Off With Their Heads:

The Islamic State and Civilian Beheadings

by Steven T. Zech and Zane M. Kelly

Abstract

This commentary evaluates the use of beheadings by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. We place beheadings in a broader historical context and draw from academic research in terrorism studies and the social sciences to explain why the Islamic State has adopted such brutal tactics. We outline the strategic logic of beheading and evaluate explanations related to symbolic politics, culture, and organizational dynamics. We conclude with a discussion about the future of Islamic State violence.

Keywords: Islamic State, beheading, terrorism, violence, Iraq, Syria

Introduction

Counter-normative violence, especially beheading, has emerged as a key component of the Islamic State (IS) strategy in Iraq and Syria and has served to distinguish its "brand" of violence from others in the global jihadi struggle for hearts and minds. IS uses extreme violence as a goad against Western powers, as a means to achieve territorial gains, and as a method to internally sanction and socialize its members. After overtaking the Syrian 17th division outside Raqqa, IS displayed soldiers' decapitated bodies and mounted more than fifty severed heads on fence posts. The group reportedly displayed crucified criminals in public spaces ("The Islamic State" 2014). IS exerts social control through strict surveillance and administers harsh punishments for offenses deemed contrary to Sharia law that governs life under the new caliphate. In addition to beheadings and crucifixions, they have perpetrated acts of torture, sexual violence, mutilation, and mass slaughter. In February 2015 IS provoked further global outrage when it killed Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by burning him alive. Later that month the Islamic State beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on a Libyan beach. This especially ugly repertoire is not merely the work of a few sociopaths, it serves to advance calculated tactical, strategic, and organizational goals.

In 2014 IS rose from being one of many factions vying for power in Syria and Iraq to the forefront of violent struggle in the region.[1] This past year the movement cut ties with al-Qaeda and swept aside large contingents of Syrian and Iraqi security forces before declaring the creation of an Islamic caliphate stretching from Northern Syria deep into Iraq. During its push into Iraq, IS captured sophisticated military hardware, accumulated substantial financial resources, and increased local and international support as IS gained credibility through military victories and greater territorial control. The Islamic State attained further notoriety when it released a gruesome video showing the beheading of American journalist James Foley. Four subsequent beheadings shocked and outraged audiences across the globe when IS murdered Steven Sotloff,

David Haines, Alan Henning, and Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig. All five victims were held in prolonged captivity and each death was accompanied by a grisly, widely disseminated video. In each of the videos a hooded figure, and often the victim, cite foreign aggression as the motivation for these actions. IS has both warned the West about intervention and demanded the cessation of foreign bombing campaigns while attempting to goad the US into putting boots on the ground.

In the wake of these murders a great deal of attention has focused on the Islamic State's tactics and a cursory look at recent media reveals any number of explanations ranging from geo-strategic aspirations to violent cultural mores. Although local acts of violence receive less international media attention than those against foreign journalists and aid workers, IS uses extreme acts of torture and execution with greater frequency against Syrian and Iraqi state security forces, rival insurgent organizations and rebel groups, as well as the civilian population.

IS expansion has generated mass displacement and a humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq. Amnesty International reports that IS has killed or adducted hundreds, possibly thousands, in non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities. More than 800,000 civilians have fled areas under IS control since June 2014, and the group is accused of ethnic cleansing "on a historic scale" as they systematically eliminate ethnic and religious minorities (Amnesty International 2014). In light of widespread media attention focused on the Islamic State's use of beheadings, what factors explain the movement's choice of such brutal tactics? What does research in terrorism studies and the social sciences say about this form of violence? We provide some brief context and explain how extreme counter-normative violence serves the Islamic State's ends.

A Long History of Losing Our Heads

The gruesome nature of beheadings, along with the savvy adoption of modern communication technologies, brought widespread attention to IS barbarity and provided the militant organization with a platform to share its political objectives with a global audience (Farwell 2014/2015). However, beheadings are nothing new. It is a widespread, enduring cultural practice that spans time and place (Janes 2005, 10). Samurai warriors severed their enemies' heads as proof of military success in 14th century Japan. Six centuries later, during WWII, two Japanese officers competed to kill or behead enemy combatants with swords (Yamamoto 2000). A famous LIFE photo from February 1943 shows a Japanese soldier's head mounted on an American tank at Guadalcanal. During the Vietnam War some American soldiers took enemy heads and other body parts as souvenirs (Greiner 2009, 171). Aztecs decapitated vanquished foes to honor their deities and to ensure agricultural fertility (Baquedano and Graulich 1993). Numerous cultures practiced headhunting in Southeast Asia (De Raedt and Hoskins 1996). From the Greeks, to the Romans, to revolutionary France, people remove heads for a variety of reasons.

Although IS currently stands out for embracing beheading as a defining element of their brand, the practice is also widespread in Mexico's drug war. While cartels battle for billions of dollars in illicit drug money, the frequency of torture, mutilation, and beheadings has increased. Authorities have linked drug trafficking organizations to gruesome acts on both sides of the border. In 2008 there were at least 186 beheadings in Mexico connected to drug violence. Cartels use beheading as a means to terrorize and to control. For example, early in the conflict, the cartels frequently targeted police, which led to mass resignations in some Mexican municipalities (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker 2010).

Discoveries of a dozen or more headless victims at one time are not unusual in Mexico. In May 2014 officials discovered at least 49 headless bodies discarded on the side of a highway outside Monterrey. The Zetas, the

Sinaloa Cartel, the Knights Templar, and others have used a variety of decapitation tools and in some cases they release footage online. The number of incidents, poor attribution in many cases, and the range of victims point to a campaign aimed at terrorizing local populations and intimidating rivals and state security forces. Competition between cartels has seemingly created an outbidding dynamic of escalating brutality.

Hostage-taking and decapitation were also employed during the early years of the Iraq War where over 200 foreign nationals were abducted between 2003 and 2005. More than 35 of these incidents ended in the execution of the hostage (Shay 2007, 128). However, the majority of abductions in Iraq entailed criminal gangs kidnapping and ransoming other Iraqis. Best known to Westerners are the exploits of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the senior al-Qaeda leader in Iraq until his death in 2006. Zarqawi gained international notoriety for his brutal executions and the international al-Qaeda leadership sought to distance themselves from his actions. Victims of al-Qaeda in Iraq include free-lance radio repairman Nicholas Berg in May 2004 and construction contractors Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong. Zarqawi beheaded Berg and Armstrong personally. Militants used the tactic less frequently during the subsequent decade, but beheadings have captured public attention once again as the Islamic State uses the tactic in a broader campaign of violence.

Recent videos portray gruesome, torturous actions meant to terrorize and intimidate particular audiences. The Islamic State employs counter-normative violence against symbolic victims to gain compliance from adversaries. Its attacks generate fear and send signals to international and local audiences. Beheadings are one part of IS' tactical repertoire as it strives to establish proto-governance within its fledgling state. Understanding the Islamic State's desire to communicate through extreme violence, particularly against non-combatants, is key to understanding IS strategy.

Explaining Civilian Beheadings by the Islamic State

> [T]errorism can best be understood as a violent communication strategy. There is a sender, the terrorist, a message generator, the victim, and a receiver, the enemy and/or the public. The nature of the terrorist act, its atrocity, its location and the identity of its victim serve as generators for the power of the message. Violence, to become terroristic, requires witnesses. 'Kill one, frighten ten thousand', a Chinese proverb says. If the killing of one is done primarily for the purpose of frightening thousands then we speak of terrorism.
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> (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, 15)

The Strategic Logic of Beheadings

One way to understand IS beheadings is through the lens of rational calculations. IS could anticipate that opponents will capitulate to its demands to avoid further victimization. In this view, militants believe in the efficacy of extreme forms of violence as part of a reasoned repertoire of deterrence, compellence, and coercion. This reasoning is consistent with the ostensible goal of halting airstrikes mentioned in several decapitation videos. However, while IS would likely be satisfied with that outcome, we believe that a more probable goal is to provoke Western powers and raise IS' profile abroad. In either case, if IS militants are not irrational fanatics, then their actions ought to have some strategic intent. Likewise we should not dismiss their media dissemination of beheading videos as propaganda. Rather it is evidence of the high salience IS places on its messaging value and recognition of Internet media's wide reach.

Beheadings and threats of violence also serve to coerce local populations. Beheadings and large-scale acts

of barbarity are instruments that IS uses to achieve compliance in pursuit of regional policy goals; striking fear in its enemies and weakening their resolve (Jones 2005). Under threat of violence, some communities have capitulated to IS. The brutal and public nature of these extremely violent acts communicates the consequences of resistance. For example, according to a report in the *Daily Mail*, two Yazidi teenage girls were beaten mercilessly and shown videos of their neighbors being beheaded. One victim recalled, "In some [videos] they put the heads into cooking pots. Sometimes they would stand on them. There were so many heads. And they would ask us, 'Do you know this one?' and laugh" (Thornhill 2014). The widespread fear and significant territorial gains illustrate the efficacy of this strategy (McCoy 2014).

General conditions of insecurity during armed conflict might also help explain beheadings; the situation compels behavior. Escalation and tactical choices depend on whether the organization feels threatened by rivals, the state, or international actors. (Gupta 2014). The more secure a group feels, the less likely it is to use extreme tactics. A powerful actor (i.e., the U.S.) targeting IS and supporting its opponents (e.g., Peshmerga fighters in Kurdistan or rival Sunni rebels in Syria) will push the weaker side to escalate violent practices. Competition with the al-Nusrah Front and other al-Qaeda groups in Syria, along with opposition from state security forces and international actors, has led the Islamic State to respond to what it perceives as an existential threat to its survival.

Symbolic Politics and Further Communicative Aspects of IS Violence

Strategic objectives and external threats do not fully explain why the Islamic State has embraced beheading. The timing of the beheadings suggests that IS used beheadings as a strategy against Western targets when it was gaining strength as well as after its opponents began to deal crippling blows to its advances in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, it seems implausible that IS believed beheadings would compel a U.S. stand-down at the same time the group was seizing vast swaths of Iraq. Identity politics offer a persuasive complementary explanation.

Militant group identities include notions of how members see themselves in relation to other collective actors, as well as appropriate behaviors given those beliefs. Militant groups assign meaning to political developments during conflict and continually renegotiate their relationships with other groups. Research on the Iraq War found that Sunni militant organizations adopted different targeting policies and shifted strategies over time (Gabbay and Thirkill-Mackelprang 2011). The Ansar al-Sunnah group, for example, refused to work with Zarqawi despite nearly identical goals and prior cooperation with al-Qaeda.

The way that IS understands the conflict and defines itself in relation to other actors explains its brutal tactics. In the 16 minute propaganda video released after the beheading of Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig alongside over a dozen Syrians, IS described its members as the "sons of Islam." The organization identifies anyone victimized by Western aggression or sectarian violence as a "brother." The Islamic State stands beside and defends the community against "the armies of the cross," "crusaders," and "apostate rulers." Militants within the movement formulate narratives to justify actions such as beheadings against these oppressors.

Similarly, beheadings serve as a recruiting tool that sends a clear message – there is no room for negotiation or reconciliation.[2] Staking out the most extreme position possible may alienate moderates, but the messages of beheading videos attracts a more devout and impressionable type of recruit. Growing evidence suggests that the Islamic State has found greater success in attracting younger recruits, rather than seasoned Islamist militants, with its provocative acts of violence (Joscelyn 2014). Some view the rise of IS and its defiance toward the West as a source of pride. Some potential recruits are attracted by IS tactics, but many

are inclined to disbelieve news media accounts that show IS mass killings and beheadings (Kirkpatrick 2014). Psychological processes lead many of those already sympathetic to IS nationhood goals to dismiss the evidence of atrocity as a Western campaign to vilify Islam. Either way, a strategy that includes extreme forms of violence moves the organization closer to its goals.

The beheading videos define victims and opponents of the Islamic State as culpable, as deserving criminals, whether through direct action or complicity. In many videos the victims are seen to "repent and recant." The confessional aspect is part of IS' attempt to control the narrative and legitimize the murders in the eyes of viewers. Surely only the guilty would feel compelled to confess their sins? The viewer is meant to see the incidents as executions, not murder, which implies an illegitimate, criminal act. Executions suggest a judicially-sanctioned punishment, albeit aimed at a collective perpetrator – the West, Shiite opposition, or apostate regimes (Jones 2005). The Islamic State also uses violence as an internal sanction, to communicate appropriate behaviors, and to punish and control members. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights notes that IS recently executed four militants; two for spying and the other two for theft. However, beheadings are mostly reserved to send a strong message to rival combatants and security forces.

One crucial aspect of beheadings by IS militants is the visceral symbolism captured in decapitation videos with the ritualistic placement of the head back onto the body. Politically, beheading has run the gamut from special punishment for traitors or "enemies of the state," to a standardized method of carrying out the death penalty, as in revolutionary France. Unlike IS, however, France promoted the guillotine as a means of equalizing and standardizing punishment and reducing victims' suffering vis-à-vis other methods available at the time. Such bureaucratized judicial beheadings stand in contrast to IS' crude implementation which aims to cultivate fear and anger, on the one hand, while galvanizing potential recruits on the other. While the guillotine symbolized modernity and equality, IS' beheadings focus attention on the gore and difficulty of manual decapitation.

The Weakness of Cultural Explanations for Beheadings

Popular commentary and debate about whether Islam condones the brutal practices employed by IS militants seems to imply a cultural explanation might account for IS beheadings.[3] But, stated simply, there is no singular Islamic culture. Islam may be a unifying force that ties together a variety of cultures in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, but the diversity of practices and interpretations within the faith make cultural generalizations concerning Islam meaningless. Although one can find justifications for amputating limbs and decapitation as a form of punishment within Islam, this behavior is not the norm. Public debate within al-Qaeda during the first wave of beheadings in Iraq between 2003 and 2005 offers evidence that beheading is a contested strategy even among Muslim militants (Dreazen 2004). Furthermore, in November 2004, the Trustee Council of the International Federation of the Muslim Ulama (a group of religious scholars) met in Beirut. They issued a statement defining appropriate behaviors in war. The proclamation emphasized the need to protect civilians and to not harm individuals not involved in the hostilities, even those acting on behalf of "aggressive" countries (Shay 2007, 136).

In response to more recent brutality and beheadings, over 120 Muslim scholars issued an open letter that denounces the actions of the Islamic State and identifies a clear disconnect between IS tactics and Islamic teachings (Markoe 2014). The Islamic State uses religious texts selectively to advance a broader political project. Militants have reimagined a preexisting political and sectarian conflict as a struggle with greater religious undertones. A cultural argument that suggests these acts of barbaric violence are simply tied to

Islam is too simplistic. Assessments of causation demand that a satisfactory explanation be able to account for cross-case variation as well as within the same case across time, which a cultural argument alone cannot. We observe beheadings across cultures and we see shifting strategies even under relatively stable cultural conditions. Likewise, embracing beheading appears to be a component of an organizational move to establish the IS brand and win support from other jihadist groups.

Organizational Perspectives

Beheadings distinguish the Islamic State's brand of violence from that of its al-Qaeda rivals in Syria, the al-Nusrah Front. Other al-Qaeda affiliates share similar goals, especially the desire to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a caliphate. The al-Nusrah Front ostensibly seeks to avoid the appearance of extremism. Although they have carried out numerous suicide attacks, executions, and kidnappings, they have not earned the same reputation for extreme brutality that came with IS beheadings. Despite attempts in 2013 to merge some factions operating in the region, cooperation proved difficult and in late 2013 IS (then ISIS) moved against other resistance groups in Syria (Joscelyn 2013). A rash of sectarian killings in 2013 and 2014 deepened the factional divide, pushing some groups toward IS and others toward the al-Nusrah Front.

Beheadings signal to other factions that the Islamic State claims to be the legitimate heir to the broader regional movement. The reemergence of beheadings occurred at the very moment of increased tension between various factions of Sunni Islamists sympathetic to al-Qaeda and were likely a deliberate attempt to identify IS as the successor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq. The IS propaganda wing provided evidence for this association with Zarqawi in the Peter Kassig and Syrian soldier beheading video. Zarqawi, whose beheadings inflamed sectarian violence, is an integral part of the broader narrative describing the genesis of the Islamic State. The videos create an instrumental link to Zarqawi and refine the group's political boundaries. By adopting Zarqawi's tactics, IS demonstrates a commitment to the same political and social vision that appeals to sympathetic fighters.

Militant organizations pursue strategies to capture finite resources. A potential fighter cannot travel to Syria and join multiple groups. The more specialized a niche, the better an organization can reduce competition. Beheading is also understood as a tactic intended to provoke repression by Western powers. In turn, airstrikes reinforce the IS narrative portraying them as rulers of a caliphate persecuted by Western "crusaders." With its large Internet presence, IS has stronger control of the Syria-Iraq narrative than its rivals. This ties in with the idea that beheadings are a way for the Islamic State to stake out its identity as: 1) distinct from al-Qaeda, and 2) historically continuous to a struggle previously led by Zarqawi. More troubling, IS beheadings and discourse signify a shift in the global jihad narrative where al-Qaeda is seen as moderate or ineffective.

The actions of Jund al Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate) in Algeria also suggest that beheading is perceived as a strong brand-building activity that other groups might use to cement their position on the side of the Islamic State. The obscure Algerian group beheaded Frenchman Herve Gourdel after IS called for worldwide attacks against Westerners (Callimachi 2014). Thus far it looks like the IS media strategy is working, with several prominent groups declaring support for the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In October 2014 a number of senior Pakistani Taliban officials declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi and IS, distancing themselves from the more proximate Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) ("Six Pakistan Taliban Leaders" 2014). Their action is indicative of the local rifts within the TTP itself as well as the wider ideological battle between transnational terrorist groups. In November 2014 Egypt's Ansar Bait al-Maqdis group also officially declared allegiance to the IS

caliphate (Al-Anani 2014; "Egyptian Jihadis" 2014). The long-term loyalty of these recent converts remains to be seen.

The Future of Islamic State Violence

To understand the Islamic State's motivations and goals we must understand its repertoire of violence. In September 2014 President Obama addressed the United Nations General Assembly lamenting, "The brutality of terrorists in Syria and Iraq forces us to look into the heart of darkness." Indeed, the tactics employed by the Islamic State constitute some of the most horrific actions perpetrated by a militant organization in modern history. Now that IS has firmly established a reputation for extreme violence it will be difficult for the group, in its current form, to back down from those actions. Beheadings will likely persist as criminal punishment in IS-held territory. Kidnappings have proven to be a lucrative revenue stream and beheading victims primarily come from countries that are known not to pay. Western civilians are targets of opportunity, but beheadings against rival forces will continue.

The US-led coalitions in Syria and Iraq cannot ignore IS, but unfortunately airstrikes and support for opposition groups contribute to the victimization and oppression narrative. Despite widespread media coverage and public awareness of the Islamic State's brutal actions, we still know few details about how IS formulates and implements its strategic outlook. The Islamic State is certainly operating under a decision-making framework with long time horizons as they seek to consolidate territory. But beliefs within the group might play some role in explaining questionable tactical decisions. Recent interest in an ancient Islamic prophecy about a great battle between Muslims and infidels preceding the Day of Judgment could explain ferocious fighting to capture the village of Dabiq, a site of minimal strategic importance (McCant 2014). Dabiq is also the name of the Islamic State's English-language magazine it began publishing in July 2014. Analysts might examine patterns of IS counter-normative violence and targeting practices to better understand its behavior and decision-making.

In some ways IS has started to behave like a conventional state. First, IS adhered to the rules of war, albeit instrumentally, when it participated in a prisoner exchange, swapping 46 Turkish hostages for as many as 180 IS militants ("UK jihadist prisoner swap" 2014). Second, the Islamic State has moved toward systematization of bureaucratic rule in its capital city of Raqqa and surrounding areas. IS has restructured the regional bureaucracy to increase administrative capacity in terms of local governance, education, Islamic guidance, and the provision of utilities such as water, electricity, and telephone service. The group recently announced that it will mint its own currency (Al-Bahri 2014). Although we are far from optimistic about IS rule, these moves toward formalizing institutions might limit brutal acts perpetrated by IS militants if they are accompanied by mechanisms for internal accountability or create internal rifts between ethno-religious nationalists and global-jihadist factions. Consolidating statehood and minting currency are at odds with the mission of violent global jihad and we take these disparate moves as indicative of possible fault lines within the organization. Neither should we assume uniform support inside the organization for extreme acts of violence; reports of disaffected young recruits slipping away to return home are already emerging.

Strategic bombing campaigns and other pressure from foreign actors, along with increased support to oppositional forces, have dealt significant blows to IS. The United States continues to arm and train moderate rebels in Syria, but a two-front war where the Free Syrian Army simultaneously battles Assad's forces and Islamist groups has proven challenging. Policymakers have started to look for alternative strategies that include targeting the Islamic State's financial resources and discussions have begun about introducing ground

forces in the campaign (Francis 2014). In Iraq, a central component of the Obama administration strategy has been to mobilize Sunni tribal militias, key actors to the successful "Awakening" campaign against al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007 and 2008. But planners are finding that IS may have preemptively assassinated hundreds of key actors since 2009, raising significant obstacles to this strategy (Ignatius 2014). Shiite militias will also play a significant role in combatting IS.

There is some question about whether IS has withheld video footage of stonings in its territory, fearing a backlash from the Muslim community (Al-'Ubaydi et al. 2014). It would be wrong to take this as a sign that the Islamic State is turning away from its extreme violence. So far, beheadings have brought the attention IS wants: Western airstrikes, media coverage, and recruits. They are unlikely to stop, not only because they work, but because they fulfill a range of organizational goals. Islamic State militants will continue to "smite the neck" of unbelievers, albeit selectively, to foment terror, to attract new allies, and to expand the reach of the new caliphate.

About the authors

Steven T. Zech *is a Post-Doctorate Research Fellow at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. He is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Washington, Seattle where he teaches courses on political violence and terrorism.*szech@uw.edu

Zane M. Kelly *is a Post-Doctoral researcher at the Applied Physics Lab, University of Washington. He was a Fellow at the Miller Center of Public Affairs (2009-10), worked as a Defense Department political analyst, and previously taught courses on foreign policy, development, and strategic interaction* zane@uw.edu

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Notes

[1] The Islamic State (IS) evolved out of other Sunni insurgent organizations active after the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. The current movement emerged out of previous groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which later joined up with others and consolidated into the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). In 2013 the group changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and became increasingly involved in the Syrian civil war.

[2] Of course, IS has simultaneously staked out a very lucrative, and much quieter, sideline in ransoming hostages from states that are willing to pay.

[3] For more recent debates related to the cultural arguments see Hasan (2015), Holland (2015), and Wood (2015)