

# Shock and Awe: Performativity, Machismo and ISIS

Written by Christiana Spens

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CHRISTIANA SPENS, NOV 2 2014

Looking at the ISIS beheadings through the analytical lens of performativity opens up insights concerning the significance of media discourse between the US/UK and ISIS, as well as interrelated competition regarding ideas of masculinity and sexual superiority. By considering the beheadings as performed violence, taking into account Juris' ideas about performativity in particular, it is understood that they are instances of violence in which their perpetrators communicate and "seek to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation."<sup>[i]</sup> This understanding of performed violence is in line Jabri's understanding of violence as a means of political communication, resulting from its social and cultural context<sup>[ii]</sup>, and Butler's ideas about performativity in relation to sexual identity, or gender as performed and communicated through violence, media and other means.<sup>[iii][iv]</sup> The ISIS beheadings are part of a wider war of images,<sup>[v]</sup> furthermore, as well as war of masculinities<sup>[vi]</sup>, and can be better understood as part of a tit-for-tat struggle between ISIS and the UK/US, using media to communicate competitive ideas of sexual superiority. By considering the ISIS beheadings through media and sexual discourse, their meaning and even cause – including the role of the US and UK in provoking such public political violence – can be better understood.

### A War of Images

The ISIS beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Alan Henning, David Haines and others were clearly intended to shock, and were intended as acts of revenge and deterrence regarding recent and planned US and allied foreign policy against the organization. As ISIS communicated, through videos in which captives were made to recite monologues written by ISIS before being publicly beheaded, the killings were in response to Western foreign policy, and were communicated so that the people and leaders of those countries would be aware of the implications of further military action against ISIS.

I am Alan Henning. Because of our parliament's decision to attack the Islamic State, I – as a member of the British public – will now pay the price for that decision. Alan Henning, captive (and speaking for) ISIS.<sup>[vii]</sup>

You entered voluntarily into a coalition with the United States against the Islamic State, just as your predecessor Tony Blair did, following a trend amongst our British prime ministers who can't find the courage to say no to the Americans. Unfortunately, it is we the British public that in the end will pay the price for our parliament's selfish decisions. British David Haines, captive (and speaking for) ISIS in: *A Message to the Allies of America*.<sup>[viii]</sup>

The blood of David Haines was on your hands, Cameron. Alan Henning will also be slaughtered, but his blood is on the hands of the British parliament. Anonymous member of ISIS in: *A Message to the Allies of America*.<sup>[ix]</sup>

As well as specifically reacting to recent foreign policy against ISIS, these filmed beheadings are also the latest assault in a 'war of images'<sup>[x]</sup> between the US UK, and their enemies in the War on Terror – originally Al Qaeda, and now ISIS. As Mitchell explained in *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* <sup>[xi]</sup>, the US 'cloned terror'

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with its War on Terror, insofar as its efforts at counter-terrorism led to increased attacks and recruitment to terrorist organisations, parallel to a virtual 'cloning' of terror through the technological reproduction of images and other media depicting terror. Although Mitchell's insights are not concerned with ISIS, given that his book was published in 2011, his ideas are clearly relevant. It would seem that ISIS have simply fought back, in this 'war of images', by creating reciprocal propaganda videos and images that perpetuate terror, as well as committing terrorism in the physical sense through their continued combat and occupation of parts of Iraq and Syria. In the War on Terror, then, images are the arsenal and acquisitions of conflict as well as simply representations of more traditional, physical warfare. As Bolt[xii] explains in *The Violent Image*, the use of what he calls 'insurgent propaganda' in this way is rooted in a long-standing tactic of revolutionary groups – 'propaganda of the deed' – in which violence and communication are merged to maximum effect.

What is interesting about ISIS' use of propaganda and violence, however, is not only that they have employed age-old tactics of propaganda and public violence in order to communicate a political message, but the context in which they have done so. One way of interpreting ISIS' use of filmed beheadings is as a reaction to previous similar methods of media and violence by the states they are fighting. Both the US and the UK governments and media have dehumanized and humiliated their enemies in the War on Terror through media as well as public violence, not to mention conventional warfare itself. Examples of Western 'assaults' in the 'war of images' are: the public humiliation of Saddam Hussein upon his capture in Iraq, with headlines such as: "Caught like a rat," (Anchorage Daily News, 15/12/03), "Saddam's long fall: Former ruler goes from ostentatious palaces to dirty holes in the ground," (Anniston Star, 15/12/03) and "Diligent hunters track down prey," (The Washington Times, 15/12/03). These headlines were accompanied by pictures of Hussein looking disheveled, disorientated and in captivity – as well as his eventual death by public execution, as celebrated by the US especially. Osama bin Laden received a similar treatment in the media, especially when he was killed, with headlines such as, "U.S. forces gun down 9/11 mastermind," (The Daily Courier, 02/05/11) and pictures emerging (although later confirmed to be fake) of a bloody corpse.

The photographs taken at Abu Ghraib, meanwhile, while not intentionally distributed by the government or military, nevertheless had a damaging effect when they were leaked, in that the pictures were aggravating not only to those in Al Qaeda and affiliated organizations, but also to the general (and particularly Muslim) public. They were not 'state propaganda' by any means, but their effect was still an assault comparable to other degrading and damaging images from the War on Terror.

## A War of Masculinities

As well as currency in a 'war of images', these pictures and films signified assaults in another level of the conflict, a war of masculinities, as Sjoberg and Gentry put it[xiii], whereby the US and their enemies (both Al Qaeda and now ISIS) compete with their ideas and manifestations of masculinities, to prove themselves more superior than the other.

"The relationship between the United States and Iraq had been framed as a competition between masculinities for more than a decade; each government told stories of emasculation of the other (Elshtain 1992b)[xiv]. Each government held standards of masculinity which the other did not meet. The United States relied on 'the contrast between the tough but tender and technologically sophisticated Western man and the hypermacho Arab villain from an inferior civilisation' (Niva 1998: 119)[xv], while the Iraqi government challenged the virility of this new, tender American masculinity. When masculinities compete, a hegemonic masculinity dominates subordinated masculinities (Connell 1995[xvi])."[xvii]

This use of emasculation for the undermining of political power, on both sides, is part of a wider use of dehumanization for that purpose. To reduce a person to something less than human, and to portray a person in sexual terms in order to dehumanize them, is a way to discredit not only an individual, but the cause and even civilization that person is seen to represent. The use of beheadings by ISIS can be interpreted, in this context, as a way of performing Iraqi ideals of masculinity (as tough, brave warriors), to contrast with and undermine those Western ideals of 'tough but tender'[xviii] and polite masculinity. By using such brutal and visceral methods of violence against Western men as the beheadings, ISIS asserted their masculinity as superior to the Western masculinity, to express their supposed dominance in political and cultural terms more generally.

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## Conclusion

By considering ISIS' use of beheadings in the context of the 'war of images' as well as the 'war of masculinities', their showy, sensationalist violence can be understood as an effort to defeat the US and its allies in a propaganda war. By using gendered narratives of competing masculinities (through visceral, humiliating violence against Western men), and by communicating those narratives through film and other imagery (as well as the performed violence itself), ISIS are projecting an image of their organization and their cause as superior to their Western enemies. In so doing, they are attempting to intimidate and dehumanize their enemy, as well as appealing to the people of those countries to put pressure on their leaders to abandon certain foreign policies (so communicating a more specific political message). The beheadings are at once a means of deterrence, revenge, and a simple assertion of dominance, using gendered narratives and performance.

This behavior, and the use of violence and media especially, are not specific to ISIS, and significantly seem to be reacting to previous efforts of the US/ UK to dehumanize and destroy its enemies in the War on Terror, also through public violence, gendered narratives and the media. The ISIS beheadings, therefore, are part of a wider war of images, as well as war of masculinities – a recent assault in a tit-for-tat struggle between ISIS (and before them, Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein), and the UK / US – which the latter therefore have some responsibility for.

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**Christiana Spens** is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews, writing her thesis on *Spectacles of Violence: Understanding the Public Punishment of Iconic Political Villains*, which focuses on the historic use of media and public violence to acquire and undermine political power, and examines modern terrorism in that context. Previously, Christiana read Philosophy at Cambridge followed by the M.Litt Terrorism Studies at St. Andrews, and was awarded the Dr. Handa PhD Scholarship for Terrorism and Political Violence for 2013 – 2016. She is an editor (interviews and book reviews) for the *New Strategist*, and writes regularly for *Studio International* on art and politics. Her most recent publications include: "The Theatre of Cruelty: Dehumanisation, Objectification and Abu Ghraib," in *The Journal of Terrorism Research* (2014) and "Contemporary Art and Political Violence," in *The Journal of Terrorism Research* (2013).