...] as the threshold of detectability: things that hover between being identifiable or not” (Weizman 2017: 20).

As a matter of fact, the resolution of drone strikes’ publicly available images is designed so that the dimension of a single pixel (50x50cm) is bigger than the hole made on the roof of a house by drones’ missiles; the evidence of the attack is therefore made invisible, somehow removed from the images. To use a weighty expression by Weizman, what you cannot see, does not exist (2017: 20-29). In accordance with the arguments of Rancière (2004), the visible is politically defined as a discretionally accessible field. Not every event or every subjectivity has the chance to make itself visible and to appear in the visual (political) arena. Adopting a lexicon that we adapt from Butler (2002), we can go as further as to say that not every victim, in this sense, has an equal right not only to be mourned but even to be seen at all.

To overcome this critical aspect and thus being able to question the surgical narrative of contemporary warfare, Weizmann highlights the necessity of focusing on the operational and evidentiary function of images. It is important to notice, by the way, that what is at stake here is not a revival of the theories of realism that were common during the 20th century, but more intriguingly the necessity to take into account a “debt” inscribed into the images that we are required to fill (Montani 2010). In a cultural climate that is highly receptive towards the problematization of realism in visuality,⁶ the forensic turn theorized by Weizman can be conceptualized as a new sensibility towards the procedures that allow an image to act as a (judicial) evidence.

To do so, Weizman and his team create simulative models based on oral and visual testimonies collected by the victims of drones’ attacks. Each of these fragments of evidence is by definition a political act, often executed at the cost of one’s life.⁷ Those iconic acts request us – both as political subjects and scholars – to uphold: the images are calling out to us (Azoulay 2012). Weizman invites us to fulfill this civic duty by adopting a methodology that seems inspired by the evidential paradigm of Carlo Ginzburg (1989: 87-113), looking for traces, fractures and marginal phenomena: “architectural analysis can provide an alternative pathology of contemporary conflicts” (Weizman 2017: 57). In other words, it is only through a direct and accurate analysis of the images produced by the surgical war that is possible to develop a counter-narrative of this same rhetoric.

The result of this process will be what Weizamn calls the image complex, “a nexus of huge multiplicity of images taken of a site/incident from different perspectives and by different media” (2015: 234). Only through the mutual interaction between the various parts of this new visual object it will be possible to offer a complete and useful evidence of the event; it is only through what we can call a dialectic montage (Eisenstein 1998) that the property of evidentiality can emerge and be fully expressed. At the same time, the issue here is also the possibility of an effective visual ecology, moving from incomplete and partial visual contents. This form of recombination gives the chance to fight the iconic bulimia of the contemporary age (Fontcuberta 2018) and the techno-fetichistic and dehumanizing rhetoric of war.

3 Counter-narratives (II): Contemporary Jihadism

As mentioned, the sudden appearance of Jihadi John left the Western audience – not familiar to thinking at the war as something brutal and gory – shocked and disgusted. The leitmotiv of the invisible, surgical or

6. For a general theoretical overview of this complex theme, see at least Foster (1996) and Weizman (2015).

7. Weizman is right when he reads this practice through the Foucauldian concept of parrhesia, the capacity (and the political choice) to tell the truth before Power, even at risk of life (2001: 15-16).

even inexistent (Baudrillard 1995) war imposed itself as the only legitimate narrative of contemporary warfare, delegitimizing all the other possible perspectives and points of view. Baudrillard's theory – in other words – works well as far as the Western experience of the war is concerned;⁸ Baudrillard himself based his arguments on the analysis of images that were circulating mainly on Western televisions and information networks. What is left unanswered is: which images of the same war other people were watching?

The year 1996 seems crucial from this point of view: it was in that year that the television network Al Jazeera was founded. Its creation represents a fundamental divide in the history of Arabian television with specific regard to journalist communication and war reporting.⁹ The channel developed a personal and highly recognizable style, based on a new relevance of immediate news coverage (Valeriani 2005: 55-59). This allowed the network to act as a source of counter-information and to encourage a new and more direct way of experiencing conflicts (El Oifi 2005), also by showing uncensored images of dead bodies and civil casualties. Muslim spectators, therefore, have seen for years the dead or largely mutilated bodies of their co-religionists; in their visual diet, war is mostly something that has to do with blood, close ups of devastated corpses and mothers that desperately mourn their children.

As pointed out by many visual culture scholars, the cultural value of an image must be evaluated considering the historical and social context in which it is born and spread; images are something that has to do with negotiation and that always look back at what came before them (Pinotti and Somaini 2016). The Islamic State seems to be well aware of this dynamic and to have adopted this idea when producing and virally disseminating its visual contents. This confirms, beyond any possible residual doubt on the topic, that contemporary jihadism is not something that has to do with the archaic and anachronistic re-emergence of a barbaric past;¹⁰ it has to be considered, more problematically, as a constitutive product of the globalized modernity. Baudrillard (1993; 2002) rightly pointed out that terrorism can be conceptualized as a sort of autoimmune disease of modernity, a sort of overturning of that dictatorship of the positive that for Han is a constitutive part of our age:

The cause of an infection is the negativity of the Other, who infiltrates the Same and leads to the formation of antibodies. The infection, on the other hand, comes from an excess of the Same, from the obesity of the system. It is not infectious but adipose. It creates no antibodies. No immunological defense can prevent the proliferation of the Same (2018: 2).

Compared to the jihadist groups that preceded it (as al-Qaeda), the most distinctive trait of the visual strategy of the Islamic State is the unprecedented quantity and quality of the material produced. Even if a complete census of this enormous media output is still not available, the quantitative analysis conducted by some pioneering scholars can give us at least an idea of how large this flow has been. Zelin (2015), in a sample period of seven consecutive days in April 2015 (one of the periods in which the online presence of the Caliphate was most prominent), collected 143 media products, with an enormous prevalence of visual material (84%); Winter (2015), in a sample period of approximately a month, identified 1146 different media events. This overwhelming visual mass still needs to be analyzed in depth, but the study of this preliminary data and a direct access to the material released by the Caliphate indicates that the vast majority of this media production – even if not entirely constituted by executions – revolves around a precise and very distinctive attempt to create a narrative of contemporary warfare that opposes the Western imaginary point-by-point.

As a matter of fact, the majority of these videos is aimed at a regional and Middle-Eastern audience (they are usually in Arabic and without translation in any European language); their purpose is in this sense highly political, as made evident by the continuous stressing on the theme of the wounded Ummah and on the realized dream of a new Islamic Caliphate. The real visual protagonists in this context (as highlighted also in the pages

8. The narrative of the war as something surgical, where the physical consequences of the bombings and the corpses of the victims are excluded from the field of the visible, reveals here its political and ideological nature. The case of the second Gulf War, read by the vast majority of Western spectators as something distant and bloodless (Petley 2003) is in this sense quintessential. As a matter of fact, the proliferation of death images on the web, especially but not exclusively on shock sites such as *Ogrish*, made clear that a different visual interpretation of the conflict was available but made politically irrelevant.

9. On the history of the network, see the works of el-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003) and Della Ratta (2005).

10. Non-casually, in non-specialist literature, the best-selling author that writes on terrorism seems to be Stakelbeck (2011; 2015), that in his books argues that contemporary jihadism is an archaic phenomenon, based on gruesome barbarism and low education.

of the official magazines of the Caliphate¹¹) are not the orange-clothed Western prisoners, but rather the many dead bodies of the Islamic State's citizens, hit by the bombings of the International Coalition.¹²

It is a kind of image that always had a fundamental role in the visual rhetoric of the Islamic State and that is announced (even if in an embryonic form) before the formal declaration of the Caliphate, as we see in the video *Series of the Life from the Words of the 'Ulamā on the Project of the Islamic State #3 – Abū Yahyā al-Lībī* (January 4th 2014).¹³ In this relatively short video, that is part of a series that appears crucial in order to understand the state-building's project of al-Baghdadi, we find many visual topoi that will acquire a programmatic value in the later communication of the Islamic State. Already in the initial video-nasheed¹⁴ we can clearly see the image of a dead militant (probably killed by enemy bombings), framed in a close-up and accompanied by the sentence “for it is Jihad that gives life” [fig. 1]. Later on, a much more dramatic focus is reserved for the image of the young children killed by the bombings. Here we can note a peculiar insistency on the dead [fig. 2] or sometimes even disfigured body of these young citizens, often provocatively intertwined with operational drone images or with the triumphalist poses of Western politicians.

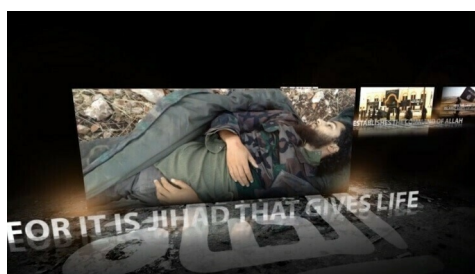


Figure 1

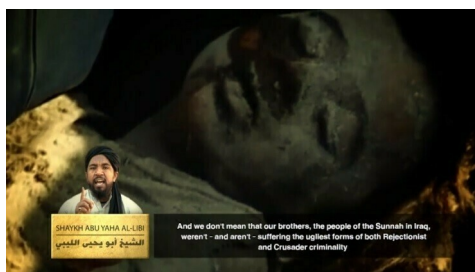


Figure 2

The theme is then more diffusely elaborated in later iterations, such as the well-known *My Oath to the Islamic State* (April 11th 2014),¹⁵ in which the former German rapper Deso Dogg reconstructs in great detail his change of life and the decision to join the Islamic State.¹⁶ In one of the most intense and dramatic moments of the

11. In the vast literature on the topic, see at least: Uberman and Shay (2016), Welch (2018), Abdelrahim (2019).
12. Some examples of this rhetoric are offered by the images of Anonymous (2014; 2015; 2017).
13. <https://jihadology.net/2014/01/04/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-2/> (Last accessed: 20-01-2020).
14. Nasheeds are typical Islamic cappella singings, whose contents are based on traditions, historical or recent events that concern the whole religious community.
15. <https://jihadology.net/2014/04/11/al-tibiyyan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-abu-tal%e1%b8%a5ah-al-almani-deso-dogg-my-oath-to-the-islamic-state/> (Last accessed: 20-01-2020).
16. This is a recurring format in the early production of the Islamic State; among the many possible examples, see at least: *There is no Life Without Jihad* (July, 12th 2014), <https://jihadology.net/2014/06/19/al-%e1%b8%a5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-there-is-no-life-without-jihad/> (Last accessed: 03-02-2020); *Stories from the Land of the Living: Abū Khālid al-Kambūdī* (April 21st 2015), <https://jihadology.net/2015/04/21/al-%e1%b8%a5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-stories-from-the-land-of-the-living-abu-khalid-al-kambudi/>

video, we see the profile of the militant and the superimposed brutal images of the dead bodies of IS' children [fig. 3]. This specific shot helps to strengthen the narrative that we mentioned above and recurs various time during the whole video: its recurrence is useful in order to underline the quintessential role played by the unbearable images of the wounded Ummah in the decision to make hijra and join the ranks of the Islamic State.¹⁷ As we can see, the theme of the Western's invasion of the sacred sites of Islam and of the consequent indiscriminate killing of civilians (especially children) is recurrent in the Caliphate's propaganda and – surprisingly enough, considering the tumultuous relation between the two factions – is something that al-Baghdadi borrows from al-Qaeda's rhetoric.¹⁸ The idea of an unjustified and violent aggression from the Western nations is a crucial leitmotiv in al-Baghdadi's state-building strategy, to such an extent that in various videos this topic contributes to define a whole set of aesthetic choices.



Figure 3

This is clearly expressed in the very influential *Although the Disbelievers Dislike It* (November 16th 2014),¹⁹ whose rhetoric is based on the juxtaposition of two different and strictly connected moments: the one that we can call of the attack (where the coalition's bombings are presented through operational images) and the one focused on the consequences, with a specific attention for damaged structures and wounded or dead people, always framed in extreme close ups. The obsessive presence of this kind of shots [fig. 4-5] metonymically evokes the crushed lives of the citizens, whose corpses are shown without any censure. War is a gory activity and this law is part of a vast list of ideological oppositions: we/them, real Islam/Western decadence, true faith/apostasy; if the end of time is approaching,²⁰ the radicalization of the positions and the final confrontation with the enemy is unavoidable.



Figure 4

Therefore, in denouncing the mortal consequences of the coalition's military operations (that are usually not advertised on Western media), the Islamic State impeaches the supposedly surgical and aseptic aspect of the

(Last accessed: 03-02-2020).

17. This specific theme is recurring also in the testimonies of the younger members of the Islamic State: "I waited a lot [...] but during the evening I showed her on my laptop the pictures of the Syrian dead and wounded children: come here, look, imagine they were your children... would you like your children to be out there suffering while the Islamic community looks back? Do you understand our duty to help them?" (Migotto and Morelli 2017: 28; translated by the author).
18. See for instance the texts collected by Lawrence (2005).
19. The video, originally accessible on *Liveleak*, appears – as of today (February 6th 2020) – to be untraceable online.
20. This eschatological perspective is a distinctive trait of the Islamic State, at least since the release of the first number of the magazine *Dabiq*. On this point, see Maggiolini and Plebani (2016).



Figure 5

technologically enhanced war, that reject the deployment of human troops preferring the pervasive use of remote operated machines. To this alleged form of anesthetization of contemporary warfare, the Islamic State opposes a new (visual and discursive) focus on the physical and gory aspect of the conflict, with the explicit aim of catalysing the anger of its supporters. Openly opposing issues of addiction to violent images (Boltanski 2009), the soldiers of the Caliphate blatantly display the corpses of their citizens, inviting the true believers to see that brutal spectacle of pain and suffering. The dead bodies of the victims, together with the wounded bodies of the survivors, becomes here the unquestionable proof of the brutality of the enemy and of the unpostponable necessity of fighting him.²¹

In this sense, the videos produced by the Islamic State fit perfectly in the contemporary visual scenario, since they question the evidentiary capacity of the image, the conditions allowing them to act as an effective proof of a war episode. Referentiality alone can no longer guarantee the status of evidence: the image is a sort of enigma (Keenan 2014: 45) that needs to be decoded through a specific process of re-signification. In this sense, the images used by the Islamic State to formulate an act of accusation and a proof of guiltiness towards the West deserves our attention not for what they represent, but for the ideological narrative in which they are inscribed (and that they contribute to perform). To the absent and technologically empowered body of the Western soldier, the Caliphate opposes the idea of a wounded but collective body.

Benslama (2016) explicitly discussed the consequences that radicalization has on the discursive definition of the Self.²² From this point of view, radicalization will be nothing more than one of the ways through which an individual tries to counteract the sense of uncertainty and eradication that is typical of the late modernity, especially for members of ethnic minorities. The Islamic State incarnates in this sense an utopian ideal of redraft and of return to the original religious purity; it offers to its supporters a straight-forward ideology and a sense of belonging, together with the promise to enter in the collective body of the Ummah. Continuously stressing an idea of a wounded and marginalized Islam,²³ al-Baghdadi asks his militants (also thanks to the Caliphal authority) to avenge the wrongs suffered by the Ummah risking their lives. Sacrificing his individuality, the sincere muslim acquires the right to be part of the “holy body” of the Ummah; his eventual death, in this sense, will possibly strengthen the anger of the community and the eversive political power of the State.

Every person that is part of the Caliphate is entitled to act as an avenger²⁴ and to act as the voice and the

21. It is for example the case of the video *Message from Those Who Excuse to Those That Do Not Excuse* (March 8th 2015), in which two militants that were left deaf-mute following an attack express their desire to come back to the battlefield; their will to sacrifice their life for the Caliphate is represented as an inspiration for the whole Ummah; <https://jihadology.net/2015/03/08/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-message-from-those-who-excuse-to-those-that-do-not-excuse-wilayat-ninawa/> (Last accessed: 27-01-2020).

22. See also Assad (2007).

23. From this point of view, Islamic State's propaganda openly reconnect with the arguments of Sayyid Qutb, universally recognized as one of radical Islamism's leading ideologists. Specifically, the Caliphate recovers from his work the importance of a true and honest faith against the perversion of religious hypocrisy, as made evident in Anonymous (2014b; 2014c; 2015b; 2016; 2016b).

24. This is specifically evident in the video *Voice vent le temps de la vengeance* (November 22nd 2015), released immediately after

name of Allah. In so doing, the Islamic State's militant performs a model of a warrior-like hypermasculinity, through which he feels to be part of some sort of a military nobility (Salazar 2017: 114). This sense of belonging is built upon the memory of the images of death and destruction seen above: the impossibility to look away, ignoring that pain,²⁵ is an invitation to act and to follow the Caliphate in its project to unify the Ummah in a real Islamic State. The process of state-building, in other words, requires the sacrifice of the brothers; it can even be said that it literally built its legitimacy on their blood. Once again, we are at the polar opposite of the idea of a surgical war: the panoptic and tracking gaze of the drone is replaced by the body of the victims and the bloody knife of the hangman.

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25. On this theme see the video *Crusader Bombings of Innocent Muslims in the Adan Neighborhood* (May 27th 2015), whose first images show the destructive effects of a coalition attack as a kind of TV program that cannot be changed; <https://jihadology.net/2015/11/22/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-here-the-revenge-has-come-to-you-wilayat-dimashq/> (Last accessed: 27-01-2020).

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