Toward a Protostate Media System: The Role of ISIS's Content

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Militant groups introduce a layer of complexity to existing theories of media systems. Operating as a protostate, ISIS defies the common understandings of Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions of national media systems by blurring the lines among the media, journalists, and the state. This study offers a first step toward understanding the role of content in this emerging media system by analyzing the most recurring components (photographs) during a key transitional period (Mosul battles). A mixed-methods analysis of 1,204 images that one ISIS province disseminated under immense military pressure breaks the photographic campaign into nine military and nonmilitary visual frames and identifies key visual semiotic tools that delineate among the group's militants, Iraqi forces, and civilians. The study reveals that ISIS has established an enduring, highly visual protostate media system, in which frames and semiotics serve to help sustain the system and retain meaning in online circulation. The article concludes with a discussion about how a protostate media system may be countered.

Keywords: media systems, ISIS, photographs, visual framing, semiotics

Comparisons among Western media systems have long focused on the nation-state as a unit of analysis. A media system typically refers to the media "operating within a given social and political system (usually a state)" (Hardy, 2010, p. 5). In the post–World War II era, four theories of the press (authoritarian, libertarian, soviet, and social responsibility) emerged to describe the media in Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). More variations surfaced in the following decades, including the democratic socialist, revolutionary, and developmental press (Hachten, 1981; Picard, 1985). In the post–Cold War era, Hallin and Mancini (2004) further advanced such comparisons by introducing a typology that challenges previous characterizations of the media as a dependent variable to the state's system of social control. They rightly perceive the media not only as a reflection of but also a force that can impact social, political, and economic contexts. The seminal study classifies media systems in the West as either liberal, democratic corporatist, or polarized pluralist based on the scope of the media market, the degree of political parallelism, the development of journalistic professionalism, and state intervention. Non-Western countries, however, do not fit any of the three models (Hadland, 2012; Peri, 2012; Zhao, 2012).

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Comparisons among Arab media systems are gradually moving beyond the nation-state as a unit of analysis. In the late 1970s, a three-model typology classified the press in Arab countries as either mobilizing, loyalist, or diverse (Rugh, 1979). Expanding to Arab television, Ayish (2002) presents the traditional government-controlled, reformist government-controlled, and liberal commercial models. An additional transnational model surfaced with the rise of pan-Arab media (Rugh, 2004), which focuses mainly on offshore Arabic publications whose target readers spanned the region. Rugh, however, does not account for the interactions among media systems. Kraidy (2012) does that in his presentation of the Saudi-Lebanese media connection as a case study to illustrate a pan-Arab, transnational media system. He argues that a transnational perspective can be "more heuristic than a traditional comparative approach using the nation-state as a unit of analysis" (p. 198). Despite the emergence of the transnational approach, another unit of analysis is missing in comparisons of media systems.

Militant groups introduce an additional layer of complexity to media systems. Building on the Taliban's declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the 1990s, several al-Qaeda affiliates announced their own states (McCants, 2015). Al-Qaeda in Iraq declared the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. By 2008, al-Shabab had controlled territory in Somalia and began to govern a protostate there—a project that failed in subsequent years (McCants, 2015). Amid the Arab Spring uprisings, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula declared an Islamic Emirate in Yemen that soon crumbled in 2012. After al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb controlled northern Mali in 2012, the group also declared a state that the French air force soon crushed in early 2013 (Boeke, 2016). In these state projects, militant groups established independent media structures online and off-line to bypass state control of the media. ISIS presents the most successful media efforts for a protostate to date.

Defying the common understandings of the four dimensions of media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), ISIS has daily disseminated products that blur the line among the media, journalists, and the protostate. The media market for ISIS is highly selective as the group has mainly sought supporters and potential recruits, or what Ingram (2016) rightly describes as the decisive minorities. Political parallelism indicates some level of overlap between a journalist's politics and journalistic mission. In ISIS media, however, activism is the core mission of militant journalists. Professionalism exists in this system, but through technical standards and the drive to serve the interests of the self-declared state. The role of the protostate is highly interventionist by dictating the direction and selection of content. The protostate, militant journalists, and the message can hardly be delineated in the case of ISIS. Thus, to understand the role of content in this emerging system, this study takes a snapshot of the most recurring media component—photographs—in the key transitional period of the battle for Mosul.

ISIS Media in Transition

Transitional periods pose unique opportunities to trace the evolution of ISIS media. Following its declaration of the caliphate in 2014, ISIS assigned media roles to its local provinces. At one point, more than 30 provincial media offices were operating under the supervision of ISIS's centralized media ministry and were disseminating a plethora of media products. When social media companies cracked down on ISIS's online presence in late 2015, the group transitioned to encrypted communications and utilized the Telegram application as its main hub for media dissemination. It simultaneously promoted "media jihad" as equivalent

to fighting in battle to attract more supporters (Al-Himma Library, 2016). In October 2016, the Iraqi government launched a military operation to defeat ISIS in Mosul, the group's stronghold and de facto capital in Iraq. The fierce battles on the military and media fronts continued for about nine months, culminating in Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's announcement of the full liberation of Mosul in July 2017. A year later, ISIS's losses in Iraq and Syria reportedly prompted structural changes to its provincial media structure (BBC Monitoring, 2018). The Iraqi and Syrian provinces merged to disseminate their media as products of two larger provincial blocs: Iraq and the Levant. ISIS's media structure has undergone significant shifts in transitional periods over the past few years.

Photographs play a major role in ISIS media campaigns. Studies point to still imagery as the most prominent medium during the group's heyday (Milton, 2016; Zelin, 2015) and amid territorial losses (Winter, 2018). When ISIS controlled much territory in Iraq and Syria, it was releasing dozens of online images a day—more than 50,000 between January 2015 and August 2016 (Milton, 2016). It also disseminated around 100 images per issue in *Dabiq* magazine (Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2018). After military defeats, however, ISIS ceased to produce its non-Arabic publications and focused on imagery dissemination through Telegram and *al-Naba'* newsletter. These images serve as "projectiles" in ISIS's war spectacle (Kraidy, 2017, p. 1203).

This study investigates ISIS's localized visual response to military pressure during one key transitional period. Using content and visual framing analyses, it examines more than 1,200 images that ISIS's Ninawa provincial media office released during the east Mosul battles. This period was an important transition from ISIS's total control over Mosul to losing the city. The group subsequently lost its remaining key posts in Iraq, leading to the country's full liberation (Iraqi PM Media Office, 2017). After highlighting the role of visual frames and semiotics as messaging devices, I review the existing literature on ISIS's media and present the study's mixed-methods approach. Then I discuss the most prominent visual messaging strategies in Ninawa provincial photographs, describe the key components in ISIS's protostate media system, and highlight the implications of these findings on the development of countermessaging.

The Power of Images and Visual Frames

Photography is an influential, pervasive medium in today's media landscape. Compared with videos, photographs can emphasize powerful moments in action (Zelizer, 2010). A still image can prove and authenticate (Barthes, 1981), activate deep structures of belief (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007), distort perceptions (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999), sway attitudes (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Gibson & Zillmann, 2000), and influence memories of events (Garry & Wade, 2005; Wade, Garry, Read, & Lindsay, 2002). The quantity of photographs has exploded, signaling what Mitchell (1994) describes as the pictorial turn. With access to digital devices and the Internet, individuals are now able to create visual content and compete in the online environment.

Compared with text, photographs are more effective framing devices. Both images and text are capable of using rhetorical tools to convey and promote an issue (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). But the analogical, indexical, and contextual properties of images allow visual frames to operate less obtrusively (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). The memorability of images (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992; Paivio, 1991) and

their tendency to capture viewers' attention (Garcia & Stark, 1991) also result in stronger framing effects (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). Meanwhile, photo captions serve as complementary framing devices that can bolster or undermine the image (Parry, 2010). The visual frame is an increasingly important component in message construction.

Visual semiotics constitute another level of framing that carries connotation and conveys symbolic meaning. Perceived viewer distance, camera angles, eye contact, facial expressions, and subjective shots are semiotic devices that can tacitly influence the viewer's perception. The perceived proximity of the photo subject to the viewer can delineate among intimate relationships (intimate distance), friends (personal distance), associates (social distance), and strangers (public distance; Hall, 1966). The camera angle influences the viewer's perception of the subject's symbolic power (Kraft, 1986; Mandell & Shaw, 1973). High-angle shots typically suggest weakness; low-angle shots suggest strength and power; and eye-level shots suggest visual parity. Direct eye contact can reveal the subject's internal emotions and prompt connection with the subject (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Jolliffe, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Facial expressions further influence the viewer's interpretation of the emotions and the truthfulness of the conveyed message (Adolphus, 2002; Forgas & East, 2008). Finally, subjective shots involve the viewer in the depicted action, increase presence, and prompt identification with the photo subject (Branigan, 1984; Cummins, Keene, & Nutting, 2012; Perlmutter, 2016). Visual semiotics can thus alter the viewing experience and influence perceptions.

Studying ISIS Media

The existing literature on ISIS media exhibits various approaches. The first approach investigates the influence of ISIS media campaigns. ISIS's gruesome beheading videos of Western hostages in 2014, for example, resulted in a shift in the political discourse as the United States and the United Kingdom reframed the group "from a 'regional,' 'humanitarian' problem to a 'direct,' 'imminent threat'" (Friis, 2015, p. 736). The two countries intensified their military involvement and air strikes in Iraq and Syria as a response. The group's death videos also spread fear (Kraidy, 2017) and fueled the celebration of horror among select audience groups (Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018). Cottee and Cunliffe (2018) examine the impact of ISIS videos on 3,000 respondents. One-third of the respondents wanted to continue watching an ultraviolent ISIS video to the end, while over one-quarter reported that a utopia-themed video gave them a warm feeling and positively judged the depicted militant. ISIS media content also facilitates radicalization and attack planning (Gill et al., 2017).

A second approach examines the content of the broader online ISIS media campaign. These studies classify various media products into frames, themes, and narratives, including governance, military, utopia, brutality, and victimhood (e.g., Berger, 2017; Kuznar, 2017; Milton, 2016, 2018; Siegel & Tucker, 2017; Winter, 2018; Zelin, 2015). Findings indicate a surge in pro-ISIS tweets, a decline in the group's output, and a content shift over time due to military pressure, loss of territory, and death of media strategists. During ISIS's heyday, utopia was the largest component in its messaging, showcasing education, economic activities, natural scenery, and religious activities and rituals (Winter, 2018). Since January 2017, military warfare has replaced utopia and governance as the most prominent frame in the group's campaign, while the victimhood frame and core religious narratives have remained constant.

A third approach focuses on photographs as the most recurring ISIS medium. These studies highlight *Dabiq*'s glossiness and similarities to al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine (Kovacs, 2015), examine death and impending death images in *Dabiq* and *al-Naba'* publications (Winkler et al., 2018; Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2019), break down *Dabiq* images into visual frames and narrative themes (Stratcom Centre of Excellence, 2016), compare visual frames and bonding icons in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* publications (Wignell, Tan, & O'Halloran, 2017; Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017), compare the circulation of images (Tan, O'Halloran, Wignell, Chai, & Lange, 2018), and analyze provincial imagery (El Damanhoury, 2017). Overall, the visual frames in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* have been found to be somewhat similar, focusing on ISIS militants and regional Arab and Muslim enemies, yet the former depict more Western and Israeli enemies. The images also exhibit recurring visual icons, including the monotheism hand gesture, the Qur'an, black flags, fighters, and AK47s. At the provincial level, the military frame was predominant in Sinai provincial imagery, followed by law enforcement activities and local community grievances. A few studies reveal that ISIS utilizes subjective shots as an identification-inducing technique in military images and close to medium distance and direct eye contact to convey power and prompt connection with depicted militants.

This study expands on the existing literature by examining visual frames and semiotics in ISIS's provincial imagery. It addresses two main research questions about the depiction of Mosul during military pressure. The first question asks: What are the prominent visual frames in Ninawa provincial photographs during the east Mosul operation? To answer the question, the study examines visual frames that the Ninawa provincial media office constructed along with accompanying photo captions and visual icons. The second research question asks: How did the Ninawa provincial media office use visual semiotics to depict its militants and enemies during the same period? To answer the question, the study examines semiotic patterns across the photographs.

Method

Scope

To better understand ISIS's depiction of Mosul during a period of intense military pressure, this study examines all 1,204 images that the Ninawa provincial media office disseminated on the group's Telegram channel *Nashir* from October 17, 2016, to January 31, 2017. The focus on this period relates to the extensive military pressure on ISIS during the Mosul operation that led to the liberation of east Mosul in late January 2017.

A Mixed-Methods Approach

To identify prominent visual frames, the study uses a grounded theory approach. This method involves an inductive, bottom-up development of categories (Grbich, 2007), which generates context-specific frames. To investigate the role of photo captions as framing devices, a qualitative analysis examines how they work to support or oppose the identified visual frames. Then a quantitative analysis identifies the recurring visual icons that complement the frames to dissect the visual messages and account for frames that are pertinent to the Mosul operation.

To identify how the Ninawa provincial media office used visual semiotics to depict human figures, the study applies a content analysis of all photographs. The study adapts Winkler et al.'s (2016) 21-item coding instrument that examined *Dabiq* images. The modified coding sheet includes 11 items that analyze five visual semiotic tools (i.e., viewer distance, camera angle, eye contact, facial expressions, and subjective shots) and six scenic elements (i.e., humans, death, religious symbols, flags, weapons, and destruction). Prior to coding, three coders received training on the modified instrument. Then two coders analyzed each image. In cases where the two coders disagreed, a third coder resolved the discrepancy. The intercoder reliability across all variables was 93.56%.

Findings

The photographic output of the Ninawa provincial media office varied throughout the four-month period in terms of quantity and content. The average number of photographs increased from 10 per day in late October to 14 per day in November and December, before dropping to seven per day in January 2017. The image content can be sorted into two main categories: military and nonmilitary action. Together, the two categories comprised nine visual frames: combat, war spoils, eulogy, preparation, economy, social services, city/natural landscapes, law enforcement, and media distribution (see Figure 1). Military images accounted for three-fourths of the campaign ($n = 911$); nonmilitary images made up the remaining one-fourth ($n = 293$).
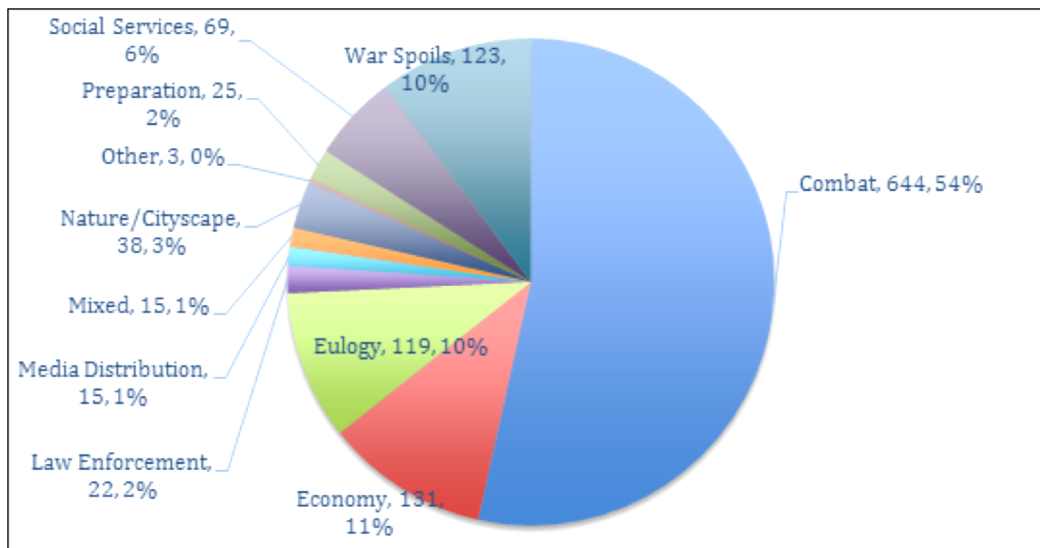

Figure 1. Ninawa provincial visual frames during east Mosul battles.

Military Frames

Combat

The combat visual frame, which was the most recurring in Ninawa provincial photographs, highlights ISIS's strength on the battlefield. The average number of combat photographs increased from six per day in late October to eight per day in November and December, before significantly dropping to two per day in January. Relevant to military conditions on the ground at the time, the combat frame depicts ISIS militants carrying out suicide missions or shooting, sniping, and firing rockets at Iraqi and Peshmerga forces, who usually appeared passively waiting at a distance, retreating, or dead. Complementing the combat frame that portrays ISIS's domination, the photo captions reinforce the message by labeling the militants "mujahidin" or "martyrs" while vilifying enemies using sectarian, derogatory terms such as "rafidis" and "apostates."[1]

The Ninawa provincial media office posted a 33-image photo report of the battles in the Tal Zalat area on December 2, 2016. The first 12 photographs depict combat. They begin with a cover photo of an ISIS militant on top of a tank shooting at the distant enemy while surrounded by fire, followed by a long shot of more than a dozen armed fighters standing next to two armored vehicles in the street before sunset with a caption stating their preparedness for the raid. The next seven photographs show ISIS militants using rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, and tanks at sunset as they attack invisible enemies identified in the captions as "the rafidi army and its militias" in reference to the Iraqi army and the Popular Mobilization units. The three remaining combat images finally reveal the target of the attack, showing distant fires and explosions lighting up the darkness and one destroyed vehicle, with the captions indicating the demise of "the militia gatherings at the hands of the mujahidin" and an "istishhadi" (a martyred suicide bomber).

The visual icons present ISIS as a pious, destructive war machine. First, almost half of all combat photographs showcase the destruction of buildings, vehicles, and artillery. In all 314 images, ISIS militants are the cause of destruction inflicted on the enemy. Second, over 70% of combat photographs show weapons that ISIS militants are using in battle or that dead Iraqi soldiers held in their hands. The militants' weapons range from AK47s, snipers, and mounted machine guns to rocket launchers and tanks. Third, combat photographs stress the agency of ISIS individual fighters and hail them as iconic heroes by depicting them alone in combat in 271 cases, or in 62% of images portraying humans. Six images in a photo report on October 23, for example, depict individual ISIS militants in offensive positions during battle, suggesting their strength against thousands of Iraqi soldiers (see Figure 2). Religious symbols appear in 18 images, mostly showing ISIS militants pointing to the heavens, signaling monotheism, while the Iraqi, Peshmerga, and militias' flags appear in 23 combat photographs to mark the enemy.

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[1] *Rafidi* means rejectionist, referring to those who refused the eighth-century leadership of Zaid ibn Ali for not condemning the first two caliphs after Prophet Muhammad's death. It is used as a derogatory term to label Shiite Muslims.

Figure 2. Combat photograph, October 23, 2016.

In the 439 combat photographs depicting human figures, the visual semiotics emphasize the power, dominance, and happiness of ISIS militants on the battlefield. All 45 low-angle shots look up to ISIS militants fighting in battle, while most of the 42 high-angle shots look down on dead Iraqi soldiers. The 13 combat photographs establishing direct eye contact with the viewer depict ISIS militants as victorious and typically standing next to the enemies' destroyed artillery. In eight of these photographs, the militants smile confidently at the camera. All 33 photographs using subjective shots position the viewer on the side of ISIS militants in battle as they snipe their enemies, march to battle, fire at Iraqi soldiers, or stand over their corpses (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Subjective shot, November 16, 2016.

War Spoils

The war spoils visual frame emphasizes the favorable outcomes of ISIS's military action. The average number of war spoils photographs significantly dropped from about one or two per day in late October, November, and December to only eight images in the entire month of January. As ISIS militants held on to territory in east Mosul during the first three months, the war spoils frame depicts weapons and belongings they reportedly confiscated in battles against the Iraqi and Peshmerga forces. For example, following the 12 combat photographs in the December 2 photo report mentioned above, 19 images show confiscated rocket launchers, rifles, machine guns, ammunition, surveillance systems, tanks, trucks, hats, and tents. A photograph posted on November 22 looks down to stacks on the ground of picture IDs, cell phones, and documents belonging to Iraqi soldiers. The photo captions typically describe these items as divine gifts that "Allah has bestowed upon the mujahidin." In instances where the corpses or picture IDs of Iraqi soldiers appear next to the confiscated belongings, the photo captions identify them as "members of the rafidi army and its militias."

The visual icons depict ISIS as the victor against state forces and militias despite all odds. About 85% of war spoils images depict the enemies' weapons and vehicles. In all 104 images, the AK47s, machine guns, snipers, tanks, and trucks are within reach of militants, who can be expected to use them in subsequent battles against the enemies. Similar to combat photographs, the war spoils frame portrays individual militants alone with the confiscated belongings in 52% of the images, followed by small groups of militants in 46% of the images. Meanwhile, large groups of people appear in only a few photographs showing the picture IDs of over 10 Iraqi soldiers, whom the captions identify as dead. The Iraqi, Peshmerga, and militias' flags appear in 15% of the photographs to mark the group whose weaponry and belongings had been confiscated (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. War spoils photograph, October 12, 2016.

In the 77 war spoils photographs depicting human figures, the visual semiotics delineate between militants and their enemies in terms of power and connection to the viewer. Over 70% of the war spoils photographs depict at least one ISIS militant holding or standing next to confiscated belongings from an

intimate/personal distance. Almost 47% of the images look down on the confiscated weaponry and belongings that ISIS militants are holding. The four photographs using a low camera angle all look up to victorious ISIS militants as they stand on top of confiscated tanks and vehicles. Several photographs establish direct eye contact with ISIS militants or the reportedly dead Iraqi soldiers. Whereas three photographs depict joyful militants looking to the viewer as they hold confiscated belongings, four photographs portray expressionless faces of Iraqi soldiers on confiscated picture IDs looking directly at the viewer with photo captions confirming their death. All 14 war spoils photographs using point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shots position the viewer in the militants' role as they hold confiscated weaponry and belongings after battle (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Subjective shot, November 16, 2016.

Eulogy

The eulogy visual frame offers a look at ISIS's most celebrated members during the east Mosul battles. The average number of eulogy photographs gradually increased over time. As the full liberation of east Mosul approached, the average number of eulogy photographs increased from one per day in November and December to almost two per day in January. The eulogy frame typically depicts ISIS's "martyrs" before carrying out suicide attacks. The photo captions praise each individual, sometimes with the text "Martyrs Caravan" superimposed on the image.

The first eulogy photograph, for example, appears in a photo report two days after the onset of the Mosul operation and shows a young man in military fatigues at a close distance as he faces the camera and holds an AK47. The photo caption identifies the man as "the brother istishhadi Saif al-Islam al-Ansari." The subsequent combat photographs show an armored vehicle moving in the desert with a caption indicating that al-Ansari is the one driving it, followed by three long shots of fire and explosions to signal the outcome of his attack.

The visual icons stress the physical and moral strength of ISIS's select pool of "martyrs." Two-thirds of eulogy images depict the militants holding their rifles and/or in vehicles before they embark on

their operations. The eulogy frame is the most celebratory of individual agency as it portrays one fighter in almost 90% of the images depicting humans. In each of the 99 photographs, the individual "martyr" is the focus of the scene. The most ISIS black flags appear in this visual frame, making up 5% of the eulogy images. The black flag serves as a physical and ideological background to the celebrated fighters (see Figure 6). Almost 40% of all religious symbols appear in this frame. In 38 eulogy photographs, the "martyr" points to the heavens, signaling monotheism, before he sets out on his mission.

Figure 6. Eulogy photograph, December 9, 2016.

In all 119 eulogy photographs, visual semiotics portray the fighters as relatable individuals to whom ISIS supporters can aspire. First, ISIS's "martyrs" appear at an intimate/personal distance in 80% of the images. Second, they are at eye level in over 85% of the images. Most importantly, almost three-fourths of all images establishing direct eye contact with the viewer are in the eulogy visual frame (see Table 1).

Table 1. Use of Eye Contact and Positive Facial Expressions in Ninawa Provincial Photographs.

Visual frame	Direct eye contact		Positive facial expression	
	n	%	*n*	%
Combat	13	12	8	14
War spoils	7	6	3	5
Eulogy	82	73	41	69
Preparation	0	0	0	0
Economy	1	1	3	5
Social services	2	2	2	3
Law enforcement	1	1	0	0
City/natural landscapes	6	5	1	2
Media distribution	0	0	1	2
Total	112		59	

In 82 photographs, the viewer is able to virtually look the subject directly in the eye before the operation. To complement this connection, about 70% of all images exhibiting positive facial expressions also appear in the eulogy frame. In 41 photographs, the fighter appears joyful and confident as he plans to take his own life. For example, a eulogy photograph on November 20 shows a militant at a close distance inside a car, smiling, looking directly at the viewer, and raising his index finger with the photo caption praising him after a suicide operation targeting "the rafidi army and militias' gatherings in al-Tahrir neighborhood" (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Eulogy photograph, November 20, 2016.

Preparation

The preparation visual frame provides viewers rare access to witness the militants' lives between battles. Appearing in only 25 photographs in four months, the preparation scenes were scattered with no set pattern. The scenes depict ISIS militants preparing for battle in various ways, such as cleaning weapons, guarding posts, reading the Qur'an, and praying. The word *ribat* typically appears in the photo captions to refer to the fortified locations where the militants are stationed. In a photo report on October 20 under the title "The Stationing of the Soldiers of the Caliphate," five preparation photographs show the backs of seven militants as they pray together; six militants sitting in a circle and reading the Qur'an; armed militants walking together to what the caption identifies as a fortification; and two armed militants sitting in a fortified position, one of whom is using binoculars to look through an opening in the wall.

The visual icons emphasize the militants' readiness for war. Almost two-thirds of the preparation photographs depict ISIS militants at the barracks with weapons in their hands or right next to them. Consistent with the other military-related visual frames, all images show either one militant or a small group preparing for battle. The preparation, however, is not always material, because 40% of the images show religious symbols, such as the monotheism hand gesture, the Qur'an, and prayer, to signify spiritual preparations. The ISIS black flag appears in two photographs as a background for the ongoing military and spiritual arrangements.

The visual semiotics portray ISIS militants as strong individuals with whom supporters can identify. The militants appear at an intimate/personal distance in 80% of the images as they reside in their fortifications, mostly at eye level. Three photographs further merge the viewer and the militant in one role using subjective camera shots. An over-the-shoulder shot on December 23, for example, aligns the viewer with the militant's perspective as he sits in a fortified location pointing his rifle to the outside.

Nonmilitary Frames

Economy

The most recurring nonmilitary visual frame is made up of photographs that present Mosul as a prosperous city under ISIS. The average number of photographs in the economy frame increased from about one per day in November to two per day in December, before significantly dropping by two-thirds in January. As the full liberation of east Mosul neared, the number of economy images dwindled. The economy visual frame depicts vibrant markets, trade, manufacturing, and agriculture in Mosul. The photo captions typically complement the visual frame by indicating the nature of the economic activity and its location.

The Ninawa provincial media office posted a 12-image photo report showcasing the market in one neighborhood on January 22, a few days before the full liberation of east Mosul. In the photo report, civilians are shown purchasing food at a restaurant, an old man is sitting in his shop with electronic appliances at the back, shop owners are covering their merchandise in the afternoon with a photo caption indicating that it was during the time for prayer, and dozens of men kneel on the curb as they pray together.

The visual icons point to the population's religiosity and engagement in the Mosul markets. Weapons do not appear in the economy frame except in the form of knives in the hands of butchers in the market. Despite the lack of religious symbols in most economy photographs, a few images point to the role of religion and show shop owners leaving their shops to pray. Unlike most military visual frames, over two-thirds of the economy photographs show many people participating in the city's economic activities (see Figure 8).

In the 116 economy photographs depicting human figures, the visual semiotics present the photo subjects as somewhat identical constituents of a larger collective. Over 62% of the images portray the photo subjects at a social/public distance on the streets. Rather than using semiotic tools to celebrate select individuals, the economy photographs typically depict all civilians at eye level, with neutral facial expressions, and not looking at the camera.

Figure 8. Economy photograph, October 23, 2016.

Social Services

The social services visual frame displays ISIS's capacity to perform as a state. The average number of social services photographs dropped from about one per day in late October, November, and December to only six in the entire month of January. Similar to the economy visual frame, the number of social services photographs decreased as the full liberation of east Mosul neared. The social services frame highlights service provisions, such as electricity restoration, street cleaning, education, and aid distribution. The photo captions complement the visual frame by specifying the type of social service and its location in Mosul.

For example, a photograph on November 22 shows two men mowing the grass in the middle strip on a Mosul road, with the photo caption describing it as part of the work of the "services bureau" in the city. A 15-image photo report on November 27 shows schoolchildren as they attend classes, read textbooks, write on the whiteboard, and play during recess (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Social services photograph, November 27, 2016.

The visual icons emphasize the religious nature of the self-declared state and the scope of its services. Religious symbols appear in 10% of the social services photographs, showing children in Qur'an recital workshops and mosques in the community. The black ISIS flag appears in the background of a few photographs depicting road services. Similar to the economy visual frame, almost three-fourths of the social services photographs show groups of people as part of the scene, often as beneficiaries of services.

The visual semiotics suggest viewer connection and identification with the individuals giving and receiving services. In the 65 photographs depicting human figures, the beneficiaries of educational and food distribution services typically appear at a close distance and at eye level. About one-fifth of social services photographs use high-angle camera shots to showcase the textbooks children are reading in the classrooms and the type of food civilians are getting. Further, a quarter of all over-the-shoulder shots appear in this frame, aligning the viewer with the photo subject as the subject reads in the classroom, receives pills at the pharmacy of a dental clinic, checks an X-ray image, conducts an ultrasound on a patient in a Mosul hospital, and documents aid distribution in a folder (see Table 2).

Table 2. Use of Subjective Camera Shots in Ninawa Provincial Photographs.

Visual frame	Point-of-view shots	Over-the-shoulder shots	Total
Combat	11	22	33
War spoils	13	1	14
Eulogy	0	0	0
Preparation	1	2	3
Economy	1	2	3
Social services	0	12	12
Law enforcement	0	7	7
City/natural landscapes	0	0	0
Media distribution	0	3	3
Total	26	49	75

City/Natural Landscapes

The city/natural landscapes visual frame stresses the beauty and functionality of Mosul despite ongoing battles. City/natural landscapes photographs were relatively constant throughout November, December, and January, with an average of one image every two to three days. These images show rivers, sunsets, greenery, neighborhoods, streets, and highways in the city. The photo captions complement the visual frame by describing the scene and confirming its location in Mosul.

As ISIS militants were fighting against the Iraqi forces on November 11, for example, Ninawa province released a photograph showing a man sitting on the ground facing the river during sunset, and the photo caption specifies the location as the bank of the Tigris River. In another 10-image photo report on January 4 in what the photo captions identify as "al-Najjar neighborhood" in Mosul, seven cityscape photographs show cars and pedestrians in the streets.

The visual icons reiterate the religious ideology of ISIS's self-declared state. Religious symbols appear in over 70% of the images, mostly presenting mosques as a recurring visual element in the community. The black ISIS flag also appears in the background of some photographs depicting the roads and neighborhoods in Mosul, thus hinting at the group's sacred role in preserving the city.

In the 28 photographs depicting human figures, the visual semiotics showcase the scenery without necessarily suggesting a viewer connection with the civilians. The photo subjects are more likely to be at a long distance in city/natural landscape photographs. As in the economy photographs, civilians in this visual frame are similar to one another, typically appearing at eye level, looking away from the camera, and exhibiting neutral facial expressions.

Law Enforcement

The law enforcement visual frame presents ISIS as a state that effectively maintains order in Mosul. The number of law enforcement photographs doubled from December to January, coinciding with ISIS's biggest losses in east Mosul. The images display *hudud* implementation (punishments dictated by sharia law) and *hisba* (moral policing) activities. The photo captions complement the law enforcement frame by highlighting the implementation of sharia law, the outlawed sins, and the nature of the *hisba* activity.

A five-image daily news brief on January 9, for example, shows the execution of a young man for homosexuality. The law enforcement photographs start with dozens of civilians gathered in the street as ISIS militants prepare for the execution, a *hisba* agent reads the verdict in a microphone in the street, masked men speak to a blindfolded young man over the roof of a building, the men push the young man off the building, and a high-angle shot looks down at the corpse. Just a couple of days after the full liberation of east Mosul, another daily news brief on January 28 shows the *hisba* van roaming the streets of Mosul, *hisba* agents in their distinctive brown uniforms talking with civilians, and shops closed during prayer per *hisba* instructions identified in the photo caption.

The lack of visual icons emphasizes the role of ISIS members in enforcing the group's laws. Neither religious symbols nor black flags appear in the law enforcement visual frame. Weapons are also nonexistent in almost all images. Instead, the images frequently display *hisba* agents as the force punishing transgressors and destroying impurities in the community.

In the 32 law enforcement photographs depicting human figures, the visual semiotics magnify the act of punishment but suggest identification with the punisher. The person about to be lashed, thrown off a building, or shot typically appears at a close distance. Meanwhile, over 13% of all subjective shots appear in the law enforcement visual frame, positioning the viewer in the role of *hisba* agents destroying cigarettes and alcohol, reading verdicts, and punishing sinners (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Law enforcement photograph, January 30, 2017.

Media Distribution

The media distribution visual frame underscores the range of ISIS's media products in Mosul. The number of media distribution photographs significantly increased around the time of the full liberation of east Mosul, with half the images appearing in January. The images show print news bulletins, newsletters, compact disk handouts, posters, billboards, and video screenings. Three photographs on November 19, for example, show an ISIS militant distributing *al-Naba'* newsletter to cars, a driver and a boy in the backseat smiling at the militant as they receive the publication, and a young man on a scooter reading the newsletter. The photo captions specify the type of the media product and identify Mosul as the location.

The visual icons present ISIS's media as engaging to civilians and militants. Religious symbols, black flags, and weapons are nonexistent in almost all media distribution photographs. Instead, the media products are always present in the scene. Further, the acts of media consumption often involve one individual or a small group of people holding, reading, or watching such products.

The visual semiotics portray the media consumer as relatable to the viewer. In the 18 photographs depicting human figures, the photo subjects watching ISIS videos or reading ISIS publications often appear at a close distance. In a few photographs, civilians are smiling as they hold the media products. At times, ISIS uses over-the-shoulder shots to position the viewer in the photo subject's role as the subject consumes the group's media (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Media distribution photograph, January 31, 2017.

ISIS's Protostate Media System

ISIS has established an enduring, highly visual protostate media system that can adjust to and sustain intense military pressure. The battle over east Mosul proved that military escalation does not obliterate ISIS's media system. The Ninawa provincial media office was generally prolific throughout the four-month period, with an average of nine images per day. Whereas military pressure hindered the production and dissemination of some visual frames over time, such as the combat and war spoils frames, the dissemination of other frames, including the eulogy, media distribution, and law enforcement frames, ramped up amid intensified pressure and even peaked at a time when the Iraqi government was announcing the full liberation of east Mosul. This fluid, sustained media presence conveyed a dual message that ISIS's military and media activities are invincible.

The content frames of Ninawa provincial photographs mark a shift from ISIS's previous media campaigns. Although victimhood has always been a key component of ISIS's message during its heyday and during military escalation, it was absent in this campaign. Not one image depicts the aftermath of the Iraqi, Peshmerga, or coalition forces' acts against ISIS and its held territories. Instead, almost one-third of all the photographs show destruction that is identified as the work of ISIS militants. The images further highlight ISIS militants as fewer in number but more effective in the east Mosul battles. Hence, the group erases any depictions of weakness to reinforce its narrative of success in what it deemed a renewed epic battle against the enemies of Islam in Mosul.

More importantly, ISIS attempted to remodel its visual sphere during battle. It incorporated two of the most powerful interpretive constructs in Islamic discourse, martyrdom and sharia implementation, to create a picture of a clash between good and evil. ISIS transformed its scores of dead militants into individual celebratory portraits of devotion, sacrifice, and ultimate victory. Using the eulogy visual frame, ISIS depicts its "martyrs" as happy and identifies their acts as a means of eternal success. This message appears in a uniform semiotic template that combines proximate distance, direct interaction, positive facial expressions,

and familiar religious symbols. Meanwhile, the law enforcement visual frame goes a step further by implying that *hudud* implementations are ongoing and increasing in Mosul despite military pressure and by involving the viewer in those acts of punishment through subjective shots. The overall visual messaging is consistent with how an ISIS military leader described the Mosul battle as "one of the most important battles in military history . . . [in which] the measure of success is satisfying Allah" (Central Media Diwan, 2017a, p. 8).

This study offers a first step toward understanding the role of content in emerging media systems. It demonstrates that visual frames and semiotics are key tools that help sustain a protostate media system. Militant groups constantly use images of previous attacks and battles to paint a picture of their present and future. Unlike the time when al-Qaeda resorted to the media's documentation of the USS *Cole* and 9/11 attacks, however, ISIS meticulously utilizes frames and semiotics to anchor meaning and create spectacles of its own military and nonmilitary actions. With access to a digital repository of tens of thousands of carefully choreographed visuals, ISIS and other groups can sustain their online media activity by repackaging their content, redrawing a nostalgic past, and retaining meaning in circulation.

Countering ISIS's protostate media system thus requires equally sustainable, creative media efforts. At the time of this writing, ISIS had lost almost all its territory, but its media battle was ongoing. The group's history indicates that its messages will persist, especially during its setbacks. Although ISIS's media presence has proven to be hard to eliminate, its visual sphere can surely be disrupted and the underlying constructs rendering the group's narrative powerful can be dismantled. Visual analyses allow us to understand the localized ingredients of ISIS's messaging, in which visual frames and semiotics are powerful and creative devices for engaging viewers. Thus, using and repackaging the products of ISIS's protostate media system in countermessaging campaigns is a recipe for failure because that would further propagate the group's own messages. Meanwhile, placing a talking head, such as a religious scholar, defector, or grieving mother, in front of a camera would put countermessaging campaigns at a disadvantage and create an unexciting visual rhetoric compared with the engaging visual anecdotes that ISIS narrates.

To best counter the messaging of groups such as ISIS, an alternative is needed: a more compelling and creative story rooted in an overarching, transhistorical metanarrative that can be incorporated in localized media campaigns. This story should call for alternative action rather than inaction. In the Mosul battle alone, for example, hundreds of ISIS members not only bought into the group's narrative but also decided to take their own lives by reportedly conducting more than 480 suicide operations (Central Media Diwan, 2017b). Until alternative countermessaging campaigns can embody a powerful metanarrative and a creative visual strategy to compete with ISIS's visual sway over potential supporters in their home countries, such efforts will be less likely to succeed.

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