



A guileful ruse: ISIS, media, and tactics of appropriation

Piotr M Szpunar

Department of Communication, University at Albany, SUNY, Albany, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

When Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in the throes of territorial demise, laid claim to the deadliest mass shooting in US history, the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, pundits declared it a sign of desperation. This paper begins from a different premise: that the case simultaneously exposes how ISIS regularly appropriates rather than inspires violence and the limits of this tactic. An analysis of ISIS propaganda and three ISIS-attributed incidents reveals that the group's ability to claim violence depends not on tactically rerouting media discourse, representation, or practice, but on taking these to their expected end, telling "us" exactly what we want to hear.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 February 2018
Accepted 9 July 2018

KEYWORDS

ISIS; terrorism; tactics;
propaganda; appropriation;
inspired attacks

O muwahhidin, rejoice, for by Allah, we will not rest from our jihad except beneath the olive trees of Rumiyyah (Rome).—Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir (epigraph on the cover of *Rumiyyah*)

Much has been made about the global reach of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). First, observers were taken aback by how the group lured thousands of recruits to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, then terrified by its handful of directed attacks in Europe, and, most recently, horrified by its ability to “inspire” those with no direct link to the group. By November 2017, ISIS had lost control of much of the land it once claimed for its state.¹ A month prior, with the caliphate already in disarray, ISIS did something that struck many commentators as odd. It laid claim to the United States' deadliest mass shooting. Stephen Paddock, a wealthy white career gambler, amassed an arsenal of firearms in a 32nd-floor hotel room in Las Vegas and killed 58 concertgoers below; he was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. In the confusion and grief, ISIS claimed that Paddock had traveled overseas and converted six months prior.² The claim, unlike others before, was met with skepticism, if not outright derision, and for many signaled the group's desperation in the face of its crumbling quasi-state.³

This paper is not about the Paddock case. Rather, it is about what ISIS's attempt to claim him exposes: the limit point of a tactic, one not simply deployed in the face of geopolitical annihilation, but an almost routine mediated practice through which ISIS (like al-Qaeda before it) *appropriates* the violence of others as its own. To be clear, this paper is concerned only with those incidents that lack evidence of direct ISIS involvement, those

that media and government officials have labeled as “inspired” by ISIS.⁴ Doubling as a critique of the popular security discourse of “inspired” violence, an examination of three pre-Paddock ISIS-attributed/claimed acts of violence—the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, the 2016 Nice truck attack, and a 2015 attack on a US Navy Reserve in Chattanooga, Tennessee—reveals how this discourse has been integral to ISIS’s ability, almost without contention, to lay claim to dispersed global violence. That this tactic finds its limit in the face of the white assailant reveals the discourse’s ideological function.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, I set the background against which ISIS’s claims resonate. I conceptualize terrorism as a refrain—an assemblage of interests, actors, texts, actions, strategies, tactics, and utterances—that structures contemporary security. Internal to the refrain is a potential to shift. Recently, this space has come to include the category of homegrown terrorism, which marks a perpetrator as “inspired” by a foreign terrorist organization in the absence of any direct links to any group. This deterritorialized notion of violence is at its core a racial framework applied almost exclusively to jihadists. It is against this backdrop that ISIS claims must be understood not as “hijacking” the media—that is, rerouting narratives off their intended course—but as simply telling “us” what we want/expect to hear (i.e., that violence committed by Arabs and Muslims, despite any ambiguity, is terrorism). The next three sections build back toward this claim. In the second section, I utilize the territorial dimension of Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactics to analyze ISIS’s English-language magazine and illustrate the group’s increasing alignment with the “inspired” narrative over time.⁵ This is evidenced in the visual and discursive changes made to the magazine’s title (from *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah*), operations reports, and the group’s pledge of allegiance. Further building on Certeau, sections 3 and 4 focus on how ISIS poaches and makes do. Section 3 stays within the pages of the magazine and examines how ISIS has poached material from its adversary, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the group originally tied to the notion of inspired terror. Section 4 uses the three cases noted above, all of which appear in the final issue of *Dabiq* (before it became *Rumiyah*), to illustrate the nuances of how ISIS has appropriated rather than inspired attacks well before the Paddock case. In the conclusion, I return to the racialized limits of ISIS’s practice of appropriation and consider its import in rethinking the weaponization of media in and for war.

ISIS in context: the shared refrain of inspiration

ISIS claims, through the “words of the enemy” no less, that it is an unprecedented phenomenon, one that will usher in a political caliphate with eschatological ramifications.⁶ That this assertion comes from the mouths of both ISIS’s proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and US Senator, John McCain—the connotations of which are not all that different—suggests a peculiar resonance within a broader set of discourses not limited to Islamic jurisprudence, culture, or history. In fact, the claim that either terrorist violence or the group perpetrating it is unprecedented has been a mainstay of terrorism and security discourse since at least the 1930s.⁷ Thus, it is important to situate ISIS within this partially shifting, partially stable discursive landscape, one that re-emerges again and again not simply because groups commit acts of violence that are *prima facie* acts of terror. Rather, it is the result of an assembling of interests, actors, texts, actions, strategies, tactics, and utterances.

A refrain, *pace* Deleuze and Guattari, is an assemblage that traces out a territory by attracting, consolidating, and holding together a regular cast of characters, scenarios, texts, and actions that may be “devoid of any so-called natural affinity.”⁸ Also internal to an assemblage is the potential to shift, change, delete, or add.⁹ Such “lines of flight” can result in significant changes in kind or more subtle shifts in degree. Thinking about terrorism as a refrain provides a lens through which to make sense of both the stability and change of what we understand terrorism to be over time and across contexts. As asymmetrical as the war on terror security assemblage may be, the refrain refocuses our attention to various parallel, imbricated, yet nonidentical tensions, particularly those between: articulation and flight; territorialization and deterritorialization; and strategies and tactics, that is, as Certeau explains, efforts of the strong (i.e., the state and its institutions) and those of the weak. For example, the persistent association of nonstate actors with barbarity in terrorism discourse—however much such exclusivity is contested¹⁰—not only is the result of state power but also has been actively embraced by al-Qaeda and ISIS. And change is not simply the purview of those who challenge the state. In the 1930s, the locus of terrorism was Central Europe; in the 1970s, it shifted to the postcolonial state;¹¹ and after the Cold War and leading into the turn of the millennium, the Middle East became the focal point of terrorism gone global. The shift from one period to the next of who constitutes a terrorist threat—anarchists, Marxists, and jihadists, respectively—is the result of state interests as much as, if not more than, the ideological proclivities of states’ adversaries. This interplay of stasis and change is perhaps nowhere more evident than in representations of terror. The aforementioned periods certainly required novel or modified images of threat. Yet, these images overlap. The dominant racial and Orientalist stereotypes integral to security discourse today¹² were also central to Cold War politics, if with a different inflection.¹³ The salience of racial thinking within the terrorism refrain cannot be understated: in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, witnesses reported seeing “Middle Eastern-looking” men leaving the scene.¹⁴

This representational interplay is further evident in the birth of the homegrown terrorist early in the so-called “postracial” moment of the Obama presidency. The homegrown terrorist is defined as an American (resident or citizen) who has turned against their country and engaged in “ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but [does so] independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization.”¹⁵ The definition hints at fears concerning Internet radicalization and inspiration, anxieties birthed in the active deterritorialization or globalization of violent insurgency by US interests in the 1980s and couched in the network metaphor prominent in security discourse since the 1990s.¹⁶ Unlike previous iterations of the terrorist, the homegrown threat is said to lack a clear profile, a Double who might look, act, or talk “like us.”¹⁷ The FBI’s increased use of sting operations—ostensibly designed to ferret out threats hiding in plain sight, but largely a questionable practice that entraps vulnerable individuals into manufactured jihadist plots—is certainly underwritten by fears of the inspired terrorist.¹⁸ Fictional portrayals and journalistic accounts of terror are equally arranged around this concept. Showtime’s popular *Homeland* features a white marine who turns and plots to kill the Vice President of the United States. In NBC’s (mercifully) short-lived *State of Affairs*, a multicultural group of college students has been transformed (read: radicalized) into a sleeper cell, culminating in a suicide bombing committed by a

blonde-haired sorority girl. And in the wake of actual violent incidents, not only are perpetrators made sense of as doubles,¹⁹ but in scenarios that lack clear ties to a terror group, journalists have devised typologies that include the category of “inspired.”²⁰

Yet, the racialized brown-Arab-Muslim-Other “spotted” running from the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City has hardly left the scene of security. As Evelyn Alsultany points out, seemingly complex representations of terror often reinforce or are underwritten by Orientalized images of threat.²¹ This is evident in both *Homeland* and *State of Affairs*. In each, the white American’s desire for violence is tied to a prototypical bin Laden figure. Moreover, journalist-formulated typologies of terror, particularly the notion of inspired attacks, are almost exclusively applied to jihadists. Other forms of violence (e.g., dispersed white supremacists) are not rendered “inspired.” These representations of threat in both fact and fiction mirror theories of radicalization which, while positing innumerable factors that lead one to violence, are—like FBI sting operations²²—unequally deployed and rely on racialized notions of susceptibility to terrorist behavior.²³ Revealed here is the racial core of what “we want to hear” vis-à-vis terror and ISIS: that violence committed by Arabs and Muslims, even those with no direct ties to any terror group and around whom float clouds of ambiguity, is terrorism.

Among these articulations of the inspired narrative is another significant voice. The appearance of homegrown as a category of terror in security discourse roughly coincides with the first issue of AQAP’s *Inspire* magazine (circa June 2010), an English-language outlet that explicitly seeks to motivate sympathizers to action across the globe and touts its ostensible ability to do so. Within its pages, al-Qaeda uncannily mirrors the mantra —“Not if, but when”²⁴—of an anticipatory security apparatus perpetually focused on the “next terrorist attack”²⁵ when it instructs the West to be concerned not with questions about the who or why of an attack, but only “Where is next?”²⁶ This shared asymmetrical refrain extends to media. For example, Faisal Devji illustrates that jihadist logic and action are far more influenced by James Bond and reality TV than Mohammed and the Quran.²⁷ In the (unequal) exchange of images or “spectacle of terrorism” that structures the war on terror, the media indeed act as “workstations” of fear, state- and terrorist-sponsored.²⁸

Situating ISIS’s claims against this shared discursive and media landscape provides a starting point from which to better understand the group’s mediated practices. I want to build on this and show how ISIS, certainly not in the position to define the rules of the game so to speak, appropriates media texts and narratives centered on inspiration. That media texts and practices are open to appropriation is the basis on which “tactical media” operate. Efforts to exploit the holes, gaps, and tensions within mainstream media and create moments of disruptive play without a defined or definitive end—these are potentials internal to any assemblage rather than located outside of it. Steeped in the thought of Michel de Certeau, the boundaries, foci, and efficacy of tactical media have long been debated.²⁹ What is of interest here is, as Joanne Richardson identifies, the symbol “of the subversion of power [that] was never far in [tactical media’s] background of associations”: the terrorist.³⁰ She lists a variety of tactical media heavyweights that equate their practice with a sort of digital, media, or philosophical terrorism. The two worlds are further connected through the notion of the hijack. Through different means, tactical media practitioners (e.g., the Yes Men who have posed as company executives) and “terrorist” groups (e.g., ethnonationalists who took control of airplanes in the

1960s and 1970s) each attempted to insert themselves into the broadcast news cycle, disrupting or shifting its focus.

Despite the provocative self-identification with terror, there is much that differentiates these two worlds. First, tactical media purposively leaves its ends undefined, while those of terror groups are often expressly given. Second, tactical media has never reduced a human to a sacrificial medium. Thus, the purpose of ending a contextualization of ISIS with a brief vignette on tactical media is intended not to equate terrorism and tactical media. Rather, it is to connect ISIS to a particular articulation of media tactics and appropriation based on Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactics. The discussion of ISIS's tactics that follows differs from those of tactical media in one other important respect, suggested by the affinity between security discourse and al-Qaeda narratives.³¹ The airplane hijacking, like that of other media, reroutes. Meaning and media are moved into unintended spaces and connotations with the aim of challenging commonplace narratives and representations. However, as I will show in the following sections, ISIS appropriates media by reinforcing the mediated and discursive routes that stabilize the terror refrain. In the group's shift to the inspired narrative, its textual poaching of al-Qaeda propaganda, and its appropriation of media texts—and, thus, the bodies of dispersed individuals with no “natural affinity”—ISIS makes do by reinforcing racial constructs of terror, telling “us” exactly what we want to hear.

From statecraft to the practice of everyday terror

For Michel de Certeau, strategy “seeks first of all to distinguish its ‘own’ place” and circumscribe that place as “proper,” that is, isolate it as a realm over which one can impose rules.³² A tactic, on the other hand, is an action carried out in the territory of the other in which this other defines the rules of the game. Sporadic and opportunistic, “what [a tactic] wins it cannot keep.”³³ It should be noted that Certeau's distinction is certainly not that of Carl von Clausewitz whom he cites. For Clausewitz, tactics and strategy “permeate one another in time and space” and are connected through the smallest unit of analysis: the engagement. Tactics concern the use of arms in a single engagement while strategy concerns the use of engagements “for the object of war.”³⁴ Indeed, Certeau's notion of tactics falls closer to the acts of deception that Clausewitz discusses and, as others have noted, are more akin to the ideas of Sun Tzu and guerilla warfare more generally.³⁵ Nevertheless, what is useful in Certeau's formulation is his focus on territorialization and deterritorialization. Through this lens, we can see how ISIS has increasingly aligned with contemporary discourses of inspired terror. To examine this shift, I turn to ISIS's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*-turned-*Rumiyah*. This genre of jihadist propaganda emerged in the 1980s, functioning to disseminate ideology, recruit those in the English-speaking world, and commemorate martyrs.³⁶ A rich site through which to gain insight into its authorial group, the visual and discursive changes made over time to ISIS's magazine—in title, operations reports, and formulation of a pledge of allegiance—reveal much about the group's tactical shift.

The move to tactics is plainly evident in the magazine's title change. *Dabiq*, first published in July 2014, is named after a Syrian town close to the Turkish border where Armageddon is to take place. It calls on sympathizers to flock there and help establish a caliphate. While open to anyone willing to adhere to ISIS's rule, special emphasis is

placed on those with the skills necessary for maintaining a functional state—doctors, engineers, and so on. *Dabiq* is primarily a place-making or territorializing text; it is the literature of a contiguous quasi-statecraft. By contrast, *Rumiyah* (*trans.* Rome) shifts the locus of activity away from the mythical center of the Islamic State and out toward the noncontiguous lands of its crusader adversaries. And as ISIS increasingly loses territory, this space expands. In effect, *Rumiyah* is a deterritorializing text aimed at inspiring violence in the space of the other; its primary focus is expanding ISIS’s reach into spaces over which the group has no control and no hope of ever achieving it. The titular shift is significant beyond branding and indicates a deeper transformation visible within the magazine’s pages.

Issues 1 through 9 of *Dabiq* (published between July 2014 and May 2015) feature a segment titled “Islamic State Reports,” which details how order is maintained, services are rendered, and punishments are meted out within ISIS territory. Not as graphic as the group’s other online propaganda, the magazine focuses on internal initiatives such as minting its own currency.³⁷ Indeed, less than 9 percent of ISIS propaganda is graphic or violent, though this is changing as it continues to lose territory.³⁸ In later issues, accounts of operations in various *wilayat* (states or provinces) outside of Iraq and Syria—“Select Military Operations” (Issues 12 and 13) and “Islamic State Operations” (Issues 14 and 15)—replace internal reports. Inspired attacks receive increasing consideration in its final issues, but are not the focus discursively or visually. In the last two issues of *Dabiq* (14 and 15, published April and July 2016), “Islamic State Operations” are accompanied by an image of a map that centers on the Middle East and North Africa, within the geographic proximity to the Islamic State’s own territory (Figure 1). The crosshairs suggest directed and controlled operations. There is only one point outside of this region, in the far left of the image where the map fades into the background. This one barely legible dot hints at a change that manifests in *Rumiyah*.

The operations reports in *Rumiyah* feature a starkly different image (Figure 2). No longer centered on the Islamic State and its surrounding environs, the scope of operations encompasses the globe. More telling, however, is what replaces the crosshairs. Rather than the connected edges of a network that are commonplace in analyses of terrorist groups, the world is swarmed by disconnected and diffuse lines of flight. They do not originate in one place, and focal points are created only in the places terror materializes—in the shape of the shadowy figures lurking in the background. Without direct connection, these disseminated lines are open to be put to use by anyone who might be inspired. The inclusion of



Figure 1. *Dabiq* 14: 20.



Figure 2. Rumiya 3: 42.

“covert operations” in the section heading illustrates ISIS’s increasing embrace of staking claim to acts of homegrown terror.

Certainly, *Dabiq* already contains elements of promoting homegrown terror. As early as its second issue, it asserted that those sympathizers who could not make their way to Syria, “for whatever extraordinary reason,” were to carry out attacks in their countries of residence.³⁹ Similarly, *Rumiya* continues to sporadically make mention of the importance of traveling to Syria and occasionally rehashes the eventual “Major Malhamah of Dabiq.”⁴⁰ However, there is an undoubted shift in emphasis. Whereas the inability to travel to Syria was to be overcome by any means necessary in *Dabiq*, in the first issue of *Rumiya* the tone changes drastically:

It is only from the *hikmah* [trans. wisdom] of Allah that he has scattered you around the earth and in the various lands of the Crusaders to see which of you are best in deeds. So here before you are the doors of jihad—unhinged and in their lands!⁴¹

In this deterritorializing effort, ISIS also reworks its pledge of allegiance (*bay’a*; *bay’āt*, plur.). With precursors in pre-Islamic civilization, the process, meaning, and form of *bay’a* have been the subject of political and theological debate.⁴² Tied to the constitution of the caliphate, some have likened the pledge to the democratic process, while others have shown certain articulations to be a “decisive rejection of contract theory.”⁴³ In some articulations, allegiance is to be given by the entire community; in others, the requirement is limited to elites (i.e., those who “loosen and bind”) or designated electors, the basis of which also varies. Its form has alternated between gestural (i.e., given by handshake), oral, and written articulations. There is no room here to outline its rich interpretive history. It is worth noting, however, that the practice of the oath has been historically affected directly or indirectly by territorial fragmentation.⁴⁴ ISIS’s use, thus, constitutes not the recovery of an unchanging tenet of Islamic culture or jurisprudence, but rather a set of reformulations affected by the shifting media and territorial environments in which the group finds itself.

ISIS originally and most thoroughly outlined the construct of a pledge of allegiance in the fifth issue of *Dabiq*, aptly entitled “Remaining and Expanding.” The cover article, which spans 15 pages, catalogs the various pledges given to the Islamic State by groups in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Sinai, Libya, and Algeria. What is telling is that each pledge, for ISIS, establishes a new state or province (*wilaya*) and is considered in terms of its strategic value: “Each of these new lands is important for the future expansion of the Islamic State and provides it with greater experience and further resources.”⁴⁵ *Dabiq* clearly communicates a desire to expand to China and Indonesia in the East and Rome in the West. This is a territorially contiguous expansion that the pledge of allegiance is structured to facilitate—given by the leaders of other groups who become part of the Islamic State’s infrastructure.

For those that cannot travel to Syria or ISIS’s nearest state:

try in your location to organize bay’at (pledges of allegiance) to the Khalifah Ibrāhīm. Publicize them as much as possible. Gather people in the masājid, Islamic centers, and Islamic organizations, for example, and make public announcements of bay’ah. Try to record these bay’at and then distribute them through all forms of media including the Internet.⁴⁶

The function of remote pledges, according to *Dabiq*, lies in creating a critical mass that might pressure others to join ranks; this would subsequently generate fear in the Islamic State’s enemies. Regardless of its remote nature, the pledge here remains collective. In the pages of *Rumiyah*, however, the collectivity of the pledge is abandoned for expediency. Therein, *bay’a* is discussed exclusively as an individual responsibility, articulated only in its relation to committing an act of violence on behalf of ISIS. The pledge’s importance no longer lies in the expansion of the state. Rather, “lest the operation be mistaken for one of the many random acts of violence that plague the West, it is essential to leave some kind of evidence or insignia identifying the motive and allegiance to the Khalifah”⁴⁷—the significance of this statement I discuss in more detail below. Connectedly, the form also changes. ISIS does not request that its inspired minions use social media to declare and broadcast their allegiance, perhaps because of the group’s own decreased use or that doing so before an attack might tip off law enforcement. Instead, the suggested means include pinning a note to a victim’s body, tossing leaflets that read (tellingly) “The Islamic State will remain!” onto the streets during an attack, or tagging the scene of an attack with spray paint or a permanent marker.⁴⁸ In effect, one’s pledge of allegiance will make its way to ISIS through the mass media.

A thoroughly contemporary phenomenon that utilizes current media practices, ISIS’s shift from *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah* marks its growing dependence on deterritorialized tactics, aligning with discourses of inspired terror. Following Certeau’s thought, ISIS no longer imposes and makes (strategically within a territory); rather, it is left to poach and make do. This move was spearheaded by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s spokesperson, just before his death; the first issue of *Rumiyah* appeared six days after he was killed.⁴⁹ Recognizing this shift demands an examination of the ways in which ISIS increasingly depends on, builds on, and borrows from already-established articulations of homegrown or inspired terror. Next, I examine how ISIS poaches (from its adversaries) before turning to how it makes do (by appropriating violent incidents) in order to maintain a presence.

Just terror tactics

Significant portions of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are made up of borrowed images. For example, in Issue 4 of *Dabiq*, various images accompany excerpts from an address given by al-Adnani. One shows coffins draped in the American flag; the adjacent text begins, “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women.”⁵⁰ The image dates to 2004 and was taken at the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. It is widely used, heading Historian Andrew J. Bacevich’s commentary on endless war in *Foreign Affairs*, for example.⁵¹ The use of images that have little connection to ISIS (and predate it) is a superficial clue to a significant dimension of ISIS’s mediated practice. ISIS regularly poaches material from its adversaries, particularly AQAP. While the concept of “poaching” is taken from the work of Certeau, I follow Henry Jenkins’s iteration in which the act of poaching is not ephemeral but produces its own texts.⁵²

In a December 2013 video, ISIS uses the audio from one of Anwar al-Awlaki’s lectures as a voiceover; the group also named a “contingent of English-speaking fighters the Anwar al-Awlaki Brigade.”⁵³ The value of doing so is evident in that al-Awlaki’s own videos and lectures, produced before and during his time with AQAP, continue to be tied to home-grown terrorism. More important perhaps is that al-Awlaki, despite being relatively unknown in the Middle East, garnered much attention in the United States. An American cleric born in New Mexico, he was once known as an imam who strove to connect communities. A “good Muslim,” he was invited to an outreach event at the Pentagon in 2002 (en route to the event, he was closely followed by the FBI). Later, when he became involved with AQAP, his American-English accent and charismatic, calm delivery peppered with American cultural references spawned anxieties concerning an enemy within who could effectively galvanize others. An enemy who spoke “our” language, he was killed in a 2011 drone strike.⁵⁴ While appearing sporadically in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, he is clearly honored therein. The careful and infrequent use of his image is likely because he was the English-speaking face of a group that has refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS.

The animosity between the groups has not prevented ISIS from poaching AQAP’s texts. In fact, *Rumiyah* resembles AQAP’s *Inspire* more than anything else. Rhetorically, ISIS uses the term “terrorism” positively, in essence reappropriating a concept that has long maintained inhuman or barbaric connotations—despite the best efforts of “terrorism studies” to render the construct a purely denotative object of study. For ISIS, terror is laudable, evidenced in article titles such as “Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism” and “The Kafir’s Blood is Halal for You.”⁵⁵ Neither *Dabiq* nor *Rumiyah*, however, contains a detailed explication, political, theological, or otherwise, concerning its use. The legibility of the group’s position seemingly builds on a doctrine central to *Inspire*’s narrative:

We refuse to understand this term according to the American description. “Terrorism” is an abstract word, and like many of the abstract words, it can carry a good or bad meaning according to the context, and what is added to it and what is attached to it. The word is an abstract term, which has neither positive nor negative meaning.⁵⁶

The article goes on to distinguish between two types of “terrorism”: blameworthy (*irhab madhmum*) and praiseworthy (*irhab mahmud*). The article is one installment of a serialization of Abu Mus’ab al-Suri’s 1600-page tome *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*. ISIS does not parade Mus’ab al-Suri in the way it does al-Awlaki. He is mentioned only

derisively (often in a footnote) and cast as a sympathizer of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁷ Regardless, his work is poached and utilized by ISIS.

In a similar way, ISIS's appropriation of the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis mirrors that found in *Inspire*.⁵⁸ In "Reflections on the Final Crusade," the group paraphrases al-Awlaki to assert that "the mujahid knows no grayzone. As the liar Bush truthfully said, 'Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.'" Three issues later and in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack—claimed, in fact, by AQAP—the grayzone is declared "extinct."⁵⁹ The use of this narrative highlights the recycling of well-worn lines of articulation that are repeatedly appropriated and reformulated, put to uses the original British and American authors had surely not anticipated.

Tactics "make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse."⁶⁰ This is evident in ISIS's growing promotion of homegrown terror. ISIS, again like AQAP before it, seeks to inspire attacks by attempting to exploit the internal divisions within European countries and the United States. *Inspire*, in a move reminiscent of those once made by the USSR and the Vietcong, attempts to present al-Qaeda's theology as a "Solution to Racism."⁶¹ The magazine juxtaposes an image of Trayvon Martin against that of Barack Obama, poaching the words of Malcolm X to label each (Figure 3). ISIS takes up this line in *Dabiq 11*, contrasting

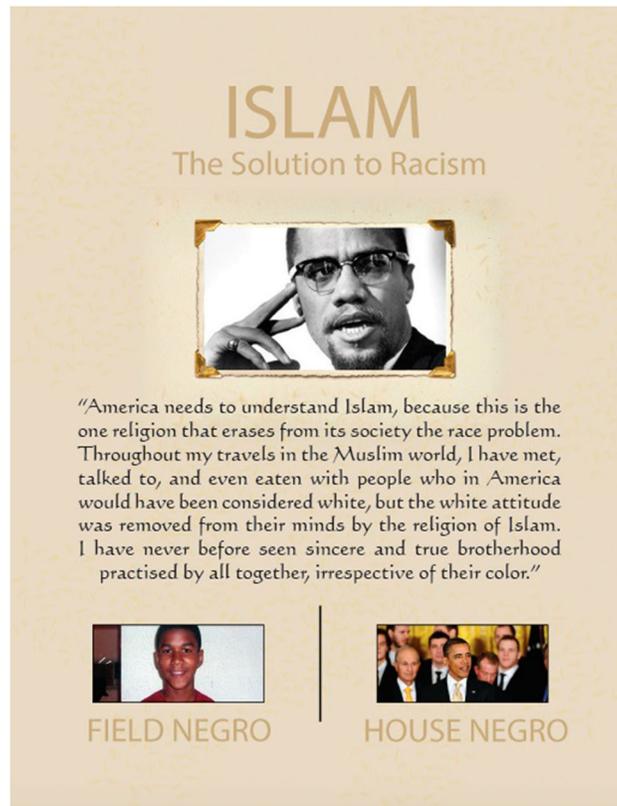


Figure 3. *Inspire* 10: 29.

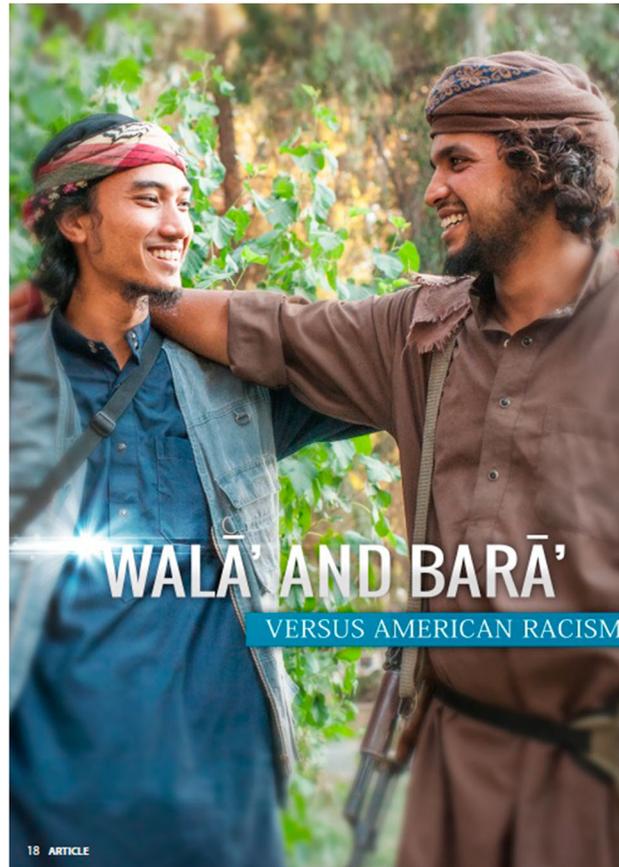


Figure 4. Dabiq 11: 18.

“Wala’ and Bara’ Versus American Racism” (Figure 4). The article uses an image of two ethnically dissimilar fighters to declare that “racial hatred has no place in Islam.”⁶² And during the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri after a police officer murdered Michael Brown, ISIS urged protesters, via Twitter, to connect Malcolm X’s words about Islam and race to the group’s claim that the Islamic State presented an “alternative to [the] indignity” blacks experience in America.⁶³ This tactic necessitates two comments. First, the postracial paradise offered by ISIS clearly remains the stuff of fantasy. Reports from within its territory reveal that there is indeed a racial hierarchy evident in the way “country of origin” determines a recruit’s tasks and a woman’s value.⁶⁴ Second, the use of Malcolm X is a superficial and failed effort. That is, there is no evidence that ISIS has been able to exploit the continued racist violence experience by America’s black communities for its own gains.

Perhaps the most visible way in which *Rumiyah* resembles *Inspire* is in its serialized “Just Terror Tactics.” A less detailed appropriation of “Open Source Jihad” which appears in each issue of *Inspire*, the feature builds on al-Adnani’s calls for sympathizers to carry out attacks around the globe by any means necessary and without seeking anyone’s approval or permission. The first installment includes a footnote that explains

the use of the construct: “Instead of using the term ‘lone wolf,’ we will refer to operations in Dar al-Kufr executed by mujahidin with bay‘ah to the Khalifah as ‘just terror operations,’ ‘just’ being the adjective form of justice.”⁶⁵ At the time of writing, there have been three installments published, which encourage the use of trucks and arson in attacks, describe the utility of particular knives, lay out the construction of Molotov Cocktails (*Inspire* featured automatic weapons maintenance and improvised bomb manufacturing), and suggest a variety of purposefully vague potential targets along with the various ways of pledging allegiance noted above. Homegrown terror is indeed, *pace* Certeau, opportunistic, sporadic, and everyday. As ISIS increasingly depends on tactics to maintain a presence, it is perhaps not surprising that the group poaches from AQAP, the organization intimately tied to the coalescence of notions of inspired violence and radicalization in contemporary security discourse. This fact—ISIS’s regular and increasing appropriation of its adversary’s material—opens up an interstice, a fissure from which to develop a different perspective on “inspired operations.”

Appropriating attacks

ISIS urges sympathizers to pledge allegiance “lest the operation be mistaken for one of the many random acts of violence that plague the West.”⁶⁶ Yet, recent history reveals that ISIS has shown little hesitation in claiming attacks in which either a pledge is absent or the motive behind giving it is debatable. A re-examination of three attacks illustrates the various levels of uncertainty that ISIS has ignored, suggesting a willingness to appropriate even in murky waters. Accounts of the three cases—involving Omar Mateen, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, and Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez—appear in the fifteenth and last issue of *Dabiq*, a key transition point in the shift from strategy to tactics outlined above.

On 12 June 2016, Omar Mateen entered a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 people. Amid the carnage, Mateen called 9-1-1 and pledged allegiance to ISIS. Yet, during that call, Mateen also “expressed solidarity” with Tamerlan Tsarnaev (one of the Boston Marathon bombers) and Moner Mohammad Abu Salha (a Florida man turned suicide bomber in Syria). The issue is that these men have been claimed by or tied to ISIS’s adversaries: AQAP and al-Nusra Front, respectively. Mateen had also once claimed to be a member of Hezbollah.⁶⁷ The 29-year-old security guard was known to have watched jihadist videos, though it is not clear where he got the idea to pledge allegiance. Thus, some pundits raised questions concerning Mateen’s drug use, mental state, and sexual orientation.⁶⁸ In the face of such an equivocal scenario, ISIS asserts—as it did in the case of an Australian man who had pledged allegiance, but had a troubled past and was killed during his attack in a Sydney coffee shop—that a pledge erases past sins and excuses any other miscues.⁶⁹

In July 2016, another man with a troubled past, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, killed 86 when he drove a truck through a crowd of revelers on Bastille Day in Nice, France. Lahouaiej-Bouhlel had watched beheading videos and had reportedly researched Omar Mateen’s attack. There is no evidence that he learned about Mateen through ISIS propaganda. Given the short interval between the incidents, more likely is that he scoured news reports on the Internet. He was known to have psychological issues.⁷⁰ Lahouaiej-Bouhlel left no pledge of allegiance to ISIS. It was the style of his act that tied him to ISIS. Yet,

despite the group's call for sympathizers to employ any means available to them in 2014, it is not until the second installment of "Just Terror Tactics" that ISIS suggests mowing down pedestrians with a truck, a tactic poached from an issue of *Inspire* published in 2012 (Figure 5). Significantly, the Nice attack predates the issue of *Rumiyah* that outlines this tactic. As such, the group's detailed instructions, which insist that leaflets containing a pledge be launched "from the vehicle's window during the execution," are a reaction to Lahouaiej-Bouhlel rather than his inspiration.⁷¹

Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez of Chattanooga, Tennessee carried out a drive-by shooting at an Armed Forces Career Center in July 2015. Armed with a semiautomatic rifle, a shotgun, and a handgun, he then drove to a US Navy Reserve Center. In an attack that killed five, Abdulazeez also left no pledge. There is ample evidence that he had consumed the work of Anwar al-Awlaki, but those close to him recounted his repeated criticism of ISIS.⁷² This is perhaps the clearest example of ISIS's appropriation of violence. Abdulazeez committed his crime in July 2015, a year before he was mentioned in *Dabiq*. In that timespan, four other issues had been published without mentioning him, signaling the poignancy of the shift that the last issue of *Dabiq* marks.

In all three cases, ISIS's claim is tenuous at best. Yet, this practice of appropriation is itself not novel, and again, ISIS is borrowing from the playbook of AQAP. In the first issue of *Inspire*—and most subsequent issues—AQAP honors those who have planned or

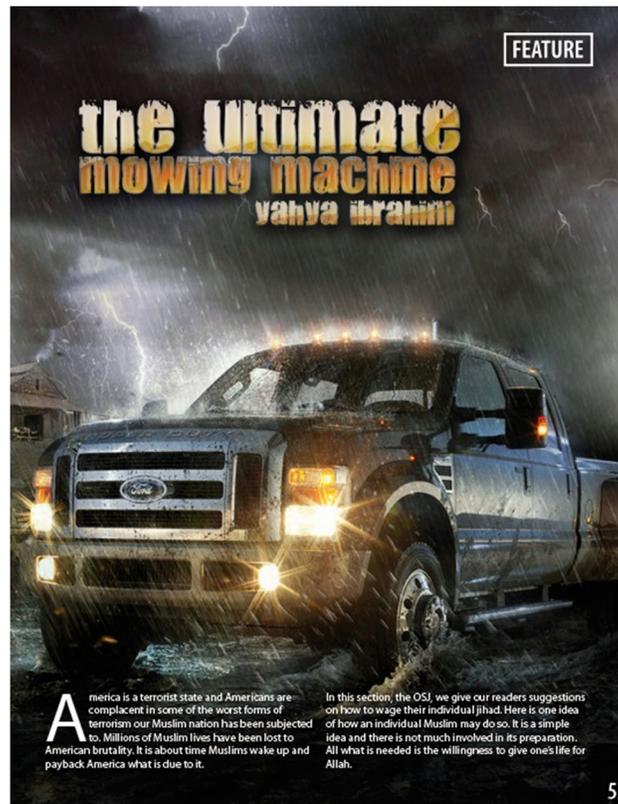


Figure 5. *Inspire* 2: 53.



Figure 6. Inspire 1: 64.

committed violence supposedly for its cause (Figure 6). However, the list includes the names of Americans with no connection to the group. The starkest is that of the “Fort Dix Case,” which received much national attention. It involves the entrapment of a young man by a paid government informant who urged his target to consume the propaganda of Anwar al-Awlaki. The other four individuals swept up in the sting were, according to the informant himself, completely unaware of the informant-hatched plot.⁷³ Their connection to terrorism was manufactured and then re-appropriated by AQAP.

Despite the discrepancies and ambiguity surrounding their cases, both Mateen and Lahouaiej-Bouhlel are regularly listed in media reports as having been “inspired” by ISIS⁷⁴—the absence of Abdulazeez I address below. ISIS’s ability to appropriate these attacks surely depends on media coverage. In fact, ISIS depends on the media for more than just its expected use of the terror frame. In each of the above cases, the account given in *Dabiq* includes only as much, or even less, information than what is available in news media reports. This suggests that the “secret security source” ISIS cites when claiming responsibility for one of its “soldiers” is, in fact, the news media. Yet, placing the brunt of responsibility for the prevalence of terror on the media is old hat. Margaret Thatcher’s claim that the media is “terrorism’s oxygen” was certainly more strategic than factual. And in the wake of another act of violence claimed by ISIS, in London, England, March 2017, journalist Simon Jenkins appeared on the BBC to sharply criticize the media

coverage of the incident. The story's prominence and framing aided terrorists, he said. And given that "all over London people are doing crazier things," the incident ought to be treated and covered as a crime.⁷⁵ For journalists Charlie Winter and Haroro Ingram, such critiques were the impetus for devising distinctions between "directed," "egged on," and "inspired" attacks. Bridget Moreng and Rukmini Callimachi et al. have created similar typologies.⁷⁶ Arguing that each type of attack requires a unique response, Winter and Ingram posit that a more nuanced scrutiny of violent incidents might break the "vicious cycle" fueled by "crude political rhetoric ... [and] certain types of media coverage." This brings us back full circle to the contextual space I outlined above.

The notion of "inspired attacks" proposed by Winter, Ingram, and others does not provide a way out of contemporary terror discourse because it is already part and parcel of the "crude political rhetoric" they critique. Rather than providing nuance, it creates a discursive and ideological shortcut designed to reduce complexity and furnish a sense of certainty. Moreover, the inspired line of articulation, given its focus on an imminent "when" and an anywhere "where"—the "next terrorist attack"—magnifies an opening exploited by al-Qaeda and ISIS. It presents the cracks and conjunctions necessary for a "guileful ruse" through which ambiguous incidents can be appropriated as "attacks." The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two figurative definitions of "inspire" with which to illustrate this point: "to infuse some thought or feeling into (a person), as if by breathing," and "to influence, animate, or actuate (a person) with a feeling, idea, impulse, etc." The history of each individual suggests that it is perhaps questionable to say that ISIS animated the men, that the group is the "cause" of the men's violent outbursts, and, moreover, that their acts were perpetrated *for* the Islamic State. Yet, when the dust is yet to settle, and contradictions abound, within a discursive field that privileges any minute piece of evidence of terror over other mitigating factors, particularly when attached to a brown Orientalized body, a claim by ISIS tells "us" precisely what "we" want or expect to hear: the next terror attack has materialized, and violence committed by an Arab or Muslim is, in fact, terrorism. Here, ISIS's guileful ruse does not require it to hijack the media. It need only play its part in today's security discourse.

Conclusion: the limits of appropriation

As ISIS continues to lose territory, it is likely that it will "claim just about everything" for fear of "becoming irrelevant."⁷⁷ But, this paper highlights that this practice is a tactic long deployed by ISIS and one poached from the playbook of AQAP, which has itself claimed attacks as recently as November 2016. Yet, appropriation has its (racial) limits. The very fact that ISIS found it necessary to produce a narrative about Stephen Paddock is telling; no such account was necessary for others who fit the Orientalized stereotypes of the war on terror (e.g., Mateen and Lahouaiej-Bouhlel). The absence of Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez in journalistic accounts of inspired terror illustrates these limits further. The fact that his friends made it clear that he had regularly condemned ISIS certainly provides a rationale for this absence in journalists' typologies. However, Abdulazeez's *inclusion in ISIS propaganda did not* ignite any heated commentaries or debates concerning ISIS's desperation, carelessness, or existential status, as did its claim on Paddock.⁷⁸ This difference in reaction aligns well with the racialized nature of contemporary security. For those that

look the part, ISIS needs no story other than a few quick words on devotion, nor does a factual error lead to debates about the group's position, existential or otherwise. These tendencies fulfill the ideological function of maintaining a sense of "us" integral to the war on terror effort, particularly when the line dividing us from them is destabilized by the home-grown terrorist.

The limits of ISIS's mediated practice of appropriation also indicate the need to rethink claims concerning the group's "weaponization of the media."⁷⁹ Certainly, the group has used a variety of media to buttress its image, relevance, and goals (from statehood to simply remaining in the public eye). At times, these are disruptive. For instance, the group hijacked Twitter hashtags related to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil opening up the possibility that some of the millions of spectators might come across ISIS propaganda while tracking football results.⁸⁰ Yet, as this paper highlights, a portion of ISIS's mediated practice does not require it to lead discourse elsewhere or to disrupt the ordinary operation of the news cycle; ISIS and the security discourse that informs contemporary media coverage share much in common—including reporting style.⁸¹ What drives an individual to violence, let alone gravitate toward ISIS or simply invoke it in a moment of violent rage, is certainly complex, and there is no single or satisfactory answer. The inspired construct provides certainty for inherently complicated events in which violence produces clouds of ambiguity; it identifies intent and reduces it to a known evil. Moreover, it tells us nothing about why ISIS exists as an entity to which one might gravitate; that history is messier. Marking the incidents in Orlando, Nice, and Chattanooga as appropriated rather than inspired turns our focus to the conditions—an interplay of political, discursive, and media—in which ISIS can make claims of responsibility that resonate and are recognized in the face of great ambiguity. As ISIS continues to fizzle territorially, it is not incorrect to assert that it will "return to [its] guerrilla roots."⁸² Yet, by examining the tactical dimension of ISIS's media practice, this paper serves to illustrate how the group's ability to use (poach, and make do with) media depends much on how media has already been "weaponized" in and for security.

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