OSINT Summary: The messaging and concepts behind Islamic State execution propaganda

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Key Points
- The Islamic State frequently releases propaganda materials containing the graphic execution of individuals or small groups, either for transgressing against sharia (Islamic law) or for acting against the group.
- Although the disturbing and innovative execution methods utilised have frequently caused shock and outrage in the West, this has led to the messaging of the videos being either missed or misunderstood.
- Examining the videos more closely, and understanding how they tie in to the retaliatory concept of qisas, has led to important insights into the group's operating mechanisms and how it presents itself internally and externally.

A screenshot from the Islamic State video Story of Slaughter, released on 29 June 2016. (IHS Jane's/JTIC)

On 29 June, the media office of the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Furat, operating in the cross-border region between Syria's Deir ez Zour governorate and Iraq's Anbar province, released a video entitled "Story of Slaughter" in which five residents of the town of Al-Bukamal in Deir ez Zour, close to the border with Iraq, confessed to passing information on the group to the United States-backed militant group Jaish Suriyya al-Jadid. After lengthy re-enactments of their transgressions and detailed confessions, the five men were beheaded in the desert and their heads put on spikes.
Such highly graphic execution videos are nothing new for the Islamic State and have formed a constant part of the group's continuous stream of propaganda. Indeed, execution videos were made infamous by the group's first leader Ahmad Fadil Nazzal al-Kalaylah (alias Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) in the mid-2000s, but since the declaration of the khilafa (caliphate) on 29 June 2014, the Islamic State has maintained a steady stream of videos and photographic reports of various executions, some driven by the application of the Hudud penalty for contravention of the group's strict interpretation of sharia (Islamic law), whereas others are driven by its implementation of the concept of qisas, a term in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) for revenge/retribution/retributive justice.

One of the most striking examples of the application of the qisas concept by the Islamic State can be seen in the video of the execution of Jordanian military pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, whose aircraft crashed over Raqqa in late 2014. In the video, entitled "Healing the Believers' Chests" and released in early February 2015, scenes of the aftermath of US-led coalition airstrikes on Islamic State-held territory were shown, including graphic and emotive scenes of dead civilians in burnt and crushed buildings and their grieving relatives. Kasasbeh was paraded through the ruins, highlighting his direct role in the airstrike campaign and linkage to the previously showcased suffering. The conclusion of the video - where Kasasbeh was locked in a steel cage, doused in fuel, and then set alight, before a bulldozer dropped rubble on top of the cage - was well publicised and generated substantial media interest as well as widespread outrage and condemnation worldwide.

However, much of this analysis singularly failed to understand the point being made by the Islamic State in the method of Kasasbeh's killing. Under its implementation of qisas, Kasasbeh was killed in the manner in which the airstrikes killed civilians, burning them alive and crushing them under rubble. By conducting his execution in this fashion, the Islamic State was demonstrating to its supporters and those living under its control that the group had the capability to directly punish those acting against the group in the manner in which they had acted.

Despite the clear messaging of the video, the main narrative advanced in international media was that of a barbaric and mindlessly savage killing, which has only been underlined by the continued failure to fully understand the message being advanced by the Islamic State in subsequent videos. Later releases showed further brutal and innovative methods of execution in graphic and vivid detail, such as the drowning of several men in a steel cage, firing a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at a vehicle containing four men, or the use of detonation cord to behead seven men at once. For each of these killings and in every other such video, the execution is preceded by a lengthy exposition of the crimes of those to be executed, including staged and clearly rehearsed interrogations/confessions. For instance, the drowning and RPG/vehicle executions were linked back to purported US-led coalition airstrikes on the banks of the River Tigris near Mosul that allegedly resulted in civilians drowning in the river or being burnt alive in their vehicles. As such, the executions can be presented as direct retaliation, seeking to underline both the strength and the capabilities of the Islamic State as well as its willingness to fight for and avenge the Sunni population it claims leadership of.
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