

# 'Beyond anything we have ever seen': beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS

SIMONE MOLIN FRIIS\*

On 19 August 2014, shortly after 5 p.m. US eastern time, a video lasting 4 minutes and 40 seconds appeared on Al-Hayat Media Center's account on the social networking platform Diaspora.<sup>1</sup> 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 insurgent from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>2</sup> In the video, the black-clad insurgent condemns the American government's actions in Iraq and announces that the execution of Foley is in retaliation for the air strikes ordered by President Barack Obama on 7 August 2014. The actual beheading is not explicitly shown in the video. However, the video does show the black-clad insurgent pressing a knife against 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 concludes with the reappearance of the ISIS insurgent, this time holding another kneeling hostage (the American photojournalist Steven Sotloff) and warning Obama that 'the life of this American citizen depends on your next decision'.

The warning in the final scene of the video proved to be no empty threat. On 2 September 2014 a similar, somewhat shorter, video showing the apparent beheading of Steven Sotloff was released on the Russian social networking platform vKontakte.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, three additional videos were released purporting to

\* Earlier versions of this article have been presented at the Sussex–Copenhagen Ph.D./Post-doc workshop, 10–12 December 2014, and at the International Studies Association's Annual Conference in New Orleans, 18–21 February 2015. I wish to thank discussants and audiences on those occasions for questions, criticism and suggestions. I am particularly grateful to the following for their detailed feedback: the two anonymous reviewers, the editors of *International Affairs*, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Lene Hansen, Megan MacKenzie, Iver B. Neumann, Louiza Odysseos, Christian Reus-Smit, Johan Spanner, Bertel Teilfeldt Hansen, Alexei Tsino-voi, Cynthia Weber and Michael C. Williams. Research for this article was carried out as part of the project on 'Images and International Security' funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research—Social Sciences, Grant number DFF-1327-00056B.

<sup>1</sup> Al-Hayat is ISIS's leading distributor of western-aimed propaganda disseminated in several languages, including English, French and German. Diaspora is a community-run, decentralized network based on the free Diaspora software. Al-Hayat's account on Diaspora began posting content on 20 July 2014. As of 20 August 2014, all ISIS's accounts on Diaspora have been deleted. SITE Intelligence, 'Islamic State releases video on Diaspora showing beheading of US journalist James Foley', 19 Aug. 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/236-islamic-state-releases-video-showing-beheading-of-u-s-journalist-james-foley%2C-threatens-to-kill-another-prisoner>, accessed 20 Aug. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> ISIS is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State (IS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and in Arabic as Da'ash.

<sup>3</sup> SITE Intelligence, 'IS behead Steven Joel Sotloff, threatens to execute Briton David Cawthorne Haines',

show the beheadings of the British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning, as well as the American aid worker Abdul-Rahman Kassig.<sup>4</sup> During the autumn of 2014, these beheading videos played a remarkable role in media and public debates, as well as in official political dialogue and action in relation to the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. All five videos elicited prompt condemnation from government institutions, including the White House and Westminster. The White House called the initial video of Foley's execution a 'terrorist attack', and declared that the United States would not be 'restricted by borders' in its efforts to do whatever might be necessary to see that justice was done for what they 'saw with the barbaric killing of Foley'.<sup>5</sup> Despite attempted censorship, the videos have been widely displayed on social media platforms, generating what Hanna Kozłowska of the *New York Times* has termed 'a modern guillotine execution spectacle, with YouTube as the town square'.<sup>6</sup> In the mainstream media, carefully cropped screen-grabs from the videos have repeatedly been shown across print, broadcast and online media, thus establishing the images of the kneeling, orange-clad hostages as the predominant visual icon of the war against ISIS.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, senior officials from the American and British administrations have allegedly acknowledged that ISIS's beheading videos had a substantial impact on American and British foreign policy, prompting columnists and journalists to speculate whether the United States and United Kingdom would have carried out anything more than 'pinprick strikes' within Iraq and Syria in the absence of the broadcast beheadings.<sup>8</sup>

The extensive attention devoted to ISIS's beheading videos, and the significance ascribed to them, are highly illustrative of the ever more apparent importance of visual imagery and visual media in contemporary warfare. As new media technologies and transformations in the way in which images can be produced and circulated increase visual interconnectivity across borders and facilitate new ways of communicating the horrors of war, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand war and violence without taking visual media into account. Recent decades have seen a rise in the volume of scholarship within the academic field of International Relations (IR) dedicated to analysing the significance of visual imagery for international

---

2 Sept. 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/is-behead-steven-joel-sotloff-threatens-to-execute-briton-david-cawthorne-haines.html>, accessed 3 Sept. 2014.

<sup>4</sup> On 13 Sept. 2014 (Haines), 3 Oct. 2014 (Henning) and 16 Nov. 2014 (Kassig).

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, 'Press briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes', Public Papers of the President, 22 Aug. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Hanna Kozłowska, 'Should we be seeing gruesome acts and if so where?', *New York Times*, 25 Aug. 2014, <http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/should-we-be-seeing-gruesome-acts-and-if-so-where/>, accessed 26 Aug. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough theorization of the role of visual icons in international relations, see Lene Hansen, 'How images make world politics: international icons and the case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of International Studies* 41: 2, 2015, pp. 263–88.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Krauthammer, 'The containment plus strategy', *Washington Post*, 26 Sept. 2014, p. A19; Martin Chulov, 'Islamic state: the same script, the same horror as militants test the West's resolve: Isis video restating warning to Britain and US to stay away may be designed to provoke action', *Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2014, p. 2; Maureen Dowd, 'From pen and phones to bombs and drones', *New York Times*, 28 Sept. 2014, Section SR, p. 1; Margaret Cooker and Nicholas Winning, 'David Cameron vows action against Islamic State after beheading of British man', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 Sept. 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/david-cameron-vows-action-against-islamic-state-after-beheading-of-british-man-1410701856>, accessed 15 Sept. 2014.

conflict and security.<sup>9</sup> Yet beheading and execution videos have not been given sufficient theoretical attention within these debates; nor have they been subjected to empirical studies. A crucial body of work has been produced on the topic within the academic fields of terrorism studies, Middle Eastern studies, and film and media studies.<sup>10</sup> However, these studies have predominantly focused on the religious and cultural contexts presumed to inspire beheadings or on the strategic logics driving the creation of the videos, including their presumed ability to function as fear-provoking propaganda or recruitment tools for terrorist organizations. Yet the way in which the *visibility* of the beheadings shapes the politics of war in the states 'watching' the videos has been largely neglected as an object of study.

This article seeks to fill the gap in the study of beheading videos by examining how ISIS's videos and the extensive visibility of ISIS's beheadings of western hostages impact the politics of war in the victims' home states, the United Kingdom and the United States. I argue that the role of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US is a crucial demonstration of how visual imagery, and the way in which the violence of war is made visible, shape what come to be perceived as the 'realities' and 'facts' of war, and thereby which political responses will appear sensible and legitimate. In order to develop this argument, the article is arranged in three sections. In the first section, I briefly present the emergence of beheading videos and highlight the importance of studying not only how these videos function as strategic 'weapons' for their producers, but also how their display, circulation and mobilization—as well as their ability to make the violence of war exceedingly visible—may affect the politics of war by shaping the interpretative schemes within which war is understood and responded to. In the second section, I trace the role and impact of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US and show how ISIS's beheadings have functioned as 'visual facts' within a political discourse promoting military action against ISIS. Specifically, I argue that the videos have been mobilized as *evidence* for claims about the identity of ISIS and the extreme urgency of the situation, and as an important element in the *legitimization* of military action and intensified counterterrorism efforts. In the third section, I problematize the political

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, 'How images make world politics'; Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies: visual securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis', *European Journal of International Relations* 17: 1, 2011, pp. 51–74; Michael Williams, 'Words, images, enemies: securitization and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 47: 4, 2003, pp. 511–31; David Campbell, 'Geopolitics and visibility: sighting the Darfur conflict', *Political Geography* 26: 4, 2007, pp. 357–82; David Campbell, 'Cultural governance and pictorial resistance: reflections on the imagining of war', *Review of International Studies* 29: S1, 2003, pp. 57–73; David Campbell, 'Horrible blindness: images of death in contemporary media', *Journal for Cultural Research* 8: 1, 2004, pp. 55–74; Claudia Aradau and Andrew Hill, 'The politics of drawing: children, evidence, and the Darfur conflict', *International Political Sociology* 7: 4, 2013, pp. 368–87; Roland Bleiker, 'Visual assemblages: from causality to conditions of possibility', in M. Acuto and S. Curtis, eds, *Reassembling international theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); James Der Derian, 'From War 2.0 to Quantum War: the superpositionality of global violence', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67: 5, 2013, pp. 570–85.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy R. Furnish, 'Beheading in the name of Islam', *Middle East Quarterly* 12: 2, Spring 2005, pp. 51–7; Kasun Ubayasiri, 'Virtual hostage dramas and real politics', [ejournalist.au.com](http://ejournalist.au.com), 4: 2, 2004, Central Queensland University, pp. 1–24; Ronald Jones, 'Terrorist beheadings: cultural and strategic implications', Carlisle Paper, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, June 2005; Lisa Campbell, 'The use of beheadings by fundamentalist Islam', *Global Crime* 7: 3–4, 2006, pp. 583–614; Pete Lentini and Muhammed Bakshmar, 'Jihadist beheading: a convergence of technology, theology, and teleology?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30: 4, 2007, pp. 303–25; Bruce Bennett, 'Framing terror: cinema, docudrama and the "War on Terror"', *Studies in Documentary Film* 4: 3, 2010, pp. 209–25.

mobilization of ISIS's videos in the UK and US by showing how they gain their role and status as *evidence* and *legitimacy* through a process in which particular acts of violence are made exceedingly visible to the general public, whereas other acts of violence are reduced to more marginal visual sites. Finally, I conclude that the role of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US highlights the need for further attention to how the visibility of war, and the constitution of boundaries between which acts of violence are rendered visible and which are not, shape the political terrain in which decisions about war and peace are produced and legitimized.

## Background: videos, visibilities, warfare

### *Beheading videos and contemporary warfare*

Communicating and displaying the violence of war via visual imagery is a far from new phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> To a certain extent, the history of war can be said to be a history of visual technologies. Or, as Paul Virilio has formulated it: 'Alongside the "war machine", there has always existed an ocular (and later optical and electro-optical) "watching machine"', capable of providing soldiers with a visual perspective on the military action under way, but also shaping how citizens outside the actual battlefield see the realities of war.<sup>12</sup> Since the first official attempt at war photography during the Crimean War in 1853–6, visual imagery has provided publics far from the frontiers of war with an opportunity to see glimpses of the violence and suffering that war entails.<sup>13</sup> However, in the era of new media technologies and increased visual interconnectivity across borders, the communication of the horrors of war through visual imagery has been transformed and accelerated. As exemplified by the widespread circulation of ISIS's beheading videos, as well as in the rise of 'citizen journalism', the technological innovations of the digital age have influenced not just *how* war can be shown, but also *who* can successfully produce, choose and disseminate images of war to a larger audience. Today, thousands of images and videos showing the violence of war surface on the internet every day. Evidently, the majority of these visual objects never gain much attention or significance. Nevertheless, some do circulate beyond their initial sites of dissemination and succeed in making the violence of war visible to a wider audience. Among the types of visual events which on several occasions have received significant attention are beheading videos.

ISIS's beheading videos are not the first of their kind; nor are they the first to receive attention in the West. As a practice, beheading has been a sanctioned form of execution for centuries.<sup>14</sup> Its strategic portrayal on video is, however, a

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Martschukat and Silvan Niedermeier, *Violence and visibility in modern history* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and cinema: the logistics of perception* (London: Verso, 2009; first publ. 1989), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Larissa Tracy and Jeff Massay, *Heads will roll: decapitation in the medieval and early modern imagination*, Medieval and Renaissance Authors and Texts (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2012). Beheading is still a sanctioned form of execution in Benin, Congo, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen: see Cornell University Law School, 'Methods of execution', 22 June 2012, <http://www.deathpenaltyworldwide.org/methods-of-execution.cfm>, accessed 28 May 2015.

comparatively recent phenomenon, commonly assumed to have emerged during the war in Chechnya in the 1990s—although the absence of swift and far-reaching dissemination technologies may have limited the impact of some of the earlier videos.<sup>15</sup> During the early years of the ‘war on terror’, beheading videos gained significant attention when a spree of carefully choreographed videos took the western media by surprise and made the violent character of war highly visible for a large audience in the West.<sup>16</sup> On several occasions, the videos sparked widespread horror and anger, as when the filmed executions of the journalist Daniel Pearl and the communication tower engineer Nicholas Berg were made public in 2002 and 2004 respectively. Yet, after a systematic campaign of videos in 2004, there appears to have been a decline in the dissemination of filmed beheadings explicitly aimed at a western audience.<sup>17</sup> With ISIS’s videos from 2014, beheading videos have once again become a significant centre of attention in the West.

Besides the brutality of the acts portrayed, what has made beheading videos of particular concern is their embodiment of a manifest transformation of an image into a ‘weapon’ for agents engaged in warfare. The fatal injury portrayed in the videos is carried out not for the sake of murder in itself, but with the purpose of being reproduced and watched by an audience far larger than the one directly experiencing it.<sup>18</sup> Beheading videos thus blatantly encapsulate how active combatants may exploit new media technologies and the ensuing increased visual interconnectivity for strategic purposes. This explicitly *strategic* dimension of the videos has been a frequent focus in the literature on beheading videos. Scholars in terrorism studies have argued that terrorist organizations and insurgent groups have produced beheading videos for a range of objectives, including obtaining ransom payments, hampering foreign investment, discrediting transitional states, recruiting supporters, weakening the resolve of their opponents, provoking policy responses or arousing fear in the general public by demonstrating the perpetrators’ commitment to this form of political violence.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it has frequently been claimed that the public display of violence exemplified by beheading videos is a kind of ‘costly signalling’ or ‘provocation strategy’ by which warring factions attempt to influence the beliefs of their enemies in ways that aid their own cause.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Michael Ignatieff, ‘The terrorist as auteur’, *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2004, p. 50; Adam Taylor, ‘From Daniel Pearl to James Foley: the modern tactic of Islamist beheadings’, *Washington Post*, 21 Aug. 2014, p. A08; Ibrahim Al-Marashi, ‘The truth about beheadings’, *Al Jazeera*, 24 Nov. 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/truth-about-beheadings-20141123112635132978.html>, accessed 26 Nov. 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *About to die: how news images move the public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 277.

<sup>17</sup> The decline is often associated with a letter sent from Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the then leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, who many believed orchestrated the beheading campaign in 2004. In the letter, al-Zawahiri suggests that beheading videos were bad publicity and thus counterproductive to Al-Qaeda’s long-term strategy. It is important to notice that the decline in beheading videos aimed at a *western* audience did not imply a decline in the use of beheading as a form of execution. Cf. Lentini and Bakshmar, ‘Jihadist beheading’; Campbell, ‘The use of beheadings by fundamentalist Islam’.

<sup>18</sup> As such, the production and dissemination of a beheading video is a ‘symbolic act’ in Thomas Thornton’s sense of the word, i.e. an act of violence intended and perceived as a symbol. See Thomas Perry Thornton, ‘Terror as a weapon of political agitation’, in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal war: problems and approaches* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> Ubayasiri, ‘Virtual hostage dramas and real politics’; Campbell, ‘The use of beheadings by fundamentalist Islam’; Lentini and Bakshmar, ‘Jihadist beheading’; Jones, ‘Terrorist beheadings’.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of the strategies terrorist organizations employ, see Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F.

Accordingly, the videos have often been described as a ‘psychological weapon’ or a ‘strategic tool’ for groups seeking to communicate unequivocally how far they are willing to go to obtain their desired results. In relation to the discussions of the strategic dimension of the videos, the religious and cultural contexts presumed to motivate the production of the videos have been heavily debated. In particular, the question of whether the practice of beheading can be said to be associated with the politics and/or religion of Islam has generated heated disputes.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the videos’ particular conventions of staging and performance, cinematography and narrative structure have been subjected to analysis by film scholars and forensic analysts alike.<sup>22</sup> So far, discussions of ISIS’s beheading videos from 2014 have largely been concerned with similar themes—though with a particular emphasis on ISIS’s remarkably ‘tech-savvy’ use of social and visual media.

### *Beheadings and the visibility of war*

The literature on beheading videos as a strategic tool for terrorist organizations provides valuable insights into the strategic goals motivating the production and dissemination of beheading videos. Nevertheless, the strategic intentions behind the videos are not the only aspects of the videos that should be of interest to IR scholars. This is because analysing the videos with an explicit focus on the producer’s strategic objectives rarely captures the more subtle political effects of the videos, including the way in which the extensive *visibility* of the beheadings may impact the politics of war in the states where the videos are shown. Videos shared on the internet are nearly impossible to control, given contemporary modes of circulation and reproduction, and consequently the videos’ political impact is not a direct effect of the original intentions of their producers; nor are the producers the only agents who may use the videos politically. As Aradau and Hill argue, visual objects are both aesthetic and social objects, whose production, circulation and reception significantly transform their political effects.<sup>23</sup> After their dissemination, the videos may be watched, interpreted and translated by a wider audience; they may be circulated extensively, censored or ignored; they may be reproduced, appropriated and discussed on various media platforms; and they may be picked up by political leaders and mobilized in political discourse.<sup>24</sup> When filmed beheadings, like ISIS’s

---

Walter, ‘The strategies of terrorism’, *International Security* 31: 1, 2006, pp. 49–80; David Fromkin, ‘The strategy of terrorism’, *Foreign Affairs* 53: 4, 1975, pp. 683–98.

<sup>21</sup> The practice of beheading has frequently been associated with the politics and/or religion of Islam. See Ignatieff, ‘The terrorist as auteur’; Furnish, ‘Beheading in the name of Islam’; Campbell, ‘The use of beheadings by fundamentalist Islam’. However, it is important to note that beheading is not uniquely Islamic. Visual representations of beheadings pervade European literary, artistic and historical accounts from antiquity to the early modern period, to such an extent that beheadings can be said to be one of the most persistent and enduring images of western culture. See Tracy and Massay, *Heads will roll*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, ‘Framing terror’; Dawn Perlmutter, ‘Mujahideen blood rituals: the religious and forensic symbolism of Al Qaeda beheading’, *Anthropoetics* 11: 2, 2005, <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1102/muja.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Aradau and Hill, ‘The politics of drawing’, p. 371.

<sup>24</sup> Here, it is worth mentioning that beheading videos do not travel across contexts without changing in meaning and significance. As photojournalist Johan Spanner informed me, a beheading video is very unlikely to cause the same kind of outrage in Iraq as in the West. In fact, storing and sharing beheading videos on personal cellphones has been a recurrent practice in Iraq during the Iraq War (personal communication, 22 April 2015).

videos, are made exceedingly visible due to a widespread circulation across media platforms, they may significantly affect western states' politics of war. In particular, beheading videos' potential for making the violence of war vividly visible may have profound consequences for the general perception of threats and conflicts, including opinions on which political and military measures are sensible and legitimate. Thus, the important question, when examining ISIS's beheading videos, cannot be reduced to what strategic goals may be driving their creation. Moreover, it is essential to examine how the videos' display, circulation and mobilization impact the politics of war in the states watching and responding to them, particularly the victims' home states, the UK and the US.

In focusing on the impact of ISIS's beheading videos on the politics of war in the UK and US, I draw on two distinct, yet theoretically related, bodies of literature. First, the explicit focus on the *visibility* of beheadings is fuelled by an impetus from the emergent field of visibility studies, which has called upon researchers to use the concept of visibility to examine the political and social implications of the ways in which various forms of violence are made visible in our contemporary media-saturated societies.<sup>25</sup> Second, I draw extensively on insights from scholars who have advanced a post-structuralist or 'performative' approach to the study of visual imagery.<sup>26</sup> Scholars within the performative tradition have shown that—though visual imagery is rarely the sole determinant in the politics of war<sup>27</sup>—the visual representation of war may nonetheless have an indirect impact on the course of war by functioning as an 'ontological-political condition' or a 'condition of possibility' for political action.<sup>28</sup> That is, by shaping what can and cannot be seen, and thus what can and cannot be thought, said and done, the way in which war is shown through various forms of visual media may affect the politics of war by shaping the interpretative schemes within which war is understood and responded to. Put differently, seeing that visual imagery is one of the principal ways in which news from distant wars is brought 'home' to publics far from the actual battlefield, it is profoundly implicated in the reification of political identities into fixed forms and the enablement of power relations through which the dichotomies of West/East, civilized/barbaric and friend/enemy are produced and maintained.<sup>29</sup> As I will show below, the case of ISIS's beheading videos demonstrates vividly how the visibility of war and violence shapes the general perception of threats and conflicts, and, accordingly, indirectly affects which political responses will appear sensible and legitimate.

Before moving on to the analysis of the role of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US, a note on method is required. Analysing the impact of visual

<sup>25</sup> See Martschukat and Niedermeier, *Violence and visibility in modern history*; Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore, *Missing bodies: the politics of visibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Campbell, 'Geopolitics and visibility'; Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies'; Aradau and Hill, 'The politics of drawing'; Bleiker, 'Visual assemblages'; Judith Butler, *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Brian O'Loughlin, 'Images as a weapon of war: representation, mediation and interpretation', *Review of International Studies* 37: 1, 2011, pp. 71–91.

<sup>28</sup> Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies', p. 52; Bleiker, 'Visual assemblages', p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, 'Geopolitics and visibility', p. 358.

imagery poses serious methodological challenges that have yet to be solved within the field of IR. In today's digital environment, images and videos are constantly removed, altered and circulated. Thus, complete replicability, when studying visual imagery, may be hard, even impossible, to achieve. That said, in order to provide a platform for critique and further research, the two interlinked analyses presented in this article are outlined in table 1.

**Table 1: Overview of analysis**

<i>Focus</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Empirical material</i>
(1) The mobilization of the videos in political and media discourses in the UK and US	Discourse analysis of political and media discourses on ISIS in the UK and US, based on official political documents and media material from January 2014 to November 2014 using the analytical guidelines developed by Lene Hansen <sup>a</sup> .	(1) Official documents with the words 'behead', 'beheading', 'decapitation', 'decapitate', 'ISIS', 'ISIL', 'Islamic State' or '[the victim's names]' from Gov.uk and Public Papers of the President. (2) News articles, features, editorials and front pages with the words 'behead', 'beheading', 'decapitation' or 'decapitate' from some of the most significant newspapers in the UK and US, including <i>Washington Post</i> , <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>USA Today</i> , <i>New York Daily News</i> , <i>New York Post</i> , <i>Guardian</i> , <i>Daily Mail</i> and <i>Daily Telegraph</i> from January 2014 to November 2014. (3) Widely watched newscasts and blogs discussing the videos.
(2) The visibility of beheadings	Tracing and analysis of ISIS's beheading videos and their reproduction across media platforms, and mapping of the broader visibility of beheadings online, focusing on narrative structure, style and form, as well as circulation and views.	(1) ISIS's uncensored beheading videos, in addition to reproductions in print, broadcast and online media, traced and analysed in real time from 19 August 2014 to 16 December 2014. (2) Beheading videos and images tagged 'behead', 'beheading' or 'decapitation', and uploaded on video-sharing sites, such as LiveLeak, YouTube, BareNakedIslam and Syrian Fight throughout 2014. Videos and images of more than 100 individuals being beheaded have been analysed. (3) Images and videos from pro-ISIS forums and Twitter profiles during the period August 2014 to February 2015.

<sup>a</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as practice* (London: Routledge, 2006).



As a central goal of this article is to highlight the distinct ways in which visual imagery impacts contemporary warfare, the analysis is divided into two sections. First, I trace the role and impact of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US, focusing primarily on the mobilization of the videos in political and media discourse. Second, I broaden the scope of the analysis and show how an explicit focus on the *visibility* of the beheadings, including what is not made visible for the general public, can provide a platform for problematizing the political mobilization of ISIS's beheadings in the UK and US.

## The mobilization of ISIS's beheading videos

### *Instant icons*

The videos showing a member of ISIS beheading unarmed American and British hostages are an ideal illustration of what Lene Hansen has termed 'instant icons'.<sup>30</sup> Since the early years of the 'war on terror', when beheadings were filmed on a camcorder and distributed to traditional media institutions by videotape, the means of dissemination have been transformed. The rapid spread of ISIS's videos on various media platforms illustrates vividly how fast filmed beheadings can reach a worldwide audience in today's digital environment. Within minutes of their initial dissemination, journalists, monitoring companies and social media users were noting the videos' existence, and social media corporations were scrambling to remove them.<sup>31</sup> While the original videos were scrubbed relatively quickly from most mainstream social media platforms, images, frame-grabbed from the videos, circulated widely and rapidly entered the traditional media. In particular, carefully cropped screen-grabs showing the hostages, clad in orange jumpsuits resembling the Guantánamo Bay detainee uniforms and kneeling in the desert next to the black-clad 'Jihadi John',<sup>32</sup> were widely displayed across media platforms.<sup>33</sup> Though heated debate over how to document the event without reiterating the crime and exposing the victim once more initially ensued, when screen-grabs from 'A message to America' crowned the front pages of numerous newspapers,<sup>34</sup> they were eventually established as a recurrent visual representation of ISIS. Drawing unusual public attention, incessantly discussed and appropriated, and appearing in everything from newscasts on ISIS to promotional videos encouraging American citizens to vote for Republican candidate Wendy Rogers or outlining the need for Russia on the international stage, the images of the hostages facing death quickly became *the* predominant visual icon of the war against ISIS.<sup>35</sup> Not showing the actual act of killing, the screen-grabs remained

<sup>30</sup> Hansen, 'How images make world politics', p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Shane Harris, 'Social media companies scramble to block terrorist video of journalist's murder', 20 Aug. 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/20/social-media-companies-scramble-to-block-terrorist-video-of-journalists-murder/>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014.

<sup>32</sup> The name given to the English-speaking executioner by the British press.

<sup>33</sup> Screen-grab from 'A message to America' available at: <https://beyondanythingwehaveeverseen.wordpress.com/> (link contains graphic images).

<sup>34</sup> Including two New York tabloids and at least nine UK newspapers.

<sup>35</sup> In a NBC News/*WSJ* survey conducted in the US on 3–7 Sept. 2014, 94 per cent of respondents replied that

incomplete and suggestive shots of implication, but nonetheless imbued with all the right cues for the viewer to imagine the end. Against the background of an unclear and ambivalent conflict in Iraq and Syria, the reappearing images of the orange-clad hostages thus constituted one of a very few familiar markers, constantly reminding their viewers of the horrific actions perpetrated by the 'other side'.

### *'Beyond anything we have ever seen': ISIS's videos as evidence*

That American and British responses to ISIS underwent radical transformations in the weeks and months during which the beheading videos surfaced seems unquestionable. In January 2014, Obama termed ISIS a 'JV Team' (i.e. Junior Varsity basketball squad) and stressed the importance of being able to distinguish between 'a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland [i.e. Al-Qaeda] versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian [i.e. ISIS]'.<sup>36</sup> In his statement following the dissemination of 'A message to America' in August 2014, Obama labelled ISIS a 'cancer' with a 'nihilistic ideology' and 'no place in the 21st century'; and on 10 September he argued that 'if left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond [the Middle East]—including to the United States'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout June and July 2014, ISIS's advances in Iraq and Syria, including their capture of Mosul and persecution of the Yazidis, were predominantly described as a threat to the region of the Middle East and a 'humanitarian', 'sectarian' situation requiring containment and humanitarian support.<sup>38</sup> During the weeks and months following dissemination of the beheading videos, the 'humanitarian situation' was rapidly reframed as a 'national security' issue, and ISIS was increasingly described as an 'imminent threat' spreading *beyond* the Middle East, including to the UK and US. The focus shifted from 'containment' to 'degrading and destroying';<sup>39</sup> the number of US

---

they were aware of the beheadings of James Foley and Steven Sotloff. This proportion is significantly higher than for any other news event the NBC News/*WSJ* survey has measured over the past five years, including the 2011 debt-ceiling debate, the 2012 health care decision by the US Supreme Court and the Assad regime's reported use of chemical weapons in 2013. Hart Research Associates, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Survey Study #14901, Sept. 2014, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Obama's statement is from a transcript of an interview conducted on 7 Jan. 2014 by David Remnick and published in the *New Yorker* on 27 Jan. 2014. The 'JV team' comment has been a recurring point of reference for journalists covering the Obama administration's response to ISIS's videos. See Office of the Press Secretary, 'Press briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes'.

<sup>37</sup> Barack Obama, 'Remarks on the death of James W. Foley in Syria from Edgartown, Massachusetts', Public Papers of the President, 20 Aug. 2014; Barack Obama, 'Address to the nation on United States strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist organization (ISIL)', Public Papers of the President, 10 Sept. 2014.

<sup>38</sup> David Cameron, 'David Cameron statement on Iraq', 8 Aug. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-iraq>, accessed 10 Oct. 2014; Barack Obama, 'Remarks on the situation in Iraq and an exchange with reporters', Public Papers of the President, 19 June 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Barack Obama, 'The President's news conference with President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia in Tallinn, Estonia', Public Papers of the President, 3 Sept. 2014; Barack Obama, 'The President's news conference in Newport, Wales', Public Papers of the President, 5 Sept. 2014.

air strikes rapidly increased;<sup>40</sup> the UK initiated military action in Iraq;<sup>41</sup> and US military action was extended beyond Iraq, with air strikes carried out in Syria for the first time in September 2014.<sup>42</sup>

It would be far-fetched to argue that the beheading videos and their extensive display in the West were the sole reasons for the dramatic changes in the western leaders' responses to ISIS—especially given that ISIS began to attract political attention in the West *before* the broadcast of the beheadings.<sup>43</sup> However, it can be shown that the videos, and the extensive visibility of the beheadings, have functioned as 'visual facts' *within* the transformation of British and American responses to ISIS. American and British political leaders were quick to announce that the videos proved that ISIS is the 'embodiment of evil' and a terrorist group standing in opposition to the 'entire world' and 'humanity'.<sup>44</sup> After simply having tweeted: 'ISIL [ISIS] must be destroyed/will be crushed' in response to 'A message to America', US Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement on the murder of Foley declaring that 'there is evil in this world, and we all have come face to face with it once again. Ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, and valueless evil'.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Obama argued that the beheadings represented 'an act of violence that shocks the conscience of the entire world' and showed that ISIS has 'no place in the 21st century'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the fact that political leaders use moralistic language to describe their enemies as the embodiment of evil can hardly come as a surprise. By condemning ISIS as 'evil' and 'inhumane', they indirectly attempt to convey a superior moral clarity and separate themselves and their own tactics from ISIS and theirs.<sup>47</sup> Yet what is significant is the persistent mobilization of the videos as indisputable *evidence* of the uncontestedness of ISIS's evil character. ISIS's beheading videos are said to '*show* just how barbaric and repulsive these terrorists are' and to provide direct evidence for ISIS's 'uniquely evil nature'.<sup>48</sup> In the words of David

<sup>40</sup> US Central Command, 'Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2010–2014 airpower statistics', 31 Dec. 2014, [http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814\\_iraq/Airpower\\_31\\_December\\_2014.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airpower_31_December_2014.pdf), accessed 12 Jan. 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister's Office, 'Motion on support for Iraq', 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/military-action-in-iraq-against-isil-government-legal-position/motion-on-support-for-iraq>.

<sup>42</sup> Obama, 'Address to the nation on United States strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Terrorist Organization (ISIL)'.

<sup>43</sup> During the summer of 2014, British and American politicians increasingly described ISIS as a 'brutal' and 'appalling' organization, and both the UK and the US initiated humanitarian and—in the case of the US—military actions to counter ISIS's advances before the videos surfaced. On 7 Aug. 2014, Obama authorized targeted air strikes to protect American personnel and a humanitarian effort to help save the Iraqi civilians trapped at Mount Sinjar. In June 2014, the UK committed £5 million to the UN Iraq Humanitarian Strategic Response Plan, and in August 2014, the UK released an £8 million package of emergency humanitarian assistance to get aid to the people across northern and central Iraq who had fled ISIS.

<sup>44</sup> David Cameron, 'PM statement on European Council and tackling extremism', 1 Sept. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-european-council-and-tackling-extremism>, accessed 10 Oct. 2014; Barack Obama, 'Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City', Public Papers of the President, 24 Sept. 2014; Obama, 'The President's news conference in Newport, Wales'.

<sup>45</sup> John Kerry, 'Murder of James Foley', press statement by the Secretary of State, 20 Aug. 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Obama, 'Remarks on the death of James W. Foley in Syria from Edgartown, Massachusetts'.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Boyle, 'The problem with "evil"', *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2014.

<sup>48</sup> David Cameron, 'PM reaction to murder of aid worker David Haines', 14 Sept. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-reaction-to-murder-of-aid-worker-david-haines>; David Cameron, 'Only a coherent, coordinated response can tackle what is a truly global and indiscriminate threat', 24 Sept. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/only-a-coherent-coordinated-response-can-tackle-what-is-a-truly-global->

Cameron: 'anyone in any doubt about this organization can now see how truly repulsive and barbaric it is'.<sup>49</sup> Crucially, the videos were not only mobilized to affirm ISIS's evil, inhumane identity. References to the videos were also persistently invoked to support the claim that ISIS is a threat 'beyond anything we have ever seen' (Hagel<sup>50</sup>); a terrorist organization that is 'unique' in its brutality (Obama) and 'unlike those we have dealt with before' (Cameron).<sup>51</sup> As such, the videos have played an important role in the reframing of ISIS from a 'regional', 'humanitarian' problem to a 'direct', 'imminent threat', and a 'cancer' that 'risks spreading to other parts of the international community and affecting us all directly'.<sup>52</sup> In the words of the Republicans John McCain and Lindsey Graham, 'in this cowardly and gruesome murder of an innocent man, we see the true nature of the evil that confronts us ... It is an enemy of humanity, a darkness that will spread as far as it can, unless it is stopped'.<sup>53</sup> Importantly, the video of Foley's beheading from 19 August was widely described as a 'terrorist attack' and a 'declaration of war'. In the words of US Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes: 'When you see somebody killed in such a horrific way that represents a terrorist attack. That represents a terrorist attack against our country and against an American citizen.'<sup>54</sup> Thus, constituted as 'terrorist attacks' and as 'the clearest indication to date that ISIS has declared war on the United States, on the American people, and on freedom loving people everywhere',<sup>55</sup> ISIS's beheading videos have worked as 'visual facts' within the establishment of a unique emergency situation, in which the UK and US are facing an imminent, exceptional threat to their security: 'As to the comment about an imminent threat, I think evidence is pretty clear when we look at what they did to Mr. Foley, what they threaten to do to all Americans and Europeans ... So, yes, they are an imminent threat to every interest we have.'<sup>56</sup>

---

and-indiscriminate-threat; 'Statement on the death of Alan Henning', 3 Oct. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-murder-of-alan-henning-by-isis> (all accessed 10 Oct. 2014; emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> 'Prime Minister David Cameron reacts to murder of Alan Henning from his retreat in Chequers', *Mirror online*, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/alan-henning-beheading-david-cameron-4375477>.

<sup>50</sup> Chuck Hagel served as the 24th US Secretary of Defense from February 2013 to February 2015.

<sup>51</sup> David Cameron, 'Threat level from international terrorism raised: PM press statement', 29 Aug. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/threat-level-from-international-terrorism-raised-pm-press-conference>, accessed 10 Oct. 2014; Department of Defense, 'Department of Defense press briefing by Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room', Department of Defense transcript, 21 Aug. 2014; Obama, 'Address to the nation on United States strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist organization (ISIL)'.

<sup>52</sup> Cameron, 'PM reaction to murder of aid worker David Haines'; Cameron, 'Only a coherent, coordinated response can tackle what is a truly global and indiscriminate threat'; Philip Hammond, 'Foreign Secretary condemns alleged murder of James Foley', 20 Aug. 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-condemns-alleged-murder-of-james-foley>, accessed 10 Oct. 2014.

<sup>53</sup> John McCain and Lindsey Graham, 'McCain and Graham on murder of James Foley', 20 Aug. 2014, <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2014/8/statement-by-senators-john-mccain-and-lindsey-graham-on-murder-of-james-foley-and-need-for-comprehensive-strategy-to-defeat-isis>, accessed 10 Oct. 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, 'Press briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes'.

<sup>55</sup> Marco Rubio, 'Rubio comments on ISIL's claim to have beheaded American photojournalist', 20 Aug. 2014, <http://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=6969eb38-3752-42b8-8705-ce456f909f5d>; see also Sean Hannity, 'Exclusive: Dick Cheney on ISIS beheading of journalist', 20 Aug. 2014, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/3741320827001/exclusive-dick-cheney-on-isis-beheading-of-journalist/#sp=show-clips&v=3741320827001> (both accessed 21 Aug. 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Department of Defense, 'Department of Defense press briefing by Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room'.

*'Degrade and destroy': from humanitarian crisis to national security issue*

During the weeks and months when the images of the orange-clad hostages circulated, it was widely assumed in the mainstream media that the American and British governments changed policy towards Iraq and Syria as a result of the uproar the videos generated.<sup>57</sup> Some might object to this assumption, arguing that American and British politicians had already initiated humanitarian and—in the case of the US—military actions to counter ISIS's advances before the videos surfaced. Yet, regardless of the assumption's accuracy, the filmed beheadings *were* widely *invoked* as an impetus for escalation of military action and new counterterrorism efforts. Specifically, the videos were repeatedly mentioned in American officials' legitimization of air strikes in Syria,<sup>58</sup> and the beheading of UK citizen David Haines was given as direct motivation in Britain's House of Commons motion for support of air strikes in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> By functioning as evidence in a political discourse constituting ISIS as a 'cancer' posing an imminent, exceptional threat to the West, the videos have played an important role in the reframing of the conflict in Iraq and Syria from a 'humanitarian' and 'sectarian' crisis *requiring* a humanitarian response to a 'national security' issue *requiring* a military response and intensified counterterrorism efforts. Through the establishment of an interpretative scheme in which ISIS appears as an evil, inhumane organization hell-bent on targeting the West and incapable of any form of non-violent or rational dialogue, the videos have thus helped legitimize a change in policy from 'containing ISIS' to 'degrading and destroying ISIS':

The terrorist group known as ISIL must be degraded and ultimately destroyed ... In the most horrific crimes imaginable, innocent human beings have been beheaded, with videos of the atrocity distributed to shock the conscience of the world. No God condones this terror. No grievance justifies these actions. There can be no reasoning—no negotiation—with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force. So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death.<sup>60</sup>

In the UK, the videos have persistently been invoked in the legitimization of new counterterrorism efforts. David Cameron was quick to announce that the

<sup>57</sup> Krauthammer, 'The containment plus strategy'; Chulov, 'Isis beheading videos are aimed at testing the West's resolve', *Guardian*, 14 Sept. 2014; Cooker and Winning, 'David Cameron vows action against Islamic State after beheading of British man'; Dowd, 'From pen to bombs and drones'; Andrew Rawnsley, 'The menace of ISIS confronts David Cameron with a test of leadership', *Guardian*, 24 Aug. 2014, p. 35; Christi Parsons, Kathleen Hennessey and W. J. Hennigan, 'US will be "relentless" on militants', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Aug. 2014, p. A01; Peter Baker and Michael Shear, 'Officials say US is considering action in Syria', *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2014, p. A01.

<sup>58</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, 'Press briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes'; Obama, 'Address to the nation on United States strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist organization (ISIL)'; Obama, 'The President's news conference with President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia in Tallinn, Estonia'.

<sup>59</sup> Prime Minister's Office, 'Motion on support for Iraq'.

<sup>60</sup> Obama, 'Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City'. The first time Obama used the words 'degrade and destroy', rather than 'contain', was on 3 Sept. 2014 in response to a question on how the US would react to the beheading of Steven Sotloff: Obama, 'The President's news conference with President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia in Tallinn, Estonia'.

videos showed that what the UK ‘must do is redouble all efforts’ to stop people from taking part in ‘extremism and violence’.<sup>61</sup> When, shortly after the dissemination of ‘A message to America’, the Independent Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre increased the threat level in the UK from ‘substantial’ to ‘severe’ (i.e. an attack is highly likely), David Cameron gave the following legitimization:

We’ve all been shocked and sickened by the barbaric murder of American journalist James Foley and by the voice of what increasingly seems to have been a British terrorist recorded on that video. It was clear evidence—not that any more was needed—that this is not some foreign conflict thousands of miles from home that we can hope to ignore.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, Cameron referred to the video of Foley’s beheading as an obvious argument in favour of his government’s introduction of new counterterrorism legislation on (1) preventing suspects from travelling to and/or returning from Iraq and Syria, and (2) managing the risk posed by suspects in the UK.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, irrespective of whether ISIS’s videos actually ‘sparked’ or ‘forced’ politicians into action, they were persistently invoked as an important element in the *legitimization* of particular responses to ISIS. Even though the videos might not have a direct, causal effect on policy, the extensive visibility of ISIS’s beheadings has nonetheless indirectly influenced the politics of war through the establishment of a political environment in which references to the videos can be invoked in support of particular political claims and actions. In this context, it is noteworthy that opposition to escalation of military action and intensified counterterrorism efforts was largely absent while the images of the orange-clad hostages circulated. Because of their ability to make complicated and distant events visible and comprehensible, images circulated in the news media are often regarded as playing an important role in shaping public opinion and justifying policy.<sup>64</sup> Recent studies have found that the sentiment in the American population changed noticeably as the screen-grabs from ISIS’s videos began appearing across print, broadcast and online media. In September 2014, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey reported that Americans regarded the US as less safe in the weeks following the broadcast of the Sotloff and Foley beheadings than at any point since 9/11.<sup>65</sup> The survey also concluded that almost two-thirds of the respondents believed that taking military action against ISIS was in the nation’s interest—a remarkable shift from the NBC/*WSJ* survey earlier in 2014 that found war-weary Americans wanting to step back from foreign engagements. In the UK, opposition to the

<sup>61</sup> BBC News, ‘James Foley beheading suspect probably British, David Cameron says’, 20 Aug. 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28873051>, accessed 28 May 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Cameron, ‘Threat level from international terrorism raised’.

<sup>63</sup> More specifically, Cameron introduced: (1) targeted, discretionary power to strip British identity from dual nationals and prevent some British nationals getting back into the UK; (2) measures to ensure that airlines comply with the no-fly lists and security screening arrangements; (3) removal of ISIS-related videos from internet sites; and (4) powers to add to the existing terrorism prevention and investigation measures (TPIMs), including stronger locational constraints on suspects under TPIMs, either through enhanced use of exclusion zones or through relocation powers. See Cameron, ‘PM statement on European Council and tackling extremism’, and ‘Only a coherent, coordinated response can tackle what is a truly global and indiscriminate threat’.

<sup>64</sup> Zelizer, *About to die*, p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> Hart Research Associates, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Survey Study #14901.

air strikes in Iraq that began on 27 September 2014 was reported to have been dimmed by the scale of ISIS's atrocities, specifically the beheadings of western hostages. According to Ben Page, chief executive of the polling organization Ipsos MORI, ISIS's beheading videos and slick promotion of atrocities on the internet have helped swing public opinion in the UK strongly behind military action.<sup>66</sup> Finally, a PEW Research survey found that the number of Americans associating Islam with violence rose dramatically to an all-time high of 50 per cent following the distribution of the videotaped beheadings.<sup>67</sup> As such, the extensive visibility of ISIS's beheadings has contributed to the establishment of a political environment in which the videos can be invoked as evidence and legitimacy for particular claims and actions. Moreover, the constant display of images from ISIS's videos appears to have rendered criticism of government policy difficult.

### **Between the visible and the invisible: contextualizing ISIS's beheading videos**

On the basis of the analysis presented above, it seems reasonable to argue that ISIS's beheading videos have had a profound impact on the politics of war in the victims' home states. By functioning as evidence in a political discourse constituting ISIS as an imminent, exceptional threat to the West, the videos have played an important role in the reframing of the conflict in Iraq and Syria from a humanitarian crisis requiring a humanitarian response to a national security issue requiring a military response and intensified counterterrorism efforts. Centrally displayed and frequently mobilized, the images of the orange-clad hostages have participated in the creation of codes for understanding the conflict and rendered particular interpretations authoritative.

It is hard not to agree with those arguing that beheadings are atrocious acts. Yet the way in which ISIS's videos have been mobilized as indisputable evidence in the constitution of an exceptional emergency situation *demanding* the use of military action, combined with the remarkable lack of opposition to escalation of military action while images from the videos circulated, does pose a number of questions about the role played by the visibility of violence in contemporary warfare. To be more specific, it is both politically and analytically necessary to problematize the videos' exceptional role and status in British and American security discourses. In what follows, I will illustrate how broadening the scope of the analysis to include an explicit focus on the *visibility* of the beheadings, including what is not made visible for the general public, can provide a platform for problematizing the way in which ISIS's videos have been mobilized in the UK and US. Through, first, an examination of the actual visibility of ISIS's beheadings across media platforms, and, second, a broader contextualization of ISIS's beheading videos, I will highlight the depoliticizing effects of reducing a complicated conflict to a fragmented visual icon.

<sup>66</sup> Cited in Emma Graham-Harrison, 'A groundswell of support for action, but the anti-war protesters warn of long-term danger', *Observer*, 28 Sept. 2014, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> John Tures, 'Did the ISIS beheadings change American attitudes toward Islam?', 3 Oct. 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-a-tures/did-the-isis-beheadings-c\\_b\\_5923662.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-a-tures/did-the-isis-beheadings-c_b_5923662.html), accessed 28 May 2015.

## *The visibility of ISIS's beheadings*

To begin with, we might problematize the role and status of ISIS's videos by examining the *actual* visibility of ISIS's beheadings across media platforms. The persistent repetition of the argument that we are *shown* something that proves and legitimizes particular claims and actions necessitates further attention to what is actually shown to us. On the one hand, ISIS's beheadings of the western hostages have been historically visible events. Shown repeatedly across print, broadcast and online media, the screen-grabs of the orange-clad hostages have been probably *the* most conspicuous visual icon in the war against ISIS. However, when scrutinized, the visibility of ISIS's beheadings has been partial, fragmented and highly restricted. Despite the widespread attention *ascribed* to the beheadings and the constant display of images *from* the videos, the original, uncensored videos have not been displayed in the traditional media. Most of the time, what is shown is limited to carefully cropped still images, frame-grabbed from the videos, showing the hostages and 'Jihadi John' in the desert, but nothing more. Furthermore, ISIS's original, uncensored videos have been largely scrubbed from most online mainstream media platforms. On YouTube, 'A message to America' was removed less than an hour after it was initially posted. On Twitter, CEO Dick Costolo instantly announced the suspension of dozens of accounts related to the graphic video. Even anti-centralization networks and video-sharing sites with a history of hosting graphic material, such as Diaspora and LiveLeak, initiated censorship following the dissemination of 'A message to America'.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, government institutions largely opposed watching the videos. In fact, the British Metropolitan Police were so determined to prevent 'A message to America' from being seen that they promptly warned that merely *viewing* the video could constitute a criminal offence in the UK.<sup>69</sup> In short, ISIS's beheadings of the western hostages have simultaneously been historically visible and partially concealed media events.

In the translation from video to still image, information is lost and meaning is transformed. In particular, the 'retaliation motive' running through ISIS's beheading videos largely disappears, as the original videos are removed from social media platforms, and the screen-grabs of the orange-clad hostages become the only visual traces shown in the mainstream media. All ISIS's execution videos begin by outlining the precise acts for which the beheading is in retaliation. As an example, 'A message to America' begins by showing an excerpt from the video transmission of Barack Obama's announcement of US air strikes in Iraq, followed by a sequence of grainy drone images of an explosion that the viewer is informed—through a caption in the left corner of the screen—is the 'American aggression against the

<sup>68</sup> In the case of LiveLeak, this was the video-sharing site's first attempt to censor material for political reasons: LiveLeak, 'Statement from LiveLeak regarding IS beheading videos which might be upcoming', 21 Aug. 2014, [http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a69\\_1408615973#45MMBZChpPeqwXAQ.99](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a69_1408615973#45MMBZChpPeqwXAQ.99), accessed 12 Sept. 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Josh Halliday, 'Police warn sharing James Foley killing video is a crime', *Guardian*, 20 Aug. 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/aug/20/police-warn-james-foley-video-crime-social-media>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014.



Islamic State'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the producers of ISIS's more advanced videos often use parallel editing to cross-cut between images of their own victims and images allegedly showing western-led military action, including graphic images of victims of air strikes and images of political leaders authorizing military action.

While ISIS's videos have clear narrative structures with an explicit 'retaliation motive', the screen-grabs shown in the mainstream media are more ambiguous.<sup>71</sup> The screen-grabs do not show ISIS's motivations. Their explicit content does not communicate an indisputable geopolitical situation. Nor do they come with a self-evident foreign policy message. Despite the widespread attention ascribed to the videos, what is actually made visible for the general public, and invoked in the creation of codes for understanding the conflict, is a fragmented still image icon. The screen-grabs are incomplete and suggestive shots of implication whose meaning is primarily established by political agents—journalists, politicians, commentators—who constitute them as indisputable evidence of a particular geopolitical situation and as legitimacy for particular foreign policy responses. Thus, the images' role and status in American and British security discourse are based not merely on ISIS's videos and what we *actually see*, but in large part on what we are *told* by leaders and experts that we are shown.

Though the overlooked retaliation motive in ISIS's videos by no means diminishes the graveness of the beheadings, it does show that a more complicated story could have been told had other aspects of ISIS's videos been highlighted. In any case, the refusal to see the retaliation motive in ISIS's videos tends to obscure ISIS's narrative and preclude proper analysis of the conflict.

### *Contextualizing ISIS's videos: the broader visibility of beheadings*

Second, we might problematize the role and status of ISIS's videos by examining the broader visibility of beheadings. The mobilization of the videos to provide evidence of ISIS's exceptionally evil character is frequently coupled with the argument that the act of beheading is an exceptional act and a crime far more horrendous than other forms of murder during times of war. Over the course of recent centuries, beheading has gradually been granted a status as a particularly horrific mode of killing and a cultural marker that in western eyes separates the 'civilized' from the 'barbaric' murderers.<sup>72</sup> Following the dissemination of the videos showing western hostages being beheaded by ISIS, beheading's status as an exceptionally horrific mode of killing was persistently emphasized. Political commentators and experts frequently rationalized the extraordinarily fierce reactions to ISIS's videos with the argument that beheadings are far more spectacular and shocking than other forms of murder during times of war, such as shoot-

<sup>70</sup> Screen-grab from 'A message to America' available at: <https://beyondanythingwehaveeverseen.wordpress.com/> (link contains graphic images).

<sup>71</sup> As Lene Hansen argues in her analysis of visual icons in international relations, an image, even an iconic one, does not 'speak' foreign policy on its own—though it might be presented as if it had a self-evident foreign policy message. Put differently, the political meaning of an image is characterized by a certain level of ambiguity. See Hansen, 'How images make world politics', pp. 3–4.

<sup>72</sup> Regina Janes, *Losing our heads* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 143.

ings, suicide bombings and exploding cars, notwithstanding the higher death tolls from these other types of killing.<sup>73</sup> In the words of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, watching a beheading *feels* different from watching a shooting or a bombing, because the act of beheading is ‘not just an injury or a crime’, but ‘an indignity’, ‘a defacement of the sacred human body’, and an act that ‘reveals something about the mind of the killers’, namely that they ‘deny the slightest acknowledgment of our common humanity’.<sup>74</sup>

Yet it is important to notice that far from every beheading video uploaded on the internet gains equal importance and social status—and only very few stimulate the kind of political and public outrage seen following the videos showing western hostages being beheaded by ISIS. When we broaden the scope of the analysis to include not just what is made visible in the mainstream media, but also what is shown on more *marginal visual sites*, it becomes clear that these types of videos are neither very exceptional nor always capable of attracting attention or inciting political outrage. The internet is overflowing with videos of human beings—especially non-westerners—being decapitated. Some of the videos are half-shown by news organizations and commented on by political leaders. However, most of them never become a central point of reference in political or media discourse. Based on the content of video-sharing sites such as LiveLeak and YouTube, ISIS and other groups in Iraq and Syria began using the tactic of filmed beheadings long before the dissemination of ‘A message to America’. Yet beyond Iraq and Syria’s borders, the previous videos have hardly aroused strong reactions—despite the fact that they were obviously noticed by some. In January 2014, the *New York Times* remarked that ‘beheadings seem to be especially favored’ by ‘anti-Assad jihadists in Syria’, and in February 2014 the *Los Angeles Times* described beheadings as ‘a trademark of many Syrian Islamic militant groups’.<sup>75</sup> During the summer of 2014, newspapers occasionally referred to filmed beheadings of Iraqi soldiers, police officers and prostitutes. Yet no images were shown in the mainstream media; no comprehensive debate ensued; and the acts were mostly described as ‘sectarian violence’.

True, the majority of the videos circulating on the internet have a markedly different style and form from the videos produced by ISIS’s official media centres, al-Hayat and al-Furqān.<sup>76</sup> While ISIS’s videos suggest that the producers have access to high-quality recording material,<sup>77</sup> as well as knowledge about film techniques, including *mise en scène* (setting and props, costumes, lighting and staging), cinematography and editing, most beheading videos have a more humble

<sup>73</sup> Shashank Joshi, ‘Where does the Islamic State’s fetish with beheading people come from?’, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Sept. 2014; Jeff Jacoby, ‘Why beheadings?’, *Boston Globe*, 22 Sept. 2014.

<sup>74</sup> David Brooks, ‘The body and the spirit’, *New York Times*, 5 Sept. 2014, p. A27.

<sup>75</sup> Susie Linfield, ‘Advertising torture’, *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 2014, p. A23; Nabih Bulos and Patrick McDonnell, ‘A foreign fighter in Syria shares selfies, spin’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Feb. 2014, p. A4.

<sup>76</sup> ISIS’s media centres al-Hayat and al-Furqān produced and disseminated the videos showing the beheadings of western hostages.

<sup>77</sup> It is estimated that the video entitled ‘Though the unbelievers despise it’ would have cost at least \$200,000 to produce: Atika Shubert, ‘ISIS’s brutal beheading video: search for clues’, *CNN*, 8 Dec. 2014, [http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/12/world/isis-syria-video-analysis/index.html?iid=article\\_sidebar](http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/12/world/isis-syria-video-analysis/index.html?iid=article_sidebar), accessed 12 Dec. 2014.

'look and feel'. Some of the videos merely consist of an unedited single shot, recorded with a cellphone. Moreover, while ISIS's videos suggest a carefully planned narrative structure with long, staged testimonies from both the victims and the perpetrators, many of the videos disseminated online portray less staged scenes, for example scenes with victims struggling to escape or pleading for their life, or scenes showing victims who have passed out or are already dead. Remarkably, ISIS's videos differ from the majority of beheading videos online by being *less* graphic. Whereas the screen fades to black as 'Jihadi John' presses the knife against the victims' throats in ISIS's official videos with *western* hostages, a large proportion of the videos circulating on the internet exhibit lengthy beheadings—sometimes lasting over two minutes.

Yet, regardless of their variations in style and form, the less famous videos visually communicate the same act of violence as ISIS's videos featuring western hostages: a beheading. Nonetheless, the majority of these videos never enter the mainstream media, prompt online censorship or become a central point of reference in political discourse. In short, not every beheading video uploaded on the internet gains equal importance or social status, and only very few attract the attention of political leaders, the mainstream media or the general public. Though new media technologies and transformations in the way in which images can be produced and circulated have facilitated new ways of communicating the horrors of war, the visibility of a beheading *on the internet* does not guarantee *political* and *public* visibility. These differences in the visibility of beheadings starkly illustrate Casper and Moore's argument that despite the fact that the human body has never been more visible than in the beginning of the twenty-first century, not all forms of bodily harm are equally visible to the cameras, and while the suffering of some human beings is visually exhibited and publicly mourned, others are vulnerable to erasure and marginalization.<sup>78</sup> While the extensive circulation and display of ISIS's beheadings of western hostages have established a condition for widespread political and public outrage and action, the equally horrific beheadings of non-westerners have not been made correspondingly visible, and have not spurred the same levels of outrage and action. In short, the differences in how beheadings are shown and responded to provide ample testimony to 'whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace'.<sup>79</sup>

### *Political implications of visibility*

An explicit focus on the visibility of beheadings complicates the role and status of ISIS's beheadings in American and British security discourses on a number of dimensions. First, ISIS's beheading videos are said to show that ISIS is unique in its brutality and beyond anything we have ever seen. Yet this interpretation—unfortunately—seems to have less to do with the actual frequency of this form of

<sup>78</sup> Casper and Moore, *Missing bodies*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>79</sup> Butler, *Frames of war*, p. 75.

violence and more with the way in which beheadings—and the violence in Syria more generally—have tended to disappear from view, or never appear at all, in the West.<sup>80</sup> The *exceptionality* of ISIS is thus partly established through a process in which ISIS's beheadings are made exceedingly visible across media platforms, whereas other similarly gruesome acts of violence, including beheadings carried out by other warring factions, are reduced to more marginal visual sites.

Second, it appears that the way in which beheadings are made visible across platforms has implications for the extent to which the *act* of beheading will have consequences for the perpetrators. ISIS's beheading videos are said to show that 'there can be no reasoning—no negotiation—with this brand of evil' and that 'the only language understood by killers like this is the language of force'.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, a contextualization of ISIS's beheadings reveals that ISIS is not the only group using beheading as a mode of killing. Significantly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a leading US *ally*, employs beheading as a method of execution, and has carried out at least 87 executions in 2014, simultaneously with ISIS.<sup>82</sup> Though the Saudi regime is not in the business of producing and disseminating videos of its public executions, videos showing public beheadings by the Saudi regime—recorded by spectators—can be found on video-sharing sites, such as LiveLeak.<sup>83</sup> These videos are rarely shown in the mainstream media or mentioned in political debates. Yet had the Saudi regime's beheadings been the ones persistently featured for months on the front pages of western newspapers, western leaders' praises of King Abdullah's 'commitment to peace' and the 'education of his people' would probably seem problematic.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the extent to which an act of beheading is made visible is profoundly implicated in shaping what meaning and significance will be ascribed to the act, including what consequences the act will have for the victims and perpetrators. In short, visibility has political implications.

Finally, the case of ISIS's beheading videos leads to broader questions about the role of the visibility of violence in contemporary warfare. While the iconic images of ISIS's beheadings of western hostages have repeatedly been shown across media platforms, other acts of atrocity in Iraq and Syria—including those of Bashar al-Assad's regime—have tended to disappear from view in the West. Would the representation of ISIS as the unrivalled agent of brutality in the Syrian conflict be upheld if the videos showing other warring factions beheading unarmed Syrians—and committing other gruesome acts of violence—were more visible in the mainstream media or on the political agenda? And even more difficult:

<sup>80</sup> On the invisibility of violence in the West, see Butler, *Frames of war*; Casper and Moore, *Missing bodies*; Vivian Sobchak, *Carnal thoughts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 235.

<sup>81</sup> Obama, 'Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City'.

<sup>82</sup> Ben Tuft, 'Saudi Arabia publicly beheads woman in holy Mecca as blogger lashings are postponed', *Independent*, 16 Jan. 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-publicly-beheads-woman-in-holy-mecca-as-blogger-set-to-receive-second-lashing-9982134.html#>, accessed 16 Jan. 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Screen-grab from a video showing a public beheading by the Saudi regime available at: <https://beyondanythingwehaveeverseen.wordpress.com/> (link contains graphic images).

<sup>84</sup> David Cameron, 'PM statement on the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia', 23 Jan. 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-the-death-of-king-abdullah-of-saudi-arabia>, accessed 25 Jan. 2015; Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on the death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz', Public Papers of the President, 22 Jan. 2015.

would the legitimacy of air strikes against ISIS be questioned more if the retaliation motive in ISIS's videos and the human casualties caused by the coalition's air strikes were shown more often to the general public? Unlike ISIS's beheadings of western hostages, the human casualties caused by the air strikes conducted as part of 'Operation Inherent Resolve' have not been very visible in the western mainstream media. Rather, the visual coverage of the coalition's air strikes has converged around a narrow range of visual tropes, dominated by images of political leaders, past ISIS brutalities, and 'backstage' images of military weaponry and troops—a category of images that Michael Griffin has termed 'cataloguing the arsenal'.<sup>85</sup> As such, the framing of military action as a necessary and unproblematic response to ISIS's beheadings seems to be facilitated by a particular structuring of the visibility of the conflict in which ISIS's atrocities in general are made exceedingly visible to a large public in the UK and US, while the human casualties caused by the coalition's air strikes are reduced to more marginal visual sites.<sup>86</sup>

Consequently, the role of ISIS's beheading videos in the UK and US poses serious questions about what happens to political decision-making when a conflict is reduced to a memorable, yet inevitably partial, visual icon. Although the human casualties caused by the coalition's air strikes and the retaliation motive in ISIS's videos in no way justify ISIS's beheadings, they do add a level of complexity to the war against ISIS. In any case, reducing ISIS to an inexplicable evil and refusing to see the nuances of the violence in Iraq and Syria is highly depoliticizing and obstructs in-depth analysis of the complexity of the conflict.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of ISIS's beheading videos, and the extensive visibility of ISIS's beheadings of western hostages, on the politics of war in the UK and US. The role of ISIS's beheading videos is a highly illustrative demonstration of the ever more apparent importance of visual imagery and visual media in contemporary warfare. By functioning as evidence in a political discourse constituting ISIS as an imminent, exceptional threat to the West, the videos have played an important role in the reframing of the conflict in Iraq and Syria from a humanitarian crisis requiring a humanitarian response to a national security issue requiring a military response and intensified counterterrorism efforts. Centrally displayed and frequently mobilized, the images of the orange-clad hostages have participated

<sup>85</sup> Michael Griffin, 'Picturing America's "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and Iraq: photographic motifs as news frames', *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism* 5: 4, 2004, pp. 381–402.

<sup>86</sup> Media analysts and war photographers have argued that the visual portrayal of western military action has become increasingly sanitized during the 'war on terror'. In support of this argument are a significant number of quantitative media analyses, which identify a lack of images of human casualties and 'real' combat in the western media. See Griffin, 'Picturing America's "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and Iraq'; Liam Kennedy, 'Securing vision: photography and US foreign policy', *Media, Culture and Society* 30: 3, 2008, pp. 279–94; Katy Parry, 'Images of liberation? Visual framing, humanitarianism and British press photography during the 2003 Iraq invasion', *Media, Culture and Society* 33: 8, 2011, pp. 1185–201; James Rainey, 'Unseen pictures, untold stories', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 2005, p. A01; Travis Beard, 'Afghanistan: pictures not taken', *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2009, pp. 80–84; Gary Kamiya, 'Iraq: the unseen war', *Salon*, 23 Aug. 2005, [http://www.salon.com/2005/08/23/iraq\\_gallery/](http://www.salon.com/2005/08/23/iraq_gallery/), accessed 12 Sep. 2014.

in the creation of codes for understanding the war against ISIS and rendered particular interpretations authoritative. This article has sought to problematize the role and status of ISIS's beheadings in American and British security discourses by highlighting the depoliticizing effects of reducing a complicated conflict to a fragmented visual icon.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that I have no wish to question the argument that beheading unarmed civilians is an act of extreme cruelty; nor do I wish to assert that it is unreasonable to conclude that ISIS is a brutal organization, having watched their filmed executions. What I *do* want to question is the mobilization of these videos as indisputable evidence in the constitution of an exceptional emergency situation *demanding* escalation of military action and intensified counterterrorism efforts. The extensive mobilization of the videos as 'visual facts' in the legitimization of particular responses to ISIS, combined with the remarkable lack of opposition to military action in the UK and US, poses serious questions in terms of what happens to political decision-making when a conflict is reduced to a memorable, yet inevitably partial, visual icon. We tend to have an overwhelming, habitual belief in the apparent reliability of our visual experiences.<sup>87</sup> We assume a vision that makes everything present, and consequently visual information frequently takes precedence over other forms of information in relation to war.<sup>88</sup> Yet, as Judith Butler reminds us, a visual 'frame' never simply exhibits the realities of war. Rather, it actively participates in producing and enforcing what will count as reality.<sup>89</sup> The exceptionality of ISIS's brutality, the urgency of the situation, and the legitimacy of responding with an escalation of military action and intensified counterterrorism efforts are not self-evident facts inscribed in the screen-grabs circulating in the news media. Rather, the production of these 'facts' is facilitated by a particular structuring of the visibility of war in which particular acts of violence are made exceedingly visible, whereas others are reduced to more marginal visual sites. Accordingly, if we focus on ISIS's videos without questioning the conditions under which specific types and acts of violence come into view while others are concealed, we fail to capture the more indirect ways the visibility of war impacts the politics of war. The possibility of instant and widespread circulation of images does not imply that contemporary spectators of war have been granted a complete or unproblematic view of war. Despite the continual reassertion of principles of transparency and freedom of information, it is crucial to examine how the visibility of war, and the constitution of boundaries between acts of violence which are rendered visible and others which are not, shape the political terrain in which decisions about war and peace are produced and legitimized.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast eyes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 6; Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*.

<sup>89</sup> Butler, *Frames of war*, p. xiii.