Review – The Terrorist Image

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The Terrorist Image: Decoding the Islamic State's Photo-Propaganda
By Charlie Winter
Hurst Publishers, 2022

Situated within the broader context of political communication and visual representation, Charlie Winter's book,*The Terrorist Image*, offers an exhaustive and brilliant account of the Islamic State's use of photography to imagine, convey, and construct reality in view of its ideological and strategic goal(s). For anyone (un)familiar with the discussion around the media campaign strategies of terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State (see for example: Winkler, El-Damanhoury, Saleh, Hendry, and El-Karhili 2021), Winter's book contributes significantly to this by exploring the "cultural and doctrinal values" that underpin such visual practices (p.3). While this book speaks mostly to a specialist audience, including terrorism researchers, students, experts or practitioners, the simplicity and directness of its writing, supported by a logically apt structure, makes it highly readable and potentially accessible to a wider audience beyond its intended target.

Throughout Winter's analysis – which is driven by two related questions: first, to identify what the Islamic State uses images for, and second, how these articulate meanings about the group, its ideological and strategic goals, and sphere of influence – readers encounter the representation of the Islamic State (and its antagonists) through photo-propaganda. This visual representation ultimately produces ideal worlds which are diametrically structured by two "global themes" of *Jihad* and *Khilafah* (Caliphate), war(time) and peace(time), self and others. This binary of war and peace (see Barkawi's work for an excellent critique), which is central to the group's visual rendition, is indeed convoluted and often reflects a long-standing struggle against 'the adversaries' of Islam in which the Islamic State emerged and visualises itself as a significant, if not the chosen, prosecutor of this protracted war (p.17). Amongst several examples, to briefly illustrate, readers encounter the representation of "the Mujahidin" (or soldier) which succinctly portrays a double image of the Islamic State's soldier: idealised as a relentless combatant involved in an enduring battle on the one hand, and as a submissive devotee whose piety ensures *his* ultimate victory, on the other (Winter 2022, pp. 46-55).

While the Islamic State's keenness for visual propaganda, whether through its infamous execution videos or fatwas delivered from minbars, is well-known, Winter demonstrates how effectively organised, though highly centralised and hierarchical, the group's media apparatus is (see chapter two). Its photo-propaganda in particular, as Winter shows, accentuates the relationship between photography and warfare, revealing crucial understandings of time, geography, memory, and the role of non-combatants such as photographers. Several photo angles, such as 'shots from below and out of focus' to highlight the vulnerability of the soldier, intricately entangle the soldier, the photographer and the viewers in this performance (p.60). The *jihad* itself is historical (continuity) and at the same time episodic (intervals and ruptures) (Chukwuma 2021), shifting between different battle times and moments of peace, stocktaking and recuperation. These images, also, attempt to render a coherent depiction of the "good life" within the Islamic State's controlled territories; that is, as a space characterised by untrammelled devotion and the practice of 'true Islam' which must be defended from the abodes of infidels. Moreover, the memorialisation of dead photographers illustrates their symbolic and strategic value as propagandists and jihadists, while the visualisation of death through brutal execution photos – presided over by the iconic "executioner" (Hansen 2014) – is an unassailable forte of the group's communication strategy and visual propaganda, in which "the executioner" and "the condemned" embody new and

historical antagonisms.

In addition to the above, Winter's unpacking of the *Khilafah* theme to illustrate salient representations of state practice, nation-building, and victimhood, provide readers with copious details of life inside ISIS-controlled territories. One striking example, among several discussed in this book, includes a photograph showing members of the *hisbah* police participating in street games (such as tug-of-war) (p.131). This indeed serves to humanise the (Islamic) state. Contrastingly, however, the brandishing of assault rifles in public spaces and the implementation of *Hudud* (public punishment) by the state police amidst an apprehensive crowd certainly reinforces the (Islamic) state supremacy, if through brutal techniques. The victimization frame, which positions the Islamic State as a victim of the enemy's violence and wanton destruction, provides at least two readings. On the one hand, such instrumentalization of losses or narratives of victimization – commonly used by state and non-state actors in warfare – generate justification for its war efforts or jihad. And on the other, highlights the horrors of the global campaign against the Islamic State, which include sustained air raids and drone strikes often targeting civilian areas, and raise important questions about contemporary counter-terrorism strategies.

These snapshots of the book, thus, put it alongside a broader tenor of work on visual and representation in IR and security that seeks to 'meet the pictorial challenges' by 'acknowledging the relevance of the communicative acts that images perform' (Campbell 2003; Möller 2007). Winter's book indeed meets this challenge, particularly by utilising insights from Barthesian semiotics in exploring the different layers of meaning associated with images produced by the Islamic State to offer a textured story of its visual universe. This methodological approach is enhanced by the extensive corpus from which the analysis in the book emanates. This includes 5,441 photo-reports (or *tarir musawwar*) which consist of 20,788 images published on the Islamic State's social networking platform Telegram between 2015 and 2017, covering the period of the rise and decline of the group. *The Terrorist Image*, then, offers incredible insights for future work around the visual politics of security, discourse and representation, and, indeed, for a comparative study of the representational techniques used by different terrorist groups, or for comparing these with those used by state actors.

In sum, this is an impressive and worthwhile book suitable for this platform's audience. It utilises a wealth of primary data and methodological finesse in offering a fascinating tapestry of the Islamic State's photo-propaganda to render visible its cultural and ideological underpinnings. The book delivers on these modest objectives (and more): first, it presents a richly detailed yet comprehensive description of how the Islamic State appeal politically and emotionally to different audiences including its devotees, adversaries, and the world at large. Second, the book advances the study of photo-propaganda in a significant way, particularly by zoning in on a non-state actor. Also, by drawing upon thematic network and semiotic analysis it compellingly demonstrates the multi-layered meaning of images produced by the Islamic State which, by and large, are wrought and understood within a charged political context. Third, it makes an important methodological contribution to visual semiotics by showing why images matter and how these can be collected, studied, and analysed in a systematic way. All of this make Winter's book a huge success and, I am sure, will receive the attention it deserves in the academic community and beyond.

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