

# Broadcasting Violence. Assessing the Role of the ‘Intimate Kill’ Tactic in ISIS’ Communicational Strategy

*Emitiendo violencia. Análisis de la táctica del  
“asesinato íntimo” en la estrategia comunicacional  
del Estado Islámico*

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Abstract: This paper looks into the ‘intimate kill’ tactic as an essential part of ISIS’ communicational strategy. Looking into the issue of the Islamic State’s theoretical justification to extreme violence, several and multidimensional elements are considered to properly assess this radical and revolutionary broadcast assassination.

Key words: ISIS – Terrorism – Syria – Recruitment – Internet

Resumen: Este ensayo presenta la táctica del “asesinato íntimo” como un componente esencial de la estrategia comunicacional del Estado Islámico. Considerando la problemática de la justificación teórica que esta organización presenta respecto del uso de la extrema violencia, se consideran variados y multidimensionales elementos al momento de evaluar con precisión este asesinato radical, revolucionario y permanentemente transmitido por redes sociales y televisión.

Palabras claves: ISIS – Terrorismo – SIRIA – Reclutamiento – Internet

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“You are no longer fighting an insurgency. We are an Islamic army”.<sup>1</sup> Those were *Jihadi John’s* exact words –one of the ‘most popular’ ISIS’ killers– after he beheaded in a broadcasted video, the American journalist James Foley in August 2014.<sup>2</sup> Just a few words and a shocking image, but enough to consider the complexity of the Islamic State’s changing condition. It could be said, consequently, that this particular ‘evolution’ from an insurgency into a “*pseudo state*”<sup>3</sup> which also controls an organized army, speaks about a conscious strategy seeking to become effective in several warfare dimensions.

In fact, ISIS is much more than just an Islamist terrorist threat.<sup>4</sup> Its evolution shows a very complex organization which has had the political and military capability to control territory, infrastructure, lines of communication and an important amount of troops;<sup>5</sup> both in Iraq and Syria.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, without a sophisticated strategy, the group’s military progress would not be so effective.<sup>7</sup> In this context, ISIS military strategy does not only consider the conventional confrontation with several internal and external enemies in Iraq and Syria;<sup>8</sup> it also seeks to impose a hostile and revolutionary communications policy as an essential feature of what have been referred as a “*mythical media narrative*”.<sup>9</sup>

Using digital social networks, ISIS has been trying to fight this war using a different kind of language; “*images matter*”<sup>10</sup> and now the Islamic State “*is taking the imaginary one step further by using social media to broadcast images of deliberately brutal beheadings into homes and minds*”.<sup>11</sup> The ‘intimate kill’ tactic is therefore, the most powerful prove of this revolutionary total war. As Simon Cottee argues, this

1 In: James Fromson & Steven Simon, “ISIS: the dubious paradise of Apocalypse Now”, *Survival, IISS*, vol. 57, nº3, June-July, 2015, p. 9.

2 Foley was kidnapped by ISIS militants in northwest Syria in November 2012.

3 Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS is not a terrorist group. Why counterterrorism won’t stop the latest jihadist threat”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, nº 2, March-April, 2015, p. 88.

4 Idem.

5 According to Charles Lister’s paper, by mid-October 2014, the amount of ISIS fighters reached 31.000. In: Charles Lister, “Profiting the Islamic State”, *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, Doha, November, 2014, p. 16. Nevertheless, this number has been experienced a prominent decrease in the last months. According to Andrew Tilghman, the estimate amount of ISIS troops during the first months of 2016 is between 19.000 and 25.000. In: <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/02/04/new-intel-shows-isis-force-declining-iraq-syria/79819744/>

6 Idem.

7 Fromson & Simon, “ISIS: the dubious paradise of Apocalypse Now”, op. cit, p. 9.

8 Lister, “Profiting the Islamic State”, op. cit, p. 18.

9 Simon Cottee, “ISIS and the intimate kill”, *The Atlantic*, November 2014. In: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/isis-and-the-intimate-kill-peter-kassig/382861/>

10 Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015, p. 203.

11 Idem.

particular ISIS tactic seeks to challenge their enemies; to polarize them; “to force people to take sides”.<sup>12</sup>

A strong notion of power and moral, religious and military victory is one of the most important ISIS' communicational objectives, and without these bloody images, this would not be possible. In this context, the 'intimate kill' tactic presents a multidirectional phenomenon. This particular outcome is the issue of this essay. These extreme violent executions –permanently transmitted online– show the tragic dichotomy between a horrifying event and its execution as part of a calculated communications strategy. There are, consequently, several elements to consider.

First of all, this essay analyses how ISIS' justifies these barbaric assassinations. Thus, one useful approach would have to consider that “*ISIS doesn't want to convince its detractors and enemies. It wants to command them, if not destroy them altogether*”.<sup>13</sup> Fear and rage are what this radical organization pretends to generate in their adversaries every time these images are uploaded. Thus, an expected military reaction of its several enemies would allow, accordingly, a total war scenario in which “*the soldiers of the Khilafah (would) continue waging war on the forces of kufr (...) terrorizing, massacring, and humiliating the enemies of Allah*”.<sup>14</sup> The 'intimate kill' tactic relies on several principles, but an ideologized religious interpretation would justify it as a 'necessary' retaliation.

Secondly, this essay also looks to assess ISIS' 'intimate kill' as a way to recruit new ideologized members. Images of Islamic State members beheading or burning prisoners would reinforce a strong sense of victory in their troops. As Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan argue, this very particular kind of “*jihadist pornography*”<sup>15</sup> has helped to convince new young jihadists to join ISIS. All of this, in a context of online propaganda, full of justifications related to what Charlie Winter has presented as the “*oppression narrative*”.<sup>16</sup> Here, extreme violence and revenge against foreign occupation and apostasy would serve as an essential catalyst for this irrational response.

ISIS 'intimate kill' tactic has been widely covered, but generally not as an isolated phenomenon. Its theoretical development has been part of many studies, but as natural, with different approaches. Nevertheless, it is common to find prominent relations between its manifestation and the role which online social media and political and

<sup>12</sup> Cotee, “ISIS and the intimate kill”, op. cit, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Dabiq*, issue 12, October 2015, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, New York: Regan Arts, 2015, p. 474.

<sup>16</sup> Charlie Winter, “The virtual 'caliphate': understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy”, *Quilliam Foundation*, July, 2015, p. 33.

ideological Islamist propaganda play in its execution. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger<sup>17</sup> share –for this purpose– interesting ideas with Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan.<sup>18</sup> Both studies reflect the importance of the digital era and its strategic utility at the moment to communicate fear, violence and a particular perception of victory. Patrick Cockburn book's<sup>19</sup> confirms this idea, but with special emphasis in the role which media plays in the radicalization of new 'jihadists'. ISIS and its 'intimate kill' tactic are part of this new digital revolution, and a proper assessment should consider its close relations.

The 'Intimate kill' supposes a very short physical distance between the killer and the victim; it is, therefore, "*sensually different*".<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, one of its most strong features and justifications could rest in what Dave Grossman has referred as the 'moral distance'.<sup>21</sup> In his words, this concept "*involves legitimizing one self and one's cause. It can generally be divided into two components. The first usually is the determination and condemnation of the enemy's guilt (...). The other is an affirmation of the legality and legitimacy of one's own cause (...). It is the ultimate act of affirmation of the killer superiority*".<sup>22</sup> It seems that in this moral dimension, physical distance would not represent an essential element to consider. Thus, in ISIS' perspective, every single assassination –and its respective graphic broadcast– would confirm a 'legitimate' response. As Simon Molis Friis has argued, this 'intimate kill' strategy presents a "*retaliation motive*",<sup>23</sup> the Islamic State is trying to make a point. In this context, Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine presented, for example, the execution of a Japanese citizen as a justify retaliation: "*(...) just five days later, they (ISIS soldiers) struck again, targeting Kunio Hoshi, a citizen of Japan, one of the member nations of the crusader coalition. He was closely tracked and eliminated using a firearm*".<sup>24</sup>

Details are smartly presented and a very particular narrative tries to acclaim this kind of violent responses. Therefore, to make the argument stronger, ISIS' ideological justification to retaliation rests –among others– in Abu Bakr Naji's manifesto.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Stern & Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*, op. cit., Chapters VI, VII and IX.

<sup>18</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., Chapter XI.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State. ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, New York: Verso, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Cotee, "ISIS and the intimate kill", op. cit, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing. The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, New York: Back Bay Books, 1995, p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 164-210.

<sup>23</sup> Simone Molis Friis, "'Beyond everything we have ever seen': beheadings videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS", *International Affairs*, vol. 91, n° 4, 2015, p. 740.

<sup>24</sup> *Dabiq*, issue 12, October 2015, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Fromson & Simon, "ISIS: the dubious paradise of Apocalypse Now", op. cit., p. 31.

In his opinion about the proper use of violence, 'justice' seems to be a crucial element to assess: "(...) *one who previously engaged in jihad knows that it is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening, and massacring. (...) Regardless of whether we use harshness or softness, our enemies will not be merciful to us if they size us. Thus it behooves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us*".<sup>26</sup>

A religious interpretation would justify these violent acts and "*whatever the perversion or barbarity, ISIS has a ready-made justification*".<sup>27</sup> The fact is that a permanent reinterpretation of *hudud*<sup>28</sup> would allow reinforcing the dangerous notion that God is in their side.<sup>29</sup> Severe punishments such as lashing, disfigurement, crucifixion, stoning, and public beheading<sup>30</sup> are being nowadays transmitted online to the whole world. Consequently, ISIS discourses and violent images strongly rely on "*Islamic eschatology for legitimacy and mobilization*".<sup>31</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that any kind of international response to intimidation, savagery and extreme violence<sup>32</sup> could result, for the Islamic State, in a "*positive correlation with legitimacy*".<sup>33</sup>

However, this ideological justification for public executions is not new. During 2004, a *fatwa* issued by the Sheik Hussain Bin Mahmood referred to the 'legitimacy' of violent and bloody responses against the enemies of the *Ummah*, particularly in Iraq.<sup>34</sup> Which is new, however, is its 'digital' condition. ISIS' social media exploitation has permitted, without any doubt, a global coverage.<sup>35</sup> However, this violent development has confirmed the problem of radical and ideologized religious interpretations. As Stern and Berger argue, "(...) *the lack of central authority in Salafism makes difficult to challenge this practice. Beheadings might be condemned by religious scholars across the Muslim world, but jihadi Salafis simply ignore these condemnations and turn to their own religious leaders in search of a justification for this tactic*".<sup>36</sup> Bin Mahmood's *fatwa* explicitly argues that: "(...) *The Muslims have warned them but*

<sup>26</sup> Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma will Pass*, translated by William McCants, Boston: Harvard University, 2006, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., p. 491.

<sup>28</sup> Fromson & Simon, "ISIS: the dubious paradise of Apocalypse Now", op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Grossman, *On Killing. The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Fromson & Simon, "ISIS: the dubious paradise of Apocalypse Now", op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., p. 484.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence A. Kuznar, "Thematic Analysis of ISIL messaging", in: Hriar Cabayan & Sarah Cannah ed., "Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL", *Strategic Multilayer Assessment*, December, 2014, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> Winter, "The virtual 'caliphate': understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy", op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Hussain Bin Mahmood, "Nay, in burning you have predecessors", *Fatwa* translated by Abu Ubaidhillah, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Lister, "Profiting the Islamic State", op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Stern & Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*, op. cit., 276.

they didn't listen. So it is up to the Mujahideen to kill their prisoners and to cut their heads off, and they shouldn't turn to those who claim that these prisoners are "civilians", since there is no such term in existence in our Shar'iah and it is only a western term foreign to our Ummah".<sup>37</sup>

ISIS presents, according to Alberto Fernandez,<sup>38</sup> at least four themes in its communication strategy. Urgency, agency, authenticity and victory. All four permit to reinforce an ideological speech which basically intends to recruit new active members. The main core of this theoretical construction consists in communicating that "the Sunni Arab Muslims are being slaughtered",<sup>39</sup> and for that, an individual and communal effort is required to fight – as an ISIS combatant – against several external and internal enemies.<sup>40</sup> This would be the only way to achieve a definitive victory for the 'caliphate'.<sup>41</sup> In this context, "the humiliating subjugation of infidels, the public display of beheadings, and the destruction of idols (...) all suggests power, permanence and victory".<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, the 'intimate killing' tactic assumes here an essential role. The extreme violent images of hooded executioners assassinating a prisoner in front of a camera fulfill, in this context, Abu Bakr Naji's call: "If we are not violent in our jihad and if softness seizes us, that will be a major factor in the loss of the element of strength, which is one of the pillars of the Umma and of the Message".<sup>43</sup>

Thus, this victory's narrative, expressed in a merciless public execution is here a fundamental issue. This practice has been permanently convincing possible new recruiters to fight for the Islamic State. As ISIS recruits usually repeat: "don't hear about us, here from us".<sup>44</sup> The fact is that new members not only hear about these 'victories', they also see them. At the same time, the graphic significance of revenge allows to present an image of power and moral superiority. According to Stern and Berger, "In an interview with captured ISIS fighters, Israeli journalist Hai Anghel said one ISIS executioner intentionally used a dull knife because he wanted the beheading to last longer and cause more pain".<sup>45</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Bin Mahmood, "Nay, in burning you have predecessors", op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Alberto Fernandez, "Here to stay and growing: combating ISIS propaganda networks", *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, October, 2015, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Idem.

<sup>40</sup> Idem.

<sup>41</sup> Kuznar, "Thematic Analysis of ISIL messaging", op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> Fernandez, "Here to stay and growing: combating ISIS propaganda networks", op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma will Pass*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., p. 473.

<sup>45</sup> Stern & Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*, op. cit., p. 210.

Indeed, “*mass murder and execution can be sources of mass empowerment*”,<sup>46</sup> and every time that ISIS members show unarmed and defenceless victims with a knife in their necks –just minutes before they kill them– they are trying to show their ‘uncorrupt’ will. As Weiss and Hassan argue, one of ISIS new recruiters soon “*discovered new thinks about himself. He learned that he was violent, brutal, and determined. He beheaded enemies*”.<sup>47</sup>

The ‘intimate kill’ tactic is an innovation in ISIS strategy,<sup>48</sup> and that is precisely what makes it attractive for hundreds of new recruits. This new barbaric ‘vanguard’ is something that an ideologized youth do not want to ignore; they want to be part of it. Consequently, “*the problem is that jihadism has become a millenarian movement with mass appeal, in some ways similar to the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and ’70s, although its goals and the values represents are far different. (...) In this dark new world, children are seen to reenact beheadings with their toys, seduced by a familiar drama of the good guys killing the bad guys in order to save the world*”.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, it has also been argued that the ‘cinematographic’ assassination of hundreds of ISIS prisoners is part of a more complex context. In words of Charlie Winter, “*brutality is just one of six broad themes that the organization uses to bolster its presence and further its strategic goals. The other five are mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism*”.<sup>50</sup> It could be said that this graphic ‘intimate kill’ narrative tries to confirm the ‘total war’ which ISIS is fighting against their internal and external enemies. Again, the idea of a justified retaliation appears as a confirmation of a strong argument. Revenge against “*the Crusader-Shi’ite-Zionist conspiracy*”<sup>51</sup> seems to be the main reason to explain the tragic dichotomy between brutality and rationality in every execution.

The current ISIS’ strategy conditions are difficult to assess. This organization presents not only a military dimension which seeks to control a particular territory for the ‘caliphate’; it also shows a very strong communication’s strategy, and the ‘intimate kill’ brutal manifestation is its most powerful proof. Consequently, it has been argued that this complex and violent broadcast assassination presents two essential dimensions. First of all, it seeks to terrify their opponents and make them react and eventually surrender. At the same time, with an ideologized religious narrative, the Islamic State pursues to legitimate its irrational behavior, considering

<sup>46</sup> Grossman, *On Killing. The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, op. cit., p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Stern & Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 235.

<sup>50</sup> Winter, “The virtual ‘caliphate’: understanding Islamic State’s propaganda strategy”, op. cit., p.18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

a very particular perspective of justice and retaliation against infidels and apostates. Secondly, the ‘intimate kill’ tactic allows communicating a strong perception of victory and will. Consequently, this has been especially important for recruitment purposes in a context of advance global social media technologies. This obscene communications strategy undoubtedly represents a revolutionary innovation which is “*profoundly evocative and can mobilize Muslim youth around an imminent project*”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Weiss & Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, op. cit., p. 487.



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