Article

# Terror, Territoriality, Temporality: Hypermedia Events in the Age of Islamic State

## Marwan M. Kraidy[1]

## Abstract

Considering the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS) as a "war machine," an ever-shifting combination of humans and technology, this article articulates, from a Deleuzian perspective, terror, territoriality, and temporality as constitutive of events. It explores terrorism as a hypermedia event that resists conceptual containment in Dayan and Katz's three categories of "contest," "conquest," or "coronation." It builds on work that recognizes the globality of media events. The article uses the rise of IS to explore events as a peculiar articulation of space and time, and draws on the global "network-archive" that IS created (its digital footprint), the referentiality of which means that we experience IS depredations as one continuous "global event chain." In this analysis, media events are a productive force that articulates territoriality and temporality through affect.

## Keywords

hypermedia event, Islamic State, war machine, terror, territoriality, temporality

This article explores hypermedia events (Kraidy 2006, 2010) from a Deleuzian perspective. Considering the group that calls itself Islamic State (IS) as a "war machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980), an ever-shifting combination of humans and technology, this article articulates terror, territoriality, and temporality as constitutive of media events. In doing so, it builds on recent work that recognizes that "no event is single, unconnected to others" (Sreberny 2016), and emphasizes the globality of media events

[1]University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Marwan M. Kraidy, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.
Email: marwan.kraidy@asc.upenn.edu

as "situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants" (Hepp and Couldry 2010, 12).

Unlike media events, defined as moments of social solidarity (Dayan and Katz 1994), *hypermedia* events are "contentious episodes of political turbulence and social fragmentation" (Kraidy 2010, 187). Rather than seeing terrorism having "upstaged media events" (Katz and Liebes 2007), this article explores terrorism as a hypermedia event that resists conceptual containment in Dayan and Katz's (1994) three categories of "contest," "conquest," or "coronation." This is not necessarily a "traumatic" (Katz and Liebes 2007) event, as it may be experienced differently by various audiences. Unlike "media events"—ceremonial, preplanned, centrally executed, top down— "hypermedia events" are contentious, emergent, fragmented, bottom up (Kraidy 2010). This article uses the rise of IS to explore hypermedia events as a peculiar articulation of space and time, drawing on the global "network-archive" (Chopra 2015) that IS created as a digital footprint, the referentiality of which means that we experience IS's "regimen of bodily control justified by religion, enforced by brutality, and propagated by spectacle" (Kraidy 2016, 212) as one continuous "global event chain" (Sreberny 2016).

## Terror

Deleuze envisions events as the (incorporeal) effects of new combinations of (corporeal) things that transform those things and produce a turning point. IS can be construed as an event in the sense that a series of things—the U.S.-U.K. 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ensuing insurgency; the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war; the growth of jihadi networks in U.S. prisons in Iraq; the bloody unification of jihadi groups under the banner of IS; the conquest of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria; the declaration of the Caliphate; IS's systematic social media campaign and its relentless coverage by global media; the entry of IS as ballyhoo in various Western national elections; the linking of IS with encryption and data security, immigration, and border control; the migration crisis—combined and transformed each other, in the process producing IS as a "global event chain" (Sreberny 2016).

Key to a Deleuzian vision of events is the distinction between the *actual* and the *virtual*. Relations of distance and measurement are actual and extensive, whereas relations of intensity and affect are virtual and intensive. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) illustrate this in their binary categorization of space: striated space is that of actual extensive relations, smooth space that of virtual intensities, between objects. In the smooth desert, movement between two points can occur in a virtually infinite number of trajectories and is experienced as velocity—intensive. In the striated city, walls, streets, and so on, determine movement from one point to another, and the journey is experienced as distance—extensive.

The interplay between cities and the nomads who raided them gave rise to the notion of "war machine," by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) via Ibn Khaldûn ([1967] 2005), as a deadly configuration of humans and technology external to the state. When

Mbembe (2003, 32–33) describes the war machine as "segments of armed men" with "capacity for metamorphosis," a "mobile . . . relationship to space,"

> adapted to the principle of segmentation and deterritorialization . . . political . . . and . . . mercantile . . . operates through capture and depredations . . . to fuel the extraction and export of natural resources . . . forge direct connections with transnational networks,

he could have been describing IS. The war machine has "spatio-geographic," "arithmetic," and "affective" aspects (Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

Thinking of IS as a war machine corrects initial misdiagnoses of IS as a territory-holding, state-building enterprise (the "ISIS model"), rather than a perpetrator of terrorism in the West (the "al-Qaeda model"), a view debunked by the November 2015 Paris attacks. After the March 2016 Brussels attacks, pundits argued IS was shifting to incorporate al-Qaeda's tactics. Encompassing bounded territorial enclaves and transnational networks, a war machine does not follow either/or logic. It alternates/combines statism and terrorism. As one commentator said: "Islamic State combines and hybridizes terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and conventional warfare . . . and it makes Islamic State a new breed" (quoted in Atwan 2015, 152).

## Territoriality

Because of the rhetorical and contested nature of the Islamic *State*, the group has a fraught relation to territory. Whereas al-Qaeda controlled mere swatches of territory in Afghanistan and Yemen, IS in its heyday was equal in size to Great Britain. Most important, IS made a state-making claim—what Deleuze called "order-word"—while al-Qaeda, whose name means "the base," did not. There is a big difference between claiming to be *the* IS, rooted in the historical figure of the Caliphate, and self-defining as a mere base of operations. IS videos reflect an obsession with territoriality, most acutely manifest in counterfactual maps of an IS-dominated, post Sykes-Picot Middle East (Arabs scorn the secret 1916 British-French pact that shaped the modern Arab state order, at the dusk of the Ottoman empire and the dawn of European colonialism). IS released several videos in which it theatrically obliterates those colonial borders and makes territorial claims, such as "End of Sykes-Picot," and "What Are You Waiting For?" In June 2014, IS released what was dubbed the "ISIS global takeover map," showing an assemblage of space, lines, and names that visually upends the geopolitical state order. This shows how territoriality is a social relation nested in claims and counterclaims (see also Brighenti 2010).

Indeed, for Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 473), although the city-dweller's relation to territory is mediated by zoning and property regimes, the nomad's relation to land is so fluid that the nomad "self-reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself."[1] This mutually constitutive relation with land played itself out in contests over territoriality within jihadi circles as IS was asserting itself at the expense of other groups. When the al-Qaeda old guard, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, asked al-Baghdadi, the self-declared caliph of IS, to withdraw his fighters from Syria to Iraq, al-Baghdadi

answered that he did not recognize the "artificial" Sykes-Picot border drawn by "infidels" (Atwan 2015, 73). This shows how territoriality enters internal contestation—it is an idiom of contention as much as it is a source of discord—within Jihadi ranks, as it entails rejection of external Others, upending the modern state system in the Middle East. Territories entail boundaries, which must always be maintained, protected, and redrawn, and IS, as a nomadic agent, is a "vector of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 473).

Envisioning territory as process rather than outcome, we can consider the constitution of territory, with Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 507), as an "ambulant coupling (of) events-affects," a joining of multiple events in a chain or series. Consider IS's release of videos as hypermedia events—major, when it is a beheading or momentous announcement; minor, when it documents a routine military operation. Twitter storms act as a drum roll for major announcements, like Baghdadi's speech in Mosul announcing the Caliphate, engaging hypermedia space in the production of the event. Others, like suicide bomb attacks from Beirut to Brussels, are "eventized" by social media celebration, condemnation, circulation. These hypermedia events are rhizomatic— they transit from underground interstices to ground surfaces—territorial markers. On screens worldwide, these events appear as flashpoints across the globe, raising the frightening specter, in IS's territorology of terror, that Istanbul, Paris, or San Bernardino fall within the boundaries of IS. Events are territorial "acts of inscription in the visible" (Brighenti 2010, 325).

In this peculiar notion of territoriality, the goal is not to occupy and hold physical territory, but rather to suggest virtual dominion, sowing fears and fantasies. This "pure war" (Virilio 2008) generates anxiety because IS's elastic boundaries, even if merely imagined and suggested by flashpoints on news screens, fuel paranoia about "sleeper cells," "lone wolf attacks," and so on. Every attack, mapped on global screens in territory technically outside of IS's dominion, suggests that, in fact, IS operates in that space. It is territory conjured up in a series of events, achieving a thickness in a global imagination captured by digitally circulated affects.

## Temporality

Temporality is central to events. Although media events (Dayan and Katz 1994) punctuate important moments in national life, and hypermedia events (Kraidy 2010) mark disruptions in the status quo, Deleuze (2004, 172) introduces a heightened sensitivity to temporality, writing,

> With every event, there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person, the moment we designate by saying "here. The moment has come." The future and the past of the event are evaluated only with respect to this definitive present, and from the point of view of that which embodies it. But on the other hand, there is the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and pre-individual, neutral, neither general nor particular.

This awareness of a moving continuum from past to future is crucial for a recuperation of historical understanding of events, as Sreberny (2016, 3488) argues that analyses of events "seem to evacuate the history by which they are eventive."

A Deleuzian approach rectifies this problem by its consideration of the Stoic distinction between two kinds of time. Deleuze (2004, 172) distinguishes *Chronos*, which focuses on the present as constitutive of time, and *Aion*, according to which

> only the past and future inhere or subsist in time. Instead of a present which absorbs the past and future, a future and past divide the present at every instant and subdivide it ad infinitum into past and future, in both directions at once.

As a result, grasping an event often revolves around the twin questions of what occurred immediately before and what will happen right after. This enables an approach to events that emphasizes their historical unfolding. From this perspective, the event expresses "a becoming that escapes the present moment in time as well as the corporeal content of the subject" (Lunborg 2009). Events for Deleuze, then, are creative, emergent, and constitutive of new realities.

IS's relation to territoriality, like the smooth space of the nomad, can be understood in terms of temporality rather than spatiality, of intensity rather than extension. In some cases, IS adds vast material territory in a heartbeat: when Nigeria's Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Caliph, IS's territory grew by the size of Belgium in the minute it took the Boko Haram leader to declare allegiance in front of cameras. Holding territory is less consequential than (1) the speed with which IS occupies and unoccupies it, (2) the affective impact of images of territorial maneuvering, and (3) the speed with which different flashpoints-events interlink to produce the virtual boundaries of the Caliphate. Rather than the accumulation of territory, the accelerated fusion of ideology, technology, and territory enables IS to build what Virilio (2012, 16) called a dromosphere, a "combination of technoscientific domination and propaganda" that "reproduces all of the characteristics of occupation, both physically and mentally."

## Conclusion

By auguring a peculiar coupling of territoriality and temporality, IS provides an auspicious opportunity for a renewed, and more philosophical, understanding of hypermedia events. Grasping IS as a war machine occupying particular spatial-temporal configurations enables us to conclude the following:

1. We must expand our notion of event from unity to multiplicity: hypermedia events can be "global event chains" (Sreberny 2016).
2. A Deleuzian approach enables us to think of events, in the plural, as emergent and mediated territorial happenings.
3. Events have actual/extensive dimensions, but their virtual/intensive aspects are more consequential. Temporality shapes events, amplifying or compressing their actual and virtual durations.

4. Events are not only ritualistic or contentious participation; they are also circuits of affects. Events, in this sense, are the opposite of structure. As Massumi (2002, 27), following Deleuze, argued,

Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, or rules into paradox . . . The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure).

Here, events can be understood not as (top-down) structures of ritual participation in social solidarity, neither as (bottom-up) structures of contestation for social change, but as emergent (meaning creative, disruptive, and productive, as opposed to emerging) circuits of affect—anxiety, fear, disgust—whose effects may reproduce the social order or chip at its foundations.

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## Note

1. Author translation from original French.

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## Author Biography

**Marwan M. Kraidy** is the Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media, Politics and Culture, and director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC), Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Harvard University Press, 2016). This article stems from the author's work on the war machine, as a 2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellow.