

Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos

by Cori E. Dauber, Mark D. Robinson, Jovan J. Baslios and Austin G. Blair

Abstract

From a technical standpoint, Islamic State (IS) videos are demonstrably superior to those of other groups. But as time goes by, their aesthetic is migrating downstream as other groups attempt to copy it. Specifically, IS has turned to video games, regularly mimicking and even directly copying the aesthetic and design of First Person Shooter games, most often Call of Duty, in their videos, and other groups have followed suit. This specific aesthetic offers a way to recruit young, technologically savvy, men while sanitizing the violence they were being recruited to participate in. This study offers an instrument for tracking the IS aesthetic as it moves to other groups as well as its evolution over time, and offers a case study of a specific group that has copied the IS aesthetic, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS.)

The Game Motif

This study examines the relationship between the visual aesthetic expressed in the video propaganda of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the visual aesthetic expressed in the video propaganda of other, “downstream” groups to answer a deceptively simple question. We are seeing “downstream groups” trying to mimic or copy the Islamic State (IS) aesthetic. In examining what this means, the question we take up here is, “How do IS video propaganda aesthetics and standards appear in the work of other groups?” The dissemination of the IS aesthetic is in and of itself problematic and worth tracking. They have set a standard other groups are clearly aiming for. Furthermore, IS has multiple styles and motifs that its media makers employ. Aside from the overall problem of jihadist propaganda quality improving and IS becoming a model for other groups, the specific motif of “game” is being used by IS and copied by others, and that specifically is of concern for a number of reasons.

To that end, we compared a set of IS videos with videos from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS.) The goal of this study was first, to establish the parameters of when a video ought reasonably be considered to be built on a video game motif, and second, to assess how the method behind IS's use of such a motif has migrated “downstream” to a group that has historically produced weaker video propaganda than IS. The paper first establishes what the characteristics of this motif are, discusses why it has become a popular choice in jihadist propaganda, then charts the downstream migration from IS. It should be noted, “video game motif” or “video game aesthetic” has in practice for these groups almost always meant the aesthetic of “Call of Duty,” a choice we discuss below. HTS and IS almost obsessively focus on copying the style of (and sometimes just copying) the various games in the Call of Duty franchise.

Our interest in propaganda focuses on videos specifically. Islamic State's choice to use the gaming motif is not a random one but is, in fact, an incredibly savvy decision. Videos that make use of such a motif are a “visual dog whistle” to the all-important gaming demographic. [1] The following meme has been widely referenced in the popular press.[2]

Figure 1: “This is Our Call of Duty” Meme



The argument has been made for a number of years that IS materials are littered with memes, images, and even ripped footage from popular culture materials marketed to what could be called the global youth demographic,[3] because that, more than any specific nationality or ethnic group, is the target audience, certainly for IS, but also for any of these groups who recruit outside of a narrow nationalist base. Video games are an important example of this approach on the part of groups' media makers.

Characteristics That Define the Game Motif

For this study we compared IS product with those of HTS. We chose HTS intentionally because this group's product quality—which has been gradually improving over a long period of time,[4]—is now closest to that of IS. (Indeed in many videos it is its equal, even in some sections surpassing that of IS.) Therefore, our argument is easier to see for those not used to regularly making qualitative judgments about video production.

In order to establish that both IS and HTS borrow from video games to create game motifs in their media products, we need to identify what precisely defines a particular video as “game.” While there are many characteristics that reflect a gaming sensibility (and IS in particular will choose to put individual gaming characteristics into videos in a scattered way so that there are many videos that include references to gaming that we would not call gaming videos) only when multiple gaming characteristics *dominate* a video can that video genuinely be said to represent a game motif.

There are several characteristics that we identify as “game.” These are First Person Shooter (or “FPS” games) so it is no surprise that a primary element of these videos is the heavy use of first person (sometimes called subjective) camera angles, powerful because they create an immersive experience—just as in game play, or game space. The use of first person camera is probably the visual characteristic that is “first among equals” in identifying a video as belonging to the gaming category.[5]

Figure 2: Frame Grab: FPS Shot, Image of Gun Visible, from HTS “Eastern Al-Ghoutah 2”

The next visual marker to appear prominently in gaming videos is the use of drone footage. But any groups who can use drones to capture footage rely on such footage, because it is dramatic and effective. (The primary use of such footage is to “objectively” establish a context, referred to by media professionals as an establishing shot.) The leap to “game” is made with the addition of two additional elements. First, there are colored graphics overlaid on top of the drone footage to permit the viewer to distinguish “bad guys” (always in red, as in video games) from “good guys” (always in green.) See for example “Epic Battle of the Lions”[6] or “Racers to Paradise”[7] and “Metals of the Men.”[8]

Figure 3: Frame Grab of Drone Footage, from IS “Stay for the End Times”



The second visual characteristic that points without a doubt to “game” is the use of drone footage in brief screen-in-screen appearances in the corner of the frame when first person footage is playing. This technique, applied in games (in the games it is called a “mini-map”) there offers players a sense of the overall “battle-space,” with the objective of providing context so as to eliminate extreme fixation on their own viewpoint, which in turn risks distracting the player from the overall action.[9] Here, actual drone footage recreates that effect, and it would be immediately recognized as such by gamers. Non-gamers in many cases either would not process the screen’s appearance and disappearance, given how inconsequential the overlay often appears, or would be disoriented by it, not understanding the intended relationship to the larger screen and not being experienced in switching perspectives, as gamers are.[10]

Figure 4: Frame Grab: Mini-Map, from IS “Raid of Abu Hasan Al Khathami”



The next visual feature consists of narrative elements which are often presented with a specific type of graphic, where suddenly instead of high-resolution footage images are grainy, in an extremely washed-out color palette, often all in grey or sepia toned. This again presents a “dog whistle” mimicking a very specific visual from the game, and thus capitalizing on association with the game environment. For example, the introduction of a new “mission” in Call of Duty would present a scene or weapon as the primary focus, while the introduction of a new character would use this kind of graphic, in which case a face would be the centerpiece. For IS see, “Epic Battles of the Lions”[11] or “Harvest of the Soldiers #1”[12] or especially “Profit Selling.”[13] Animated writing appears in the space remaining, accompanied by a techno sound effect taken from the game (if you are not a gamer, think of the sound effect that accompanied the appearance of the graphics in the film *Hunt for Red October*.) These graphics, and the timing with which they unfold, almost precisely mimic those in the game, except that they are mirror images, since of course English reads left-to-right and Arabic right-to-left, so the focal point of the images in the game and in gaming videos will appear on opposite sides of the screen. For HTS see again “Metals of Men.”[14]

Only someone who plays versions of Call of Duty specifically would notice that the introduction of larger and more powerful weapons is sequenced and timed in a very specific way. In the game, at least in “multiplayer” mode where one plays against other people, as a player becomes more successful one “earns” more powerful weapons. This is what is known as a “kill-streak” or “score-streak.” Mortars and artillery never appear until roughly two thirds of the way through the gaming “mission.” IS and HTS have incorporated the same sequencing of the introduction of weapons—“players” are never shown with these “reward” weapons until after they are shown with AK-47s or RPGs for example—but the mortars and artillery pieces appear, proportionally speaking, at roughly the same point in the narrative action of the video as in the game. This extremely subtle and precise point is very unlikely to be a reflection of anything other than intent. Very great care is being taken to copy the game in a number of details that viewers unfamiliar with the game simply would never notice or care about.

Finally (and strikingly), compared with other videos (particularly those of IS), the violence in gaming videos appears highly stylized to the point of being sanitized. This study is not specifically discussing the ultra-violent videos that have received so much attention in the press: it has been well established that these are a small percentage of IS output and have been throughout the group’s existence.[15] Rather, we are comparing violent gaming videos to the average video in the jihadist combat genre, which—while typically not showing the enemy during actual combat itself—often delights in showing the bodies of fallen foes in every imaginable state, as a final display of domination, of humiliation, and as a warning. These images are grotesque and horrifying.[16] Yet they are almost completely absent from the jihadists’ gaming videos. There are plenty of people being killed, but as in video games themselves, they are killed at a distance and with no focus on the aftermath, on the effects these weapons have on actual flesh and blood, on the actual carnage involved; not for the “bad” guys and not for the “good” guys who—just as in the game space—when shot, simply get back up and start over, as for instance in “Roar of the Lions”[17] or “And God Will Be Sufficient #4”[18] for the Islamic State, and “Metals of Men” or “Eastern al-Ghuthah” for HTS.[19]

The Benefits of the Game Motif for Terrorist Propagandists

What is driving this aesthetic choice? Answers, obviously, will be speculative, but examining the gaming demographic closely, the actual numbers provide strong evidence. Globally, approximately two billion people play some kind of video game, roughly one in every three people on the planet.[20] That number, of course, is inflated by virtue of the fact that it includes everyone playing every type of game. In other words, it includes parents giving small children educational games on tablets to entertain them in restaurants, and senior citizens playing Farmville or Candy Crush on their phones on the bus on the way home from work. From the perspective of terrorist groups, what matters is who (and how many) play First Person Shooter games. These are the games which insert an individual or group of players directly into a combat scenario of some kind (they literally become a “shooter”), giving them weapons and ammunition, and asking them to perform tasks which inevitably require them to directly engage an enemy to succeed. What additionally sets these games apart is that they offer the player a “first person” perspective—they are designed in such a way as to immerse the

player in the game space. It appears that the player is “in” the space, looking at their own hands, through their own eyes and so forth. Global player numbers for these types of games are, of course, far lower, but are still enormous when you realize the starting figure is two billion. Some 57% of those two billion play FPS games, and are below the age of 35.[21] Well over 90% are male.[22] These numbers not only mean that these motifs are familiar to hundreds of millions, but that they are in the exact sweet spot in terms of recruitment for these jihadist groups: young, male, and technologically savvy.

Still, why Call of Duty specifically? Because worldwide more than 100 million play that specific game.[23] One of the most recent iterations of the franchise made the company one billion dollars on the first *day* of its release.[24]

To be clear, we are not arguing that IS videos have been so good that thousands saw them, got swept up and simply made their way to Syria to join the fight. It is our argument that other groups saw how much better IS videos were than their own, and that thousands were joining IS, and drew their own conclusions – and therefore decided they had to step up their game (so to speak) both by attempting to increase the quality of their work *and* by including game elements in their aesthetic.

Available research offers extremely useful insights on why a game motif might be attractive to these groups, because it explains how the use of such a motif might increase the chances that “gamers” would be attracted to their cause (and at the same time be particularly attractive recruits.) Marcus Schulzke, very cautious about making arguments about the impacts of First Person Shooter (FPS) games on those who play them, makes compelling arguments about the power of these games as a form of strategic communication, if not outright propaganda.[25] Moreover, an extensive body of empirical research finds at least a correlation between regular play of violent games and increased aggressiveness (although there is some question whether FPS games correlate with aggression more than third person games.[26])

One key difference between games and other forms of entertainment media is that the game experience is fully immersive. They work, in other words, because they engage multiple senses, including the sensation of movement, cannot be played without full concentration, and foster identification with the characters being played.[27] These elements produce a sense of “transportation,” of actually being *in* the world of the game.[28] These findings stem from research on the actual *playing* of games, not looking at images that are essentially using games as memes. But until research on looking at imagery based on games is available, these studies seem reasonable proxies.[29] And what is called “transportation” seems very much like the phenomena referred to as “presence” in studies of the first person camera angle critical to the reproduction in videos of the gaming motif, and those studies come to very similar conclusions.[30] We doubt very much any of these groups are aware of such research, but it does go a long way towards explaining their choices. It seems likely these groups would prefer to recruit young men with aggressive tendencies, and the gamer communities are, for whatever reason, a place to find them. Terrorist groups have no doubt discovered this through experience.

There is, however, almost no research on the integration of video games as a *motif* in terrorist propaganda.[31] Miron Lakomy writes at length about jihadist groups attempting to incorporate video *games* into their propaganda, but notes that they simply lack the technical capacity to produce games that compete in any real way with the sophistication of those being produced in the West, and concludes that is likely why Islamic State has done no more than release “trailers” (if those trailers were actually official IS products, which is in question.) Professor Lakomy references the use of Call of Duty as a meme by IS, but does not mention the way it functions as a motif for them, perhaps because he is somewhat dismissive of their capacity to produce high-quality video propaganda (a conclusion with which we obviously disagree.)[32]

There has been intense debate for many years over whether FPS (and other violent games) simply attract young people with aggressive tendencies or actually increase the aggression of the young people who play them, and that is a critical question for educators and policymakers, but completely irrelevant to terrorist and extremist groups looking for aggressive young men. Either way, they need only tap the FPS gamer community in some way in their recruiting, and they are likely to be accessing a recruiting pool that includes young men who are more aggressive than the norm.

Charting the Migration Downstream

Previous work developed a basic instrument for the evaluation of extremist propaganda, and initially demonstrated that tool could successfully evaluate the impact on Islamic State propaganda of coalition bombing.[33] That forensic tool enables a focus on the ways in which compositional elements of video (editing, lighting, graphics, audio, camera angles and so forth) contribute to the rhetorical and persuasive power of video propaganda. Since the production of quality requires intent, it should therefore be possible to generate predictive models based on where and how the makers of these videos apply that intent. That first step demonstrated the basic viability of the instrument, and so we build on that earlier work.

In order to properly assess the relationship between “downstream” groups and IS, we created a version of the original instrument using the typical IS propaganda product as a baseline against which the aesthetic choices of other groups can be measured. The original instrument itself was straightforward. Down the vertical (Y) axis all the components of video production and messaging, which can be graded based on quality are listed. Along the horizontal (X) axis are the grading levels, ranging from “Consumer,” which is essentially what you see when a naïve user picks up a camera for the first time, through to a level defined as “Hollywood.”

Here the vertical (Y) axis starts with a list of production components from the original Quality Assessment Grid and converts them into points of assessment shifted into an aesthetic—in other words, a point of comparison against which a non-IS video can be measured. In addition to this inheritance from the original grid, we added components which characterize and define the IS standard. In this study we use video games as a specific motif or expression of that aesthetic. Within the motif there are aesthetic elements, some of which are shared with other motifs and some that are unique to gaming. Pulling out motifs within the overall aesthetic points us towards the particular demographics extremist groups are attempting to recruit as well as what comprises their message and how that message is presented.[34]

We modified the X-axis, now with a scale from 1-6 (or 0 to 100%), to provide the aesthetic value (or choices) relative to the IS standard. That now allows a graded aesthetic of the propaganda of other groups, such as HTS, relative to IS. And the Y-axis has been modified, now listing the points or elements of aesthetic assessment.

Figure 5: New Y Axis

MESSAGING
Delivery Technique - Compression, Metadata, Low DRC (Dynamic Range Compression)
Quality - Pixilation
Editing Enhances Story
Graphics - Messaging
Marketing
Message: Target
Resolution
Story - Content Organization
Story/ Scene/ Sequence
Symbology
Target and Appeal
Target Audience
Use and Type of Media Elements
Delivery
Narratives and Implication
MEDIA PRODUCTION
Image Quality (Scale; Flattened; 3-D; Intention)
Set/ Location - Use; Intent
2-D Graphic Implementation
FX (AfterEffects)
3-D Graphic Implementation
FX (ex. Cinema or Maya, Motion)
Actors: Identity, Continuity, Character
Audio - Craft
Acquisition - Microphone - Craft/Skills
Foley
Audio - Mix - Engineering
Auteur - Level and Sophistication
Camera Technique (Movement, Angles, etc.)
Camera Type
Cinematography
Composition - Image (1/3rds)
Continuity
Diegetic Representation
Editing Craft (Mechanics, Timing)
Equipment Knowledge (Grain, Depth of Field etc.)
Graphics - Introduction Quality
Intention
Intersection Points - Vulnerability - Valence
Lighting Type/ Technique
Logo, Brand (Quality, Inference)
Mechanics (Sophistication of Technique and Craft)
Mise-en-Scene
Standards --> Location: Local, Regional, National or International
Synchronous Audio
Timing
Visual/ Artistic/ Craft Sophistication

Figure 6: New X Axis

Production Value - Quality									
Percentage of Production Completion towards an Industry, commercial Hollywood Production Value									
0%		-----50%-----					-----100%		
	Consumer	Guerilla	Professional -Consumer	Corporate- Pro	Professional:	Professional: Hollywood	SCORE		
	1	2	3	4	5	6			

When the IS video “Sniping One of the Apostates”[35] is run through this grid, not all values score 6 (or 100%) because that particular IS video does not represent a “perfect” representation of an IS video: there is no such thing (See Figure 7).[36]

Our initial comparison was between IS and HTS propaganda (see Figure 8)

This would seem to beg the question: how do we prove that HTS is in fact following IS, copying them, as opposed to independently making comparable aesthetic judgments about the value of a game motif? In point of fact we cannot conclusively prove this, because the forms of evidence we would need to lock down such a claim—interviews with media makers, production notes, or just raw, unedited footage—are simply unavailable, absent. As a proxy, however, we can examine historical works, and look at what HTS production choices were when the (IS) Caliphate was first declared, and IS initially began pushing out product. This would allow us to compare those to more recent examples of HTS work, thus focusing on the trajectory of their development.

Of course, when the Caliphate was first declared, HTS itself did not exist. They were then Jabhat al-Nusra.[37] Figure 9 illustrates a comparison between representative videos made by IS and Al-Nusra:

Al-Nusra videos prior to “infection” of IS standards and propaganda success, despite the fact that Nusra and IS had originally been a single organization, are markedly weaker, across the board.[38] As samples from this time period we examined “Liberation of al-Umiyyah Checkpoint”[39] and “Satisfy the Breasts of a Believing People,”[40] which are examples of poor craft, design, aesthetic, and execution. Yet HTS, after IS introduced the game motif, begins incorporating that aesthetic as well (admittedly after its own technical capacities have improved.) “Metals of Men” for example, which incorporates drone footage, also uses graphic overlays and sound effects ripped straight from the game[41] to create the look and feel of a FPS game.

HTS videos clearly feature gaming references, and importantly these include not only the First Person Shooter camera angles that a casual observer would be familiar with, (and that Nusra videos tried to incorporate), but much more subtle elements—again, the “dog whistles”—that would be immediately obvious to members of the gamer community, but which to others might be confusing, or even appear as “weaker” quality.[42] For example, videos with diluted or reduced color palettes and shots that are very grainy interspersed amongst very high-resolution footage make sense within a game comparison, whereas they otherwise might be taken for accidents or even evidence of poor craft. But when Call of Duty is the point of reference, then the diluted color palette provides an obvious shout-out, and the quick use of grainy footage (with graphic overlays) obviously imitates the manner in which a game introduces a break in the action, visually signaling that a new “mission” is beginning or a new character is being introduced.

Figure 7: Grid for Video “Sniping of Apostates”

IS Aesthetic Comparative Analysis								
Production Value								
Percentage of Production Value as Compared to Post-Caliphate IS								
0% -----50%-----100%								
New video message from The Islamic State “Sniping One of the								
How does the aesthetic appear in different groups?								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	SCORE	
MESSAGING								
Delivery technique - Compression, Metadata, low DNC (dynamic range compression)								
Quality - pixilation								
Editing Enhance story								
Graphics - messaging								
Intention - clear, refined, precise								
Marketing								
Message: target								
Targets actual or Potential Extremists - youth male-video game arg.								
Reduced Violence - sophisticated targeting of a specific demographic								
Resolution								
Story - Content organization/ scene/sequence								
Symbology								
Target and Appeal								
Target audience								
Use/type media elements								
delivery								
Narratives and Implication: Brutality, Mercy, Victimhood, War, Belonging, Utopianism ([PDF]Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy - NATO Strategic ...)								
Media Production								
Quality delivery (IS HD)								
Image quality (SCALE: Flattened to 3-D or intention)								
Set - quality & location								
2-D Graphic Implementation -								
FX (AfterEffects)								
2-D graphics adhere to design principles - formalist								
3-D Graphic Implementation - Currently weak - nonexistent								
FX (Cinema or Maya, MOTION)								
Actors: identity, continuity, character								
Audio - craft								
Acquisition - Microphone - craft/skills								
Foley								
Audio - Mix/ engineering								
Audio - either uninformed camcorder or non-synchronous sound via Canon DSLR and recorder (high quality, intentional)								
Auteur - level and sophistication of mark								
Camera technique (movement, angles)								
Camera type								
camera techniques - non steady in the majority - Less a break from status quo as it is uninformed. Clear evidence or steadying algorithms to non-steady.								
Cinematography								
Composition - Image (1/3rds)								
Content - extreme action, pushed beyond all limits - Limit condition								
Upset status quo								
The single within the collective								
Navigates around sadness, pity - empathy								
Continuity- A clear linear narrative is evident - A beginning, middle and End which often reflects the chapter/part aspect								
Diegetic representation								
Editing CRAFT (mechanics, timing) Editing enhances story and creates a youth style (MTV aesthetic) comprised of rapid edits, flickering, flash edits, reverse, slow motion								
Editing enhances story and creates a youth style (MTV aesthetic) comprised of rapid edits, flickering, flash edits, reverse, slow motion								
Crafted edits reinforce spontaneity; impatience...craft is refined but informed by the democratization of digital media. Characterized by engaged camera/ (FP) handheld.								
Timing - reflects target demographic typical/pop forms (games as example)								
Equipment knowledge (grain, depth of field etc.)								
Graphics - Introduction quality								
Intention								
Intersection points - vulnerability - valence								
Lighting type/technique								
Lighting - attention paid to white balance and conditional lighting. Minor use of studio lights but clear attention to ambient and post-production effects								
Logo, Brand (quality, inference) - careful, clear								
Mechanics (sophistication of technique and craft)								
mise-en-scene (what composes)								
Poetic - Characterized by the removal of- Shift from Arabian/Muslim access points to westernized. They turn to entertainment they are most familiar with, gaming, given it's languagless world appeal and propogation over movie market and filtering.								
Sophistication of Aesthetic choices - many made by non-historically trained practice disrupting the status quo by contrast final craft/producing is historically informed - A trained eye/hand exerts standardized industrial practices								
Standards -> location: local, regional, national or international								
Synchronous audio vs.								
Video presented as chapters or parts								
Visual/artistic sophistication								

AESTHETIC CRITERIA

Figure 8: IS[43] vs. HTS[44] Grid

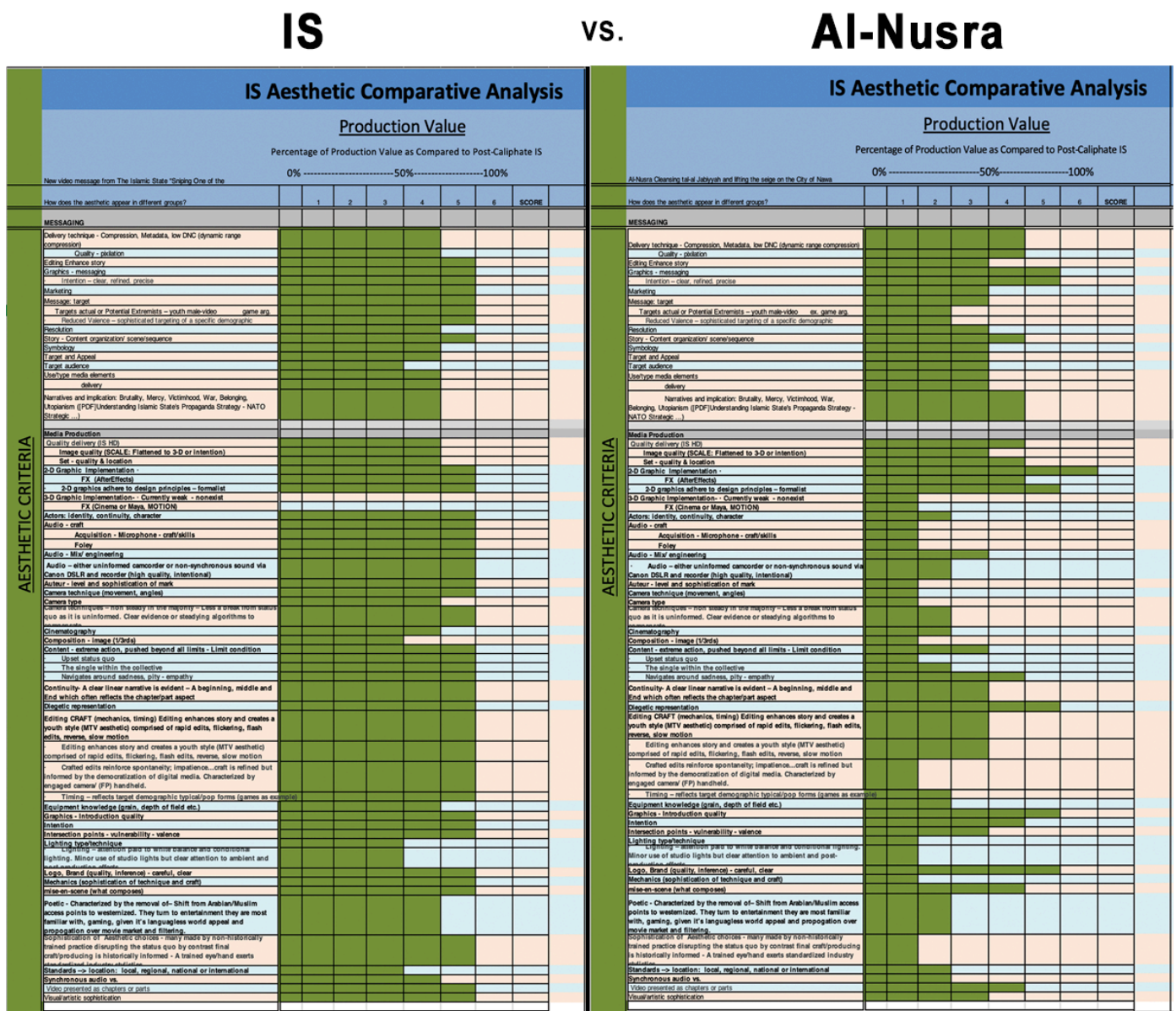
IS

vs.

HTS

		IS Aesthetic Comparative Analysis							IS Aesthetic Comparative Analysis						
		Production Value							Production Value						
		Percentage of Production Value as Compared to Post-Caliphate IS							Percentage of Production Value as Compared to Post-Caliphate IS						
		0% -----50%-----100%							0% -----50%-----100%						
New video message from The Islamic State "Singing One of the									Hawal Takwī al-Shām "100s Days"						
How does the aesthetic appear in different groups?		1	2	3	4	5	6	SCORE	1	2	3	4	5	6	SCORE
AESTHETIC CRITERIA	MESSAGING														
	Delivery technique - Compression, Metadata, low DMC (dynamic range compression)														
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	Target and Appeal														
	Target audience														
	Use/type media elements														
	delivery														
	Narratives and Implication: Brutality, Mercy, Victimhood, War, Belonging, Utopianism (POF)Understanding Islamic States Propaganda Strategy - NATO Strategic ...)														
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	2-D graphics adhere to design principles - formalist														
	3-D Graphic Implementation - Currently weak - non-existent														
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	Actors: Identity, continuity, character														
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Standards -> location: local, regional, national or international															
Synchrous audio vs															
Video presented as chapters or parts															
Visual/artistic sophistication															

Figure 9: IS[45] vs. Nusra[46] Grid



Conclusion

Providing a metric for the IS visual aesthetic, and the game motif in particular as it moves to other groups, matters for several reasons. First, the ability to quantify how close (or how far) a group's output is to emulating (or deviating from) "IS standard" remains one of the critical long-term goals of this project, the development of an "aesthetic fingerprint" we can use to track media teams. As noted, HTS improved gradually over a long period of time. That is not the case with other groups now affiliated with IS, whose production quality jumped almost overnight. Not only has the quality jumped, but it jumped in precise ways making their videos entirely consistent with the IS aesthetic, which we take as a demonstration of intent. Mapping quality changes over time through the use of this modified tool makes these linkages more directly apparent.

Also, the methodology seems to greatly strengthen the argument that popular culture materials intended for the global youth market are being targeted by terrorist propagandists, something those in the P/AVE community should take into account, and indeed ought to capture and make their own. There are any number of ways the use of a gaming motif could be addressed by that community (designing games being only the most obvious) but the bottom line of our research argues the target audience must in some way be addressed. There is no reason these motifs cannot be subverted, and used against the groups as counter-programming, for example

using FPS to lead a “player” to a gory death followed by the message THERE IS NO RESPAWN.

The enormous popularity of e-sports also provides tremendous opportunities. Governments and NGOs ought to be sponsoring advertisements during games and tournaments (or even teams or, frankly, smaller events.) E-sports provides a burgeoning arena, with literally tens of millions watching events via the web, and tens of thousands participating. It is well worth considering this new venue, a place where the precise demographic being targeted by extremist groups of all sorts are gathering, as a space that is just waiting for positive messaging from counter- and anti-extremist organizations.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the editors of *Perspectives on Terrorism* and two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions to an earlier draft.

About the Authors: **Cori E. Dauber** (@coridauber) is Professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is also a Research Fellow at the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS.) **Mark Robinson** (mark@deepskyanalytics.com) is the Director of the Media Laboratory of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. **Jovan J. Baslios** is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, majoring in both History and Peace, War, and Defense, with an additional interest in intelligence in the classical era. **Austin G. Blair** is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, majoring in Peace, War, and Defense, and has written an honor’s thesis on “Millennial Jihad.”

Notes

- [1] In political rhetoric, the “dog whistle” is a commonly used metaphor, meaning rhetoric that will sound largely neutral to the main audience, but means something very different to the targeted sub-set of that audience. It is a strategy employed by both right and left. See Tanzina Vega, “Decoding the ‘dog whistle’ politics of Trump and Clinton,” *CNNmoney*, October 19, 2016. <https://money.cnn.com/2016/10/19/news/dog-whistle-trump-clinton/index.html>. We here transfer it to the study of visuals.
- [2] See for example, Matthew Hall, “‘This is our Call of Duty’ How ISIS is using video games,” *Salon*, November 1, 2014. https://www.salon.com/2014/11/01/this_is_our_call_of_duty_how_isis_is_using_video_games/ as well as Jay Caspian King, “ISIS’s Call of Duty,” *The New Yorker*, September 18, 2014 <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/isis-video-game>.
- [3] Cori E. Dauber and Mark D. Robinson, “Comments on Video Propaganda,” in Allison Astorino-Courtois, ed., SMA Reach-back: Question QL 5 (CENTCOM NSI December, 2016) http://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/QL-5_-_response_-_how-audiences-receive-info_10-4-2016FinalDraftV2.pdf.
- [4] We make this claim based on our assessment of videos of first Nusra, then the follow-on groups, and finally HTS over the period between 2014 and the present.
- [5] For particularly clear HTS examples, see “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘Glories in the Field #13,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 22, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/04/22/new-video-mesaage-from-hayat-ta%E1%B8%A5riral-sham-glories-in-the-field-13/> or “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘Glories in the Field #14,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 25, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/04/25/new-video-mesaage-from-hayat-ta%E1%B8%A5riral-sham-glories-in-the-field-14/>.
- [6] See “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Epic Battles of the Lions – Wilayat al-Anbar,’” *Jihadology.net*, June 27, 2017, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2017/06/27/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-epic-battles-of-the-lions-wilayat-al-anbar/> at 19:40.
- [7] “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘The Racers to Paradise #2 – Wilayat al-Raqqah,’” *Jihadology.net*, January 26, 2015, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2015/01/26/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-racers-to-paradise-2-wilayat-al-raqqah/>. This is also a good example of the “bookending” feature discussed below.
- [8] See “Metals of Men,” the very end.
- [9] For IS examples, see “The Raid of Abu Hasan al Khathami,” or, “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Stay for the End Times – Wilayat Halab,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 16, 2017, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2017/04/16/new-video->

- [message-from-the-islamic-state-stay-for-the-end-times-wilayat-%E1%B8%A5alab/](#) or “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Traditions and Practices of God – Wilayat al-Barakah,’” *Jihadology.net*, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, January 6, 2018 <https://jihadology.net/2018/01/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-traditions-and-practices-of-god-wilayat-al-barakah/> or “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘And Prepare Against Them Whatever You Are Able of Power – Wilayat al-Jazirah,’” *Jihadology.net*, May 31, 2015, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2015/05/31/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-prepare-against-them-whatever-you-are-able-of-power-wilayat-al-jazirah/>. For HTS, see “Metals of Men.”
- [10] “al-Furqan Media presents a new video message from The Islamic State: ‘And Wretched Is That Which They Purchased,’” *Jihadology.net*, March 10, 2015, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2015/03/10/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-wretched-is-that-which-they-purchased/> is not precisely a mini-map, but it does demonstrate how this kind of footage can be used as screen-in-screen to create a game aesthetic in the middle of a narrative to add to its credibility.
- [11] Starting at 11:51. Although more a video that incorporates game elements than a straight game video, see “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Swords of Jihad – Wilayat al-Iraq, Shamal Baghdad,’” *Jihadology.net*, July 29, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/07/29/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-swords-of-jihad-wilayat-al-iraq-shamal-baghdad/> where at 6:51 the action is interrupted so that a vehicle can be transformed into a graphic, complete with all the relevant information about its firepower, cost, and so forth. (Warning: extremely graphic.)
- [12] The quality of Islamic State infographics is well known, but in this case because the background figures are fighters, and are animated, we feel comfortable putting it in the “game” category. These silhouettes resemble CoD Ghost mission introductions. “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Harvest of the Soldiers #1,’” *Jihadology.net*, August 2, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2018/08/02/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-harvest-of-the-soldiers-1/>.
- [13] “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Profit Selling – Wilayat al-Furat,’” *Jihadology.net*, October 4, 2017, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2017/10/04/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-profit-selling-wilayat-al-furat/> where there is, throughout the narrative, a recurrent sepia-hued image with the face to the right and writing, in Arabic and Cyrillic letters, on the left. See 3:40.
- [14] “Metals” starting at 4:35. “Metals” appears to be specifically based on the “World War II” iteration of the Call of Duty franchise.
- [15] Multiple studies have proven empirically that the ultra-violent images that received the greatest attention in the Western media were an exceedingly small percentage of IS output. Charlie Winter, “Fishing and ultraviolence,” *BBC.com*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-88492697-b674-4c69-8426-3ed17b7daed> or Aaron Y. Zelin, “Picture Or It Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Official Media Output,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, 4 (2015): 85-97, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/876>. Lydia Wilson notes that the persistent focus on the ultra-violent videos “obscured to a Western audience the revolutionary message of idealism and joy that attracts many young people to the cause, which in turn blocks our understanding of and our ability to combat the appeal.” “Understanding the appeal of ISIS,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29, 1 (2017): 5, <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1704&context=nejpp>.
- [16] As a particularly egregious example of the way enemy dead are displayed, see “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘And You Will Not Harm Him At All – Wilayat al-Khayr,’” *Jihadology.net*, February 1, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/02/01/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-you-will-not-harm-him-at-all-wilayat-al-khayr/>.
- [17] “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Roar of the Lions – Wilayat al-Furat,’” *Jihadology.net*, January 30, 2017, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2017/01/30/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-roar-of-the-lions-wilayat-al-furat/>.
- [18] “New video message from the Islamic State: ‘And God Will Be Sufficient For You Against Them #4,’” *Jihadology.net*, December 10, 2017, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2017/12/10/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-god-will-be-sufficient-for-you-against-them-4-wilayat-al-furat/>.
- [19] “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘Eastern al-Ghutah: A Castle of Steadfastness #2,’” *Jihadology.net*, June 9, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/06/09/new-video-message-from-hayat-ta%E1%B8%A5rir-al-sham-eastern-al-ghu%E1%B9%ADah-a-castle-of-steadfastness-2/> is an example of both a video where enemy dead are displayed in relatively bloodless and relatively whole positions, and where enemy dead, when shot, simply fall down. See 8:30 and just after 9:00.
- [20] Emma McDonald, “The Global Games Market Will Reach \$108.9 Billion in 2017 With Mobile Taking 42%,” *New Zoo*, April 20, 2017 <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/the-global-games-market-will-reach-108-9-billion-in-2017-with-mobile-taking-42/>.
- [21] “Distribution of video gamers worldwide in 2017, by age and gender,” *Statista*, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/722259/world-gamers-by-age-and-gender/>.
- [22] Players of First Person Shooter games average 4.3%-7.2% female. Nick Yee, “Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of

- Female Gamers by Genre,” *Quantic Foundry*, January 19, 2017 <https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>.
- [23] Robert Purchase, “100 million people played Call of Duty since COD4,” *Eurogamer*, August 8, 2013 <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-08-13-100-million-people-played-call-of-duty-since-cod4>. He is reporting on an infographic provided by the company (Activision) that produces the game, and he does note that it’s impossible to tell if that’s 100 million different people, or the same people buying different versions of the game year after year. But the company’s press release helpfully points out that whoever these people are, they’ve racked up “2.85 million years playing the game, which is longer than humans have existed for,” and fired “more than 32.3 quadrillion shots,” apparently more than “even the US army (sic) has.”
- [24] Daniel Nye Griffiths, “Activision Boasts \$1Billion ‘Call of Duty: Ghosts’ Day One Sales,” *Forbes*, November 6, 2013 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnyegriffiths/2013/11/06/activision-boasts-1-billion-call-of-duty-ghosts-day-one-sales/#2ed7079611e9>. For unit sales broken down by version of the game, see “All time unit sales of selected games in Call of Duty franchise worldwide as of January 2018 (in millions),” *Statista: The Statistics Portal*, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/321374/global-all-time-unit-sales-call-of-duty-games/>. It is interesting, though, that we found visual references to Call of Duty in multiple videos, yet Islamic State sympathizers recently released a trailer clearly based on Grand Theft Auto. Leon Watson, “Islamic State mocks up GTA game to recruit young fighters,” *The Telegraph*, October 26, 2018 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11108676/Islamic-State-mocks-up-GTA-game-to-recruit-young-fighters.html>.
- [25] See Marcus Schulzke, “Video Games and the Simulation of International Conflict,” *E-International Relations*, August 1, 2014 <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/08/01/video-games-and-the-simulation-of-international-conflict/>.
- [26] See Kirstie M. Farrar et al, “Ready, Aim, Fire! Violent Video Game Play and Gun Controller Use: Effects on Behavioral Aggression and Social Norms Concerning Violence,” *Communication Studies* 68, no. 4 (September-October 2017): 369-384. Study results regarding aggression or frustration need to be contextualized by recent research findings that video game violence differs based on skill level: for less skilled players, violence is something that is done *to* you, thus resulting in frustration. For more experienced players, violence is something you do *to* others, thus resulting in increased aggression (and, depending on the game, exposure to gory imagery.) See Nicholas L. Matthews and Andrew J. Weaver, “Skill Gap: Quantifying Violent Content in Video Game Play Between Variably Skilled Users,” *Mass Communication and Society* 16 (2013): 829-846. This maybe the case because games embed the potential for “moral disengagement” – that is, either you are shooting at targets that are not human (aliens, for example), have been intentionally dehumanized, or the game narrative provides you with moral justification for shooting them. See Tilo Hartmann et al, “How Violent Video Games Communicate Violence: A Literature Review and Content Analysis of Moral Disengagement Factors,” *Communication Monographs* 81, no. 3 (September 2014): 310-332. It is also the case that negative experiences, such as losing, may not negatively impact players’ enjoyment of the experience of game play. See Daniel M. Shafer, “Causes of State Hostility and Enjoyment in Player versus Player Environment Video Games,” *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012): 719-737. See the literature reviews of all these articles for the extensive body of research conducted over a period of years on the relationship between video games and violent behavior.
- [27] See the discussion of research in Aaron Delwiche, “From *The Green Berets* to *America’s Army*: Video Games as a Vehicle for Political Propaganda,” in J. Patrick Williams and Jonas Heide Smith eds., *Player’s Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), p. 95.
- [28] Delwiche, “From *The Green Berets*,” p. 96.
- [29] Such work may become available sooner than one would think, given the increased popularity of so-called “e-sports.” Literally hundreds of millions of young people, probably mostly male, are now not themselves playing video games, but are watching others play. “First 100 million viewers in the history of esports,” *ESC*, November 8, 2017 <https://esc.watch/blog/post/100M-viewers-esports>. This seems an important direction for subsequent research, but apparently it is too new a phenomenon to have caught the attention of researchers. The only study we were able to find evaluated why people chose to watch e-sports. Juho Hamari et al, “What is e-sports and why do people watch it?” *emerald insight* 27, no. 2 (2017): 211-232 <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/IntR-04-2016-0085>.
- [30] See the discussion of this camera angle in Cori E. Dauber, “ISIS and the Family Man,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 1, 2015 <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/isis-and-the-family-man> note xxiv.
- [31] We are aware of work coming from the critical/cultural studies perspective, but that work stems from a completely different approach from ours and asks different questions. Much of it focuses on critiques of the games themselves rather than the way actual terrorists are making use of the games.
- [32] See “Let’s Play A Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 17 (2017): 1-25.
- [33] Mark D. Robinson and Cori E. Dauber, “Grading the Quality of ISIS Videos: A Metric For Assessing the Technical Sophistication of Digital Video Propaganda,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* available on line, specific issue not yet assigned: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513693>.

- [34] Our interest is in jihadist groups, but there is no reason why these grids (certainly the first, and hypothetically the second) could not be used for the assessment of the output of other categories of extremist groups.
- [35] “New video message from The Islamic State: ‘Sniping One of the Apostates of the Peshmerga in Daquq – Wilayat Kirkuk,’” *Jihadology.net*, February 2, 2015, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2015/02/02/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-sniping-one-of-the-apostates-of-the-peshmerga-in-daquq-wilayat-kirkuk/>.
- [36] The basis for the scoring system itself (how can you know if the editing of a particular scene should be graded as "guerrilla" or as "Hollywood?") is not subjective: it may appear that way to an observer who has no training in media production techniques or their application. Our efforts at inter-coder reliability have so far been only preliminary, but they—along with many years of classroom experience—give us confidence that in fact with training this assessment tool can be learned relatively easily.
- [37] For the history of HTS, its development out of Jabhat al-Nusra, and the changes in its relationship with both IS and the Al-Qaeda leadership, see Aymen Jawad al-Tamimi, *From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung n.d.) http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_52977-1522-2-30.pdf?180629110003.
- [38] The weakness of Nusra relative to IS videos is discussed in Mark D. Robinson and Cori E. Dauber, “ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style,” Guest Post, *Jihadology.net*, July 6, 2015 <http://jihadology.net/2015/07/06/guest-post-isis-and-the-hollywood-visual-style/>.
- [39] “al-Manarah al Baydā’ Foundation for Media Production Presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusrah: ‘Liberation of al-Umiyyah Checkpoint With a Blessed Martyrdom Operation – Rural Eastern Hamah,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 14, 2014, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2014/04/14/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-liberation-of-al-umiyyah-checkpoint-with-a-blessed-martyrdom-operat/>.
- [40] “Al-Manārah al-Bayḍā’ Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: ‘The Raid ‘And Satisfy the Breasts of a Believing People’ – Besieged Ḥomṣ,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 30, 2014, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2014/04/30/al-manarah-al-bay%e1%b8%8da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-the-raid-and-satisfy-the-breasts-of-a-believing-people-besieged/>.
- [41] Both of which, it is interesting to note, would have had to be added in post-production. See “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘Metals of Men,’” *Jihadology.net*, January 24, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin <https://jihadology.net/2018/01/24/new-video-message-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-metals-of-the-men/>. It isn’t, interestingly, a sound effect from that specific iteration of CoD, but players would certainly recognize it as from the franchise.
- [42] It’s interesting that both groups are using very subtle references to the games, and they work. When non-official media makers tried this motif, producing a game “trailer” (based on Grand Theft Auto) it “worked” only in the sense that it annoyed anti-ISIS viewers. See Ahmed al-Rawi, “Video games, terrorism, and ISIS’s jihad 3.0,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 3 (2018): 740-760.
- [43] “Sniping One of the Apostates.”
- [44] “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘100 + Days,’” *Jihadology.net*, February 4, 2018, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2018/02/04/new-video-message-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-100-days/>.
- [45] “Sniping One of the Apostates.”
- [46] “al-Manarah al-Bayda Foundation for media production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusrah: ‘The Battle of the Liberation of Western al-Tal al-Ahmar – Rural al-Qunaytrah,’” *Jihadology.net*, April 23, 2014, Posted by Aaron Y. Zelin, <https://jihadology.net/2014/04/23/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-the-battle-of-the-liberation-of-western-al-tal-al-a%E1%B8%A5mar-rur/>.