Unmasking the Executioner: What This Gesture Means and How It Can Help in the Fight Against ISIS

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Abstract

There are important lessons to be drawn from the November 16 ISIS video. Its slick production of the unmasked execution video displayed one of ISIS’s strengths and also presented a powerful clue to governments looking to exploit its inherent structural liabilities as well as the challenges that it faces from within. The assembled force of ISIS is a composite of individuals all fighting for different reasons. Western governments seeking to defeat ISIS and its capacity for “franchise jihad” must recognize and understand this diversity and exploit it. This strategy requires the West to orient itself to the composite that ISIS presents and avoid the catastrophic pitfall of trying to create the enemy it wants to fight at the expense of the one presented.

Article

On November 16, ISIS released its fifth execution video featuring a murdered Western hostage. The video contained several points of departure from the previous execution videos; most notable were its content, structure and length.\[i\] The American, Peter (Abdul Rahman) Kassig, did not appear alive; rather, his severed head was displayed at the end of the 16-minute video.\[ii\] Also featured were the choreographed, simultaneous executions of 22\[iii\] Syrian soldiers. Despite these variations on an established theme, the most dramatic and revealing departure in this video is that the executioners performed their duties unmasked.

The Unmasking: A Statement of Confidence or an Act of Desperation?

Intelligence experts and the media have so far focused their interpretations of the unmasking as either a statement of confidence or an act of desperation.\[iv\] The fighters appear unashamed of their role; their expressions and swagger filmed in dramatic slow motion are staged to suggest they are convicit to the cause and committed to participating in the mass execution about to take place. Additionally, several if not all of the unmasked executioners appear to be foreign fighters.\[v\] By unmasking the executioners ISIS flaunts its global appeal and demonstrates progress towards its stated goal of establishing a transnational Caliphate.
Analysts at the U.S.-based Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC) and the U.K.-based Quilliam Foundation have examined each frame of the 16-minute video and using clues in the lighting, shadows and overall production, suggest that it took up to 6 hours to film. This is not the hasty effort of a group trying to flip the script to remain relevant. Rather it is a deliberate and purposeful effort to broaden their appeal and demonstrate resolve to their cause. Furthermore it boasts of their ability to recruit jihadists from the international community.

Within 24 hours of the fifth video’s release, French authorities identified one citizen, Maxime Hauchard from Normandy. Within two days, medical student Nasser Muthana, from Cardiff, Wales, was tentatively identified by his father, and French authorities identified a second citizen, Mickael Dos Santos. Previously, Nasser Muthana appeared in a recruitment video, stating that ISIS has “brothers from Bangladesh, from Iraq, from Cambodia, Australia and UK.” That ISIS has clearly accomplished its goal of international recruitment is at this point self-evident from their own use of social media.

Regardless if the video reveals desperation or confidence, it is also true that in unmasking its executioners ISIS has ensured that they cannot go home. The unmasking was an instrument of control. There is little doubt that both ISIS and its foreign fighters are aware of the actions governments are taking to prevent their own citizens from both joining and returning from fighting with jihadist groups. By having foreign fighters turned executioners appear unmasked and complicit in murder ISIS has done just as much to ensure that they cannot go home as Western nations have done to try and prevent would-be jihadists from joining ISIS. Regardless of the intention behind the unmasking, the question posed to governments is now: How can the presence of foreign fighters be leveraged against ISIS?

Unmasking Diversity and Revealing Liabilities

In unmasking their executioners, ISIS has displayed one of its great strengths, the ability to compel foreign individuals to abandon their former lives, risking death for the promise of a glorious resurrection in a new state. The unmasking also presented a powerful clue to governments looking to exploit its inherent structural liabilities. ISIS’s diversity has revealed three distinct vulnerabilities in the narrative surrounding the reality of international jihad. First, the foreign fighters motivated to defend the Sunni population in Syria’s civil war are not just battling the Syrian government as the recruitment videos and other propaganda that led them to jihad suggested. Rather they find themselves slaying and brutalizing other civilians—the vast majority of them Muslims—in an increasingly fracturing region as ISIS struggles to control the territory it has gained. Secondly, foreign fighters are not experiencing the romanticized jihad they have dreamed of. Instead, many have found themselves conscripted into a jihad of bureaucracy attempting to provide services to non-combatants in the very power vacuum which they helped create. Finally, under the rubric of ISIS there is no room for the concept of meritocracy that foreign fighters who have lived in the west have seen or experienced. They are, and will always remain, second class jihadists.

The Near Enemy is Other Muslims

ISIS information campaign captured the imagination of potential foreign fighters by utilizing social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to deliver daily propaganda to tens of thousands of subscribers. Through a fully integrated social media campaign, ISIS initially presented the narrative that it was defending the Syrian Sunni majority against a brutal Shia minority regime. This campaign was all the more effective for showing decisive action, in contrast to Western governments whose rhetoric of outrage and war crimes of the Syrian government had begun to ring hollow.

However, ISIS created expectations of jihad which do not accurately convey the reality of combat on the ground. As the fractures developed amongst the opposition groups, so the targets shifted with fellow Sunni fighters now in their sights. Social media posts revealed internal debate between foreign fighters
over whether martyrdom can be the result of being killed by intra-jihadist group fighting. Other posts reveal disillusionment that the once honorable resistance of the mission had been lost. One British fighter, claiming to represent 30 other British citizens, told the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), “We came to fight the regime and instead we are involved in gang warfare. It’s not what we came for but if we go back [to Britain] we will go to jail.” Several French jihadists have also echoed this disillusionment with not fighting in a heroic battle, rather battling amongst jihadist factions.[xi]

Furthermore, ISIS exists on the potency of the Sunni-Shia divide. With limited exceptions, the governments and population standing in the way of its goal of a caliphate are Muslim. This divide will be keenly felt and understood by the fighters who have grown up in Muslim countries. The perception that Shia are the mortal enemy of the Sunni will have been a regular feature of extremist ideologues and will have been reinforced through a long history of violent clashes, national identity, and socio-economic conditions. For many of the foreign fighters from Western countries, their minority religious status will have diminished the sectarian divide, and rather focused their motivation to fight along Christian–Muslim lines. These foreign fighters are likely unprepared for the scale of brutality required to gain control of territory by killing other Muslims.

A Jihad of Bureaucracy

The second vulnerability in ISIS media campaign is a function of the changing nature of the battle. Once again, the strength of its ability to inspire and recruit fighters contains an inherent weakness. The slick video productions with dramatic soundtracks and staging as seen in the fifth execution video appeal to a violent video game playing generation.

Following its rapid series of territorial gains, ISIS is now at pains to demonstrate it can equally succeed at governance, including humanitarian assistance, basic services, and rule of law. This “mission creep” includes population control, a task which ISIS approaches the only way it knows how: by instilling fear and terror through the brutal tactics of public executions, beheadings, crucifixions, and torture.[xii] It also involves micromanagement. The German journalist, Juergen Todenhoefer, was recently given permission for safe passage to visit Mosul. He found the militants in control confident, relaxed and even boastful about their brutality. They were also very young, and even adolescent boys were armed.[xiii] He saw professionally produced leaflets and posters instructing men how to pray, women how to dress, and how to treat slaves. Todenhoefer was clear that ISIS motivation to allow him to visit and film was to show their Islamic state is indeed working.

Social media serves the population of Mosul and presents a very different picture. In a series of “diary entries” to the BBC, residents describe constant water and power and shortages, poisoning from contaminated water and anger that ISIS has banned sports and painting from schools, even the use of colored pens.[xiv] The work of governance has to be done under the constant threat of attack. This existentially heightened paradigm where martyrdom and need to keep sewage out of the water supply fosters something of a schizophrenic requirement of its fighters.

To heed the call to jihad in Western countries represents the ultimate rejection of any and all opportunities that can be imagined in their known context. The promise of starting over in a new life in an Islamic Caliphate presents an alluring vision, less the daily experience. The foreign fighters from Western countries have the steepest learning curve, and the gap between the idea and the reality has begun to reveal itself, as evidenced by communications between British and French fighters within ISIS. In letters published by the newspaper Le Figaro, complaints included being bored, “I’ve basically done nothing except hand out clothes and food,” annoyed, “I’m fed up. They make me do the dishes,” and missing the
comforts of life in France: “I’m fed up. My iPod doesn’t work any more here. I have to come back.”[xv]

**Second Class Jihadists**

In every institution, there are fault lines which form along natural leadership and personality boundaries. In the Muslim world, there is another, disproportionately weighted hierarchy to overlay: ethnicity. Not all Salafist Sunnis who have committed their fate to ISIS are equal. Without question, Arabs, have the closest connection to the Prophet of all Muslims, and yet it is still a critical point that ISIS’s leadership has to demonstrate.

There is a distinct hierarchy within both Sunni and Shia Islam. Just as there are certain formulaic rules used to validate a Catholic saint, there are rules within Islam for claiming the legitimacy of your ideology or authority: the closer you can demonstrate your bloodline to the Prophet Mohammed, the more likely it is that your ideas and leadership will be accepted and elevated. When the self-proclaimed leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the expansion of his emirate to Syria in 2013, Turki al-Binali wrote a biography supporting Baghdadi’s claim as the Caliph. Binali examined Baghdadi’s family history providing evidence that he is a descendant of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad’s Quraysh tribe.

Every non-Arab Sunni, even a Salafist jihadi, ultimately represents a convert at some point in his or her personal history. This means their ability to claim relationship to Muhammad is an inherent limitation on their leadership and influence. This reality is not a concept consistent with being raised in Western democracies and may well pose a long-term threat to the organization. However marginalized the foreign fighters might have felt in their own countries, they are still products of the education system and certain western cultural norms. This will be a distinct attribute that will set them apart from their Arab counterparts.

By showing the faces of foreign fighters who appear to be from Southeast Asia, Southern Russia and Europe, ISIS makes its case for a globally supported jihad, but one with an inherent, unspoken religious hierarchy. This hierarchy will naturally compete with the assigned social hierarchy of its individual fighters. Although converts cannot as easily demonstrate their lineage to the Prophet, it does not stop them from trying. While operating as a humanitarian aid worker in Darfur from 2004 to 2005, I spent time in Khartoum and became aware of notable consistencies in perspectives as I visited some of the more privileged families of the establishment. Invariably, as part of their introductions, each family would at some point attempt to demonstrate their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed. Over time, I became aware of an entire industry in Sudan and elsewhere, which supports this attempt for Muslims to trace lineage as close as possible to the Prophet and his extended family.[xvi]

This hierarchy of honor and ethnicity will have a dynamic role in ISIS operations, and it is something that must be managed. In the unmasking of its foreign fighters, ISIS’s leadership is exerting its control over its own rank and file, limiting their options within the organization and effectively removing any opportunity for returning to life in a Western country.

**Conclusion**

With the decision to release an execution video with unmasked executioners ISIS made a bold statement. It also exposed its underbelly. This last video offers significant clues to the makeup of the organization as well as the challenges it faces from within. The assembled force of ISIS is a composite of individuals all fighting for different reasons. Inherent in this spectrum, of self-defense, defending an adopted homeland against a record of perceived American-led occupation, or Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime, is a diversity that will complicate effective command and control. Both foreign and domestic fighters are also fighting for their own personal reasons, from ambition and glory to curiosity, to a need to belong and religious
ISIS’s self-proclaimed “state” and their dramatically staged presentation of a bold, confident, multinational force is easy to film but tougher to realize. Managing the diversity of an international jihad is a whole other ballgame. Governments combating ISIS should exploit its diversity and the inherent potential for mistrust and internal discord. The unavoidable requirement of effective command is consensus. Regardless of what its social media campaign proclaims, this consensus will be an ongoing, dynamic challenge for ISIS.

The West must understand this and orient itself to each aspect of ISIS, avoiding the catastrophic pitfall of trying to create the enemy it wants to fight at the expense of the one presented. ISIS has made it clear that it is not one enemy; it is a composite. The strategy for the defeat of ISIS can be found in seizing upon the organization’s diversity. Success may well come in transforming their boast into their downfall.

End Notes

[i] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUaxyhRfqyk (YouTube clip that stops short of the actual execution)


[iv] Here we are, come get us,” comments Paul Hunter of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, adding that they are “intentionally unmasked and exposed.” ”It’s just a way of saying, ‘We're not afraid,’” comments Firas Abi Ali, a London-based senior analyst at the global intelligence group HIS: http://www.cbc.ca/m/touch/news/story/1.2838106


[vii] Since then, doubt has been cast on whether Dos Santos and Muthana appear in the execution video, though neither deny fighting with ISIS. http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-french-jihadist-mickael-dos-santos-denies-appearing-beheading-video-1475833


There are as many sources debunking this myth as those claiming direct lineage, no less than the national history and arrival of Islam posted on the their website by the Embassy of Sudan in DC:


See also: Jacob K. Olupona, “African Religion: A Very Short Introduction,” Oxford University Press, 2014; and for a compelling argument that the Arabization of Sudan is as much a strategic alignment overtime with the power brokers as it is a comment on the centuries old association of “black” with slavery, see: “The Scramble for Arab Genealogies,” in African Writing, June-August 2007,

http://www.african-writing.com/aug/jalal.htm

About the Author

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Holly Hughson is a humanitarian aid worker with an extensive background in rapid assessment, program design, management and monitoring of operations in complex humanitarian emergencies and post-conflict development settings, including Kosovo, Sudan, Iraq, Russian Federation and Afghanistan. Presently she is writing a personal history of war from the perspective of a Western, female operating in Muslim conflicts. She works as an instructor and advisor on humanitarian aid and early recovery to joint, coalition and inter-agency civilian-military training exercises at multiple US bases in the United States and Europe.


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