Islamic State: Politics by Other Means?

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In this article, I examine the ways in which Islamic State deploys neoliberal concepts of justice, security, and equality against the West. I analyze how the militant group weaponizes these concepts in three different ways. First, I look at how Islamic State uses these concepts in its recruitment strategy to appeal to a sense of victimhood that is represented by Islam but is not limited to Muslims. Second, I argue that the militant group is not questioning the premises of these terms or their meaning, but is critiquing the hypocritical ways they are being applied arbitrarily and the ambivalence of the West in applying them. Third, I examine how Islamic State is at the same time the result of and a reproduction of the precarity of living under neoliberalism.

Keywords: Islamic State, neoliberalism, capitalism, justice, security, equality, violence, political theory, critical theory

During June 2014, the then-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) captured the city of Mosul in Iraq (Chulov, 2014). This territorial victory allowed ISIS to consolidate control over territories in Iraq and Syria the size of Great Britain (Johnston, 2014). In addition to directly controlled ISIS lands, some emirates and wilayas pledged allegiance to the group. These were mainly located in Nigeria, Libya, Mali, Tunisia, Somalia, the Sinai, and Algeria (Shaheen & Stephen, 2015). Following its territorial conquests and its desire to appeal to Muslims everywhere, the group declared a caliphate and asked Muslims to join its ranks or pledge allegiance from a distance (al-Baghdadi, 2014a). The caliphate became known as Daesh or Islamic State. Since its inception, the caliphate's territorial presence has been in constant flux. At its birth, it grew uncontrollably in Iraq and Syria so much so that fears of it seizing Baghdad were expressed (Strange & Merat, 2014). Today, Islamic State has lost the vast majority of its territory.

In this article, I propose a critical theoretical analysis of form and content that proceeds in multiple registers and that aims at taking seriously rather than dismissing Islamic State and its discourse as epiphenomenal or as disinformation propaganda. In an effort to do so, I manually and systematically scraped

each issue of Islamic State's English ezines *Dabiq* (15 issues) and most issues of *Rumiyah* (Issues 1–7). In doing so, I coded the ezines' main articles based on the themes I observed. I annotated all of the main articles that appeared in both ezines by dividing them based on the recurrent topics I found and identified the themes of justice, security, and equality as central to Islamic State discourse. These thematic and conceptual patterns led me to further investigate the ways that justice, security, and equality were mobilized, even weaponized by Islamic State. In my analysis, I rely mainly on the following *Dabiq* issues: "The Flood" (Issue 2; July 27, 2014), "A Call to Hijrah" (Issue 3; September 10, 2014), "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone" (Issue 7; February 12, 2015), and "Just Terror" (Issue 12; November 18, 2015). I also refer to Issues 2 and 3 of *Rumiyah*.[2] In addition to *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, I also base my analysis on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's "Proclamation of the Caliphate" and "Emigration and Worldwide Action" speeches.[3] I chose these two speeches because they provide direct insight into the appeal that Islamic State wants to create for potential recruits. Indeed, al-Baghdadi highlights in these two speeches the themes mentioned above and weaponizes them in an affective move that I expand on later in the article. I also include in my analysis the widely circulated recruitment video *There Is No Life Without Jihad*, which features British and Australian recruits stopping by Syria on their way to Iraq (Becker, 2014b; Mackey, 2014; Siddique, 2014). In what follows, I examine Islamic State publications as they relate to the debate about neoliberal politics and human rights discourse. I argue that what makes Islamic State's reach possible beyond the limits of a physical space is in part due to the appeal it creates by playing on sentiments of victimhood in its rhetoric on (in)justice, (in)security, and (in)equality.[4] I ask: How does Islamic State appeal to a universal victimhood by weaponizing the concepts of justice, security, and equality as symptomatic of the present moment of neoliberal capitalism?[5] And how is Islamic State reproducing the very discourse it purports to critique?

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[2] For a quick reference guide to Islamic State publications, refer to Hororo J. Ingram's (2018) research paper for the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

[3] It appears that the speech itself does not have a title. It was communicated as a 19-minute audio recording at the beginning of Ramadan 2014 (al-Baghdadi, 2014a).

[4] I use parentheses as a play on words. They serve to denote that equality, justice, and security can mean different things in different contexts. In the case of this article, parentheses allow me to highlight that Islamic State perceives equality, justice, and security differently from the "West."

[5] I use "universal victimhood" in reference to Faisal Devji's (2010) argument that "those who participate in global forms of militancy attempt to speak in the name of humanity" as a whole in their "efforts to represent mankind" (p. 36). As I argue in the article, Islamic State is not "dedicated solely to the cause of Islam" (Devji, 2010, p. 36). Indeed, their "justification of violence illustrates the crucial role that the language of humanity plays in the narrative of militancy" (Devji, 2010, p. 36). As such, Islamic State aims to remedy threats to humanity that in this day and age come in the form of threats to Islam, as the militant group argues. Given that "these militants claim to participate in a universal struggle and not a specifically Muslim one" (Devji, 2009, p. 176), Islam comes to represent the whole of humanity because it is the embodiment of a universal victim.

Islamic State Publications

Islamic State's publications are many, of course, and appear in different languages. For the purposes of this research, I analyze some English-language publications by Islamic State and focus mainly on various issues of the English-language publications *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* specifically because I am interested in the way that the militant group communicates with (primarily Muslim) Euro-American audiences.[6] Research by Nelly Lahoud (2018) reveals that there are distinguishable differences in the militant group's language of communication depending on its target audience (p. 2). Lahoud's research also points to gendered differences in attitudes and tones (p. 2). Although an analysis into the gendered language and strategies used by Islamic State is beyond the scope of this article, Lahoud's research elucidates important linguistic distinctions in Islamic State publications. In fact, the militant group operationalizes concepts differently between its Arabic publications such as *al-Naba'* and its Euro-American targeted publications such as *Dabiq* (Lahoud, 2018, pp. 8–9). For example, in its Arabic publications, Islamic State emphasizes masculinity and the subjugation of women more casually as its audience is assumed to be familiar with such readings of Islam. In contrast, in its Euro-American publications, women are described as valuable "free agents" to the caliphate (Lahoud, 2018, pp. 2, 8–9). As such, Islamic State weaponizes concepts differently in its publications to appeal to different perceived audiences: English-speaking, Western audiences are viewed as liberal, and Arabic-speaking, Middle Eastern audiences are considered conservative.

Not coincidentally, *Dabiq* was named after a city in Syria where, Islamic State believes, the final battle between the forces of righteousness (Islamic State) and falsehood (the West/Crusaders) will take place ("The Return of Khilafah," 2014, pp. 4-5). When the militant group lost the city of Dabiq in October 2016, it launched a new ezine called *Rumiyah* (Ingram, 2016; Robins-Early, 2016). *Rumiyah* refers to Rome or the Crusaders (synecdoche for the West). *Rumiyah* can be perceived as the rebrand of *Dabiq* magazine and is relevant because some of its issues also tackle the themes of justice, security, and equality (Ingram, 2016). *Rumiyah* is easier to read than *Dabiq* and is focused less on recruitment and *hijrah* than on attacks. The differences between *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* underline the shift in tone and strategy of Islamic State to accommodate the militant group's major territorial losses (Lahoud, 2018). In fact, the new magazine also signaled a new strategy by Islamic State: Instead of the ultimate battle taking place in Dabiq, the militant group was taking the fight to the West.[7]

The success of Islamic State in gaining literal and virtual ground is due in part to the fact that Islamic State uses different forms of media to disseminate its propaganda: ezines, social media pages, tailored propaganda videos, and so on (Becker, 2014a). Their media products have been regarded as highly sophisticated and advanced (Koerner, 2016; Williams, 2016). Indeed, and although other militant groups have been using the Internet to recruit and spread carefully designed propaganda messages, Islamic State's level of professionally produced and highly adaptive media presence is left unparalleled (Byman, 2001; Greene, 2015). But, given the complexity and fluidity of the human decision-making process, there are many reasons why people decide to join militant groups such as Islamic State. There is in fact no typical

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[6] Interestingly, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are written in American English and not in British English.

[7] The second, third, and fifth issues of *Rumiyah* include explicit step-by-step guides to carry out "Just Terror Tactics" in Western countries without needing to travel to the lands of the *Khilafa* (caliphate).

prototype exemplifying "the militant." Indeed, Islamic State recruits cannot and do not fit one single category (Hellmuth, 2016). Therefore, by conducting a close reading of primary sources, I elucidate part of the strategy that the group uses to appeal to its public. I argue that one of these strategies aims at appealing to a universal victimhood.

Islam as Victim: The Devaluation of Muslim Lives

Victimhood here is understood as symptomatic to the present historical moment of neoliberal capitalism. By neoliberalism I mean the ideological system of governance that has redefined political terminology in the language of the market and has exacerbated the conditions of precarity and volatility for (human) beings (Brown, 2015, pp. 47, 210; Harvey, 2007, p. 33). This has had profound impacts on social and political relations in late capitalism (Harvey, 2007, pp. 3, 165–169). In fact, under neoliberal governance, justice, security, and equality lose their political significance and become relevant insofar as they are understood in economic registers (Brown, 2015, p. 154). This leads to a state of precarity in which some lives are perceived as more "valuable," more "worthy" than others. Indeed, human life comes to be governed by increased insecurity, endemic crises, and mundane threats to survival. As a result, new subjectivities that center around victimization and victimhood are engendered. Islamic State expresses frustration with this system of governance by centering its discourse on the Muslim victim. Indeed, Islamic State repeatedly articulates its frustration with the devaluation of Muslim lives in *Dabiq*. One clear illustration of this is the following quote from the magazine's third issue "A Call to Hijrah," which condemns the "double standards" of the West:

> The US had killed women, children, and the elderly. . . . There are countless accounts of American soldiers executing families and raping women under the sanctity of the US military and Blackwater. Muslim families were killed under the broad definition of "collateral damage," which the US grants itself alone the right to apply. Therefore, if a mujāhid kills a single man with a knife, it is the barbaric killing of the "innocent." However, if Americans kill thousands of Muslim families all over the world by pressing missile fire buttons, it is merely "collateral damage." ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, p. 3)

Islamic State tells its readership that the United States (synecdoche for the West) grants itself exceptional rights over the value of some lives and not others ("collateral damage") and decides which actions are justifiable and which are not ("barbaric killing of the 'innocent'"). In doing so, Islamic State clearly condemns the "hypocrisy" of the West and brings to the fore the Muslim victim as the only true "innocent" victim. The idea that some lives and deaths matter more than others is not unfamiliar; indeed, the devaluation of human life appears as a sort of "double standard" in the discussion of life and death around the world (Greenslade, 2007; Jones, 2013).[8] This is apparent in media coverage, popular reactions,

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[8] In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler (2009) discusses at length what *precarity* means in different contexts. Her arguments resonate with the points I make in this paragraph. Indeed, she writes that "the apprehension of precariousness leads to a heightening of violence, an insight into the physical vulnerability of some set of others that incites the desire to destroy them" (p. 2). She argues that "for populations to become grievable does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who

and political speeches. The implicit suggestion is that some "lives lost deserve public attention while others do not" (Badiou, 2016, pp. 3–4). In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben (1998) writes that

> if it is the sovereign who, insofar as he decides on the state of exception, has the power to decide which life may be killed without commission of homicide, in the age of bio-politics this power becomes emancipated from the state of exception and transformed into the power to decide the point at which life ceases to be politically relevant. When life becomes the supreme political value, not only is the problem of life's non-value thereby posed, it is as if the ultimate ground of sovereign power were at stake in this decision. In modern bio-politics, sovereign is he who decides on the value or non-value of life as-such. (p. 142)

Indeed, the very act of deciding whether or not a life has value is an act of sovereignty. Depoliticizing the murder of some lives facilitates the creation of the category of universal victim: one who can be identified with. Roy Greenslade (2007), credited with coining the phrase "hierarchy of death," argues that

> if [the deaths] are thousands of miles away they cannot—in the eyes of the media's editorial controllers—generate the same sympathy and interest as deaths near at hand. . . . So home-grown massacres are infinitely more newsworthy and . . . sexier. (para. 3)

Greenslade writes that

> the deaths of non-white people in foreign parts—and, I would contend, often at home— are never accorded equal status by the white, western media. The deaths of Arabs and Muslims (and, in many media eyes, there is no difference) are overlooked because they are, variously, anti-western, anti-Christian or anti-capitalist, or all three, and are therefore undeserving of sympathy. By virtue of their religion and their ethnicity they cannot expect the same treatment as the people in the west (who, of course, are also more civilised, better educated and altogether more wholesome). In other words, it's racist. (para. 5)

This hierarchy has no actual basis in reality; it is a mere construction that has led to a sort of self-materialization (Greenslade, 2007). In turn, this actualization resonates as frustration in various parts of the world given that "placing human suffering into hierarchies allows injustices to continue without scrutiny or challenge; and it distorts our understanding of the reality of conflicts" (Jones, 2013, para. 11). Not only that, but this act also materializes an *other* that cannot be identified with, an *other* whose death is considered "collateral" (Whyte, 2017, pp. 139–140).[9]

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is at risk or who has, indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (p. 28).

[9] Islamic State's discourse highlights this perceived "unfairness" in representation and demands a return to the tenets of human rights. The fetishistic obsession with human rights is very much symptomatic of our

To counter the rhetoric of neoliberal action, Islamic State mobilizes resentment about conditions listed earlier and decries human precarity under neoliberalism by weaponizing them in its effort to appeal. Ironically, Islamic State does not question the liberal conception of human rights as natural rights (i.e., man is born "free"), but critiques the neoliberal conception of human rights as "a discourse that is used to justify both state violence and forms of conversion, including economic conversion, on a global scale" (Whyte, 2017, p. 141). Instead of passively accepting the reality it constructs for its audience, Islamic State takes matters into its own hands. "We matter," it says, creating an eerie sense of hopefulness amid the certainty of uncertainty. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed when declaring the establishment of the caliphate that

> The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise. The time has come for the ummah of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared. ("The Return of Khilafah," 2014, p. 3)

Al-Baghdadi's (2014b) proclamation of the caliphate depicts a victimhood that belongs somewhere and whose suffering is not only recognized, but will eventually be alleviated as it reaches "honor" and "victory." This victimhood conceives itself as having been humiliated, treated unjustly, and abused by the West. Islamic State claims to offer the disenfranchised a chance to seek justice by pledging allegiance to the group and joining its ranks. Salvation, for Islamic State, can only be reached through cathartic action, action that points to the West its own incapacity. The affective and sentimental aspect of Islamic State's politics wants to appear as an answer to an incessant struggle that some may experience in feeling irrelevant. The "hierarchy of death" and the "devaluation of Muslim lives" serve as reminders of the invisibility, disposability, and sheer unimportance of some (human) beings under neoliberal capitalism. The desire to belong, to emerge as a force unreckoned with, one that matters is a feeling that Islamic State tries to latch onto and deploy.

For instance, in the video *There Is No Life Without Jihad* (2014), Islamic State portrays camaraderie between the recruits and extends the possibility of meaningful heroic activity to its viewers. Stirring images appear as the audience follows the story of Muhammad, a young Syrian battling melancholy at the state of affairs in his country. The video is measured and sober in tone and content: No gruesome decapitations are featured; no kidnappings, sex slaves, or bloodshed is visible. On the contrary, the video expertly targets

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present temporality. Today, compliance with universal human rights forms the golden standard, the ultimate litmus test by which to legitimate the sovereignty of a state. For instance, the "international community" grants itself the right to intervene when human rights have been breached (Whyte, 2017, p. 141). For instance, the United Nations Security Council has a "responsibility to protect" clause that legitimates interference in the "sovereignty" of another state under the pretext of human rights. Given that Muslims present "collateral damage," Islamic State seems to invoke the "responsibility to protect" clause by presenting itself as the only true "protector" and guarantor of human rights.

real grievances and appeals to a potential recruit's sense of purpose by presenting a victim worth defending in duty. A typical young recruit's sense of helplessness in the face of a crumbling world is addressed and an enabling offer to triumph is made when Muhammad joins Islamic State. The precarity of life under neoliberal governance and the insecurity or volatility of the human condition are clearly emphasized in the production of the video. In addition, under neoliberal governance, collective systemic struggles are transformed into individualized personal ones (Fraser, 2009; Rottenberg, 2018). Islamic State tackles this phenomenon expertly as the video gives the impression that there exists a community of people who believe in the same cause and are going through the same internal struggle as Muhammad and who are there to offer guidance, support, and salvation. The video can be analyzed as an echo chamber that reinforces Islamic State's self-description of a movement that is fighting an unjust global system while protecting the world's Muslims. In this sense, Muslims represent a universal victim that can be recognized (Devji, 2010, p. 36). Individuals who feel insufficient, humiliated, disrespected, full of untapped potential and insatiable ambitions, and angry at perceived injustices can find themselves mirrored in the body of the Muslim victim (Stern & Berger, 2015). The video supports potential recruits' grievances and ultimately introduces or reinforces the idea that the source of their angst is outside themselves. Indeed, the source of this helplessness for Islamic State is the ambivalent application of human rights. The volatility of human life and the precarity of conditions under neoliberal governance incessantly demand an escape. Slavoj Žižek (2009) writes that "the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us social reality itself as an escape" (p. 76). This escape is embodied in Islamic State rhetoric as it presents itself as the only true entity to harbor and defend suffering bodies. In the article "The Extinction of the Grayzone" in *Dabiq,* the militant group hails the individual:

> [The] revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater. The satisfaction of this desire brought life back to the zeal latent in Muslims' hearts and when this entity embodying them was threatened by the crusaders, attacks were immediately carried out by the zealous Muslims in different kāfir lands in a way uniquely different to all attacks before. ("The Extinction of the Grayzone," 2015, p. 57)

This type of Althusserian interpellation instantiates a community in which Muslims belong, a community that protects and upholds dignity among other tenets of human rights.[10] Research corroborates

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[10] The quote mentioned states that "[the] revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater" ("The Extinction of the Grayzone," 2015, p. 57). According to Louis Althusser, this qualifies as a call or "hail," which has the main purpose of instantiating a subject through "interpellation." Indeed, the quote "calls on" Muslims to answer the "call" to belong somewhere. By recognizing the "hail," the individual is turned into an ideological subject. The act of responding by recognizing the "you" in the hail "Hey, you there!" as Althusser puts it, is the precise moment when the ideological subject is instantiated (Althusser, Goshgarian, Balibar, & Bidet, 2014, pp. 190, 264). The mere recognition of oneself when hailed means that the individual-turned-subject is in the realm of ideology. Althusser adds that this interaction is rarely understood as ideological, which illustrates the power of ideology: "Those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology

the idea that some European recruits join Islamic State for lack of a better alternative in fighting what they perceive are the injustices they have suffered (Galka, 2016; Graham, 2015; "The Extinction of the Grayzone," 2015). Islamic State thus appeals to a universal victimhood that is represented by the Muslim victim. The militant group continuously points to hypocritical injustice in the West's biased humanitarianism to glorify Islamic State's ideological beliefs and the mediating role of Islam in the triumph of the morally virtuous disenfranchised (al-Baghdadi, 2014b; "The Extinction of the Grayzone," 2015; *There Is No Life Without Jihad*, 2014).

As evidenced above, the recurring themes of equality, security, and justice are interwoven in Islamic State's discourse. These conceptual clusters are difficult to discern individually as they intersect with each other in the militant group's ideology. Not only that, but it appears that as the battle of Dabiq is lost and *Rumiyah* becomes the primary English-language publication by Islamic State, victimhood is transformed in the discursive production of the militant group. It is appropriated and empowered, thereby moving registers from that of passive recipient of violence to active perpetrator of violence in the name of equality and justice. In what follows, I analyze these themes as distinctly as possible while highlighting their interconnectedness.

(In)equality, (In)security, and (In)justice

Under neoliberal governance "inequality replaces equality" because "market principles are extended to every sphere, [so] inequality becomes legitimate, even normative, in every sphere" (Brown, 2015, p. 64). Islamic State's rhetoric of victimization indicates a desire for equality with the West. But what kind of equality is the militant group seeking? In his work on al-Qaeda, Faisal Devji (2009) argues that militant groups seek equality in death by dying alongside their victims because an equality of/in life is seemingly impossible to achieve (p. 182). Although it does seem that Islamic State's strategy wants to equalize death, their quest for equality is more nuanced and moves beyond equality in death. The case of James Foley's murder illustrates Islamic State's desire to be legitimated as an equal interlocutor. Foley's murder was justified as an act of vengeance for the United States' disregard of Islamic State's requests ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, pp. 3–5). Although "the US was informed of Foley's status as a prisoner held by Islamic State," they ignored the demands that the militant group made ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, pp. 3–5). These demands were "for the release of Muslim prisoners held by the US in exchange for Foley's release." However, the United States "arrogantly ignored" Islamic State's requests and instead proceeded with airstrikes ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, pp. 3–5). The United States' disregard and "indifference" to the warnings it was given work to dismiss Islamic State as the United States' equal ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, pp. 3–5). Indeed, the militant group's emphasis on U.S. nonchalance further underlines the frustration Islamic State has with not being considered an equal interlocutor. According to Islamic State, not only have Muslim bodies, lands, and rights been ravaged and abused, but the West is again refusing to acknowledge equality even when the

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by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'" (Althusser et al., 2014, pp. 264–265). Misrecognition through interpellation is also ideological. Islamic State hails the individual person into being a subject of the caliphate by allowing recognition to take place. As such, subjects are instantiated by social forces and are therefore not self-engendered. Rather, they recognize themselves as being mirrored in the ideology presented by Islamic State, thereby acquiring an identity already devised for them.

opportunity presents itself. This form of equality as legitimacy of status is emphasized in the case of Foley as precisely its opposite: a state of inequality. In turn, the murders are justified as being retaliatory, which means that they intend to punish by bringing equity in terror and insecurity.

So, in a way, part of the equality being sought by Islamic State extends to a form of equality that "demands that security should be enjoyed by all or by none" (Devji, 2009, p. 182). This explains why Islamic State deploys security as a necessary component of justice while discussing attacks against Western targets.[11] For instance, the militant group qualified the November 2015 Paris attacks as acts of "just terror" because they were in part a response to France's airstrikes against the caliphate. The article "Just Terror" states that France and Russia were "blinded by hubris, thinking that [their] geographical distance from the lands of the Khilāfah would protect [them]" ("Just Terror," 2015, p. 2). The *Dabiq* magazine article further boasts about its successful attacks by using scripture to showcase how the West has brought Islamic State's actions on itself: "Both [Russia and France] crusader nations had undoubtedly destroyed their homes with their own hands through their hostilities toward Islam, the Muslims, and the Muslim body of the Khilāfah" ("Just Terror," 2015, p. 2). Islamic State also boasted that after the November 2015 attacks, Paris was left "shocked and awed" and that "the eight knights" or attackers had "brought Paris down on its knees, after years of French conceit in the face of Islam" ("Just Terror," 2015, pp. 2–3). The use of *knights* to refer to Islamic State militants is noteworthy as it also highlights another form of equality in status that Islamic State gestures toward in its rhetoric. Indeed, *knight* in English is not the same as the Arabic translation of *faris*, which roughly refers to *horseman*. Although the intended imagery is not just that of horsemanship, the reference to knighthood is curious as it alludes to the honorary title bestowed on military men by monarchs during the European Middle Ages. One of the many Arabic propaganda videos by Islamic State is entitled *Fursan an-Nasr* (Knights of Victory) and showcases Islamic State militants as exhibiting traits of chivalry and bravery that are associated with the ranks of knighthood. The article also boasts that after the Paris attacks "a nationwide state of emergency was declared as a result of the actions of eight men armed only with assault rifles and explosive belts" ("Just Terror," 2015, pp. 2–3). Islamic State also zooms in on safety and security while talking about the attack against the Russian chartered passenger flight in October 2015; the article states that "revenge was exacted upon those who felt safe in the cockpits of their jets" ("Just Terror," 2015, pp. 2–3). The focus on the issues of safety and security is again here featured as an equivalence of rights; basically, Islamic State is saying that as long as Muslims are unsafe, everyone else should or will be unsafe as well. Indeed, the article "Just Terror" concludes by asking rhetorical questions:

> So when will the crusaders end their hostilities towards Islam and the Muslims? When will they realize that the Khilāfah is here to stay? When will they recognize that the solution to their pathetic turmoil is right before their blinded eyes? For until then, the just terror will continue to strike them to the core of their deadened hearts. These are the deeds of those upon the methodology of the revived Khilāfah. They will not let its enemies enjoy rest until enemy blood is spilled in revenge for the religion and the Ummah [Islamic community]. ("Just Terror," 2015, p. 3)

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[11] Security is also a neoliberal concern that adds yet another layer to Islamic State complicity in the propagation and reproduction of the neoliberal moment.

What is "the solution . . . right before their blinded eyes?" that Islamic State is talking about? The devaluation of Muslim lives particularly is a driving force for the Islamic State's vengeful actions as is portrayed in the 12th issue of *Dabiq* magazine, in which the militant group expresses frustration at these practices by showing that its actions are merely reflecting at the West what the West is doing to Muslims around the world ("Just Terror," 2015, pp. 3–16). Indeed, the 12th issue of *Dabiq* mentions vengeance 11 times while discussing the attacks committed by Islamic State against Russia and Paris and features a quote by al-Baghdadi promising revenge:

> By Allah, we will take revenge! By Allah, we will take revenge! Even if it takes a while, we will take revenge, and every amount of harm against the Ummah will be responded to with multitudes more against the perpetrator. ("Just Terror," 2015, p. 2)

Islamic State also promises that "a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master, having honor, being revered, with his head raised high, and his dignity preserved" ("Just Terror," 2015, p. 2). As such, Islamic State appears as the defender of Muslim dignity and a champion of the Muslim victims' cause amid material and ideological crises.

Crises of Neoliberal Capitalism

Harvey argues that neoliberalism thrives on crises (Harvey, 2007, p. 188). Here, crises refer to crises of capital, ideology, morality, and power. Given this understanding of neoliberalism, Islamic State appears to be symptomatic of the status quo. Indeed, not only does the militant group thrive on crisis, but it also highlights the "disposability" of some lives and not others and points to flagrant inequalities that have been normalized around the world. As demonstrated above, Islamic State is frustrated with the ambivalent applicability of human rights. The universality of rights under neoliberalism is contingent on "two dominant logics of power––that of the territorial state and that of capital" and "if political power is not willing, then notions of rights remain empty" (Harvey, 2007, p. 180). Who benefits from the protections of rights remains a question today, especially when "the nation-state, with its monopoly over legitimate forms of violence, can in Hobbesian fashion define its own bundle of rights and be only loosely bound by international conventions" (Harvey, 2007, p. 181). This "hypocrisy" and selective application of rights are pointed to by many of Islamic State's publications. Harvey writes that under neoliberalism, economic rights (selling one's labor, ownership of private property, and so on) supersede other rights that become derivative (the right to life and human security, access to education, and so on). This in turn gives way to "disposable" populations because

> endless capital accumulation implies that the neoliberal regime of rights must be geographically expanded across the globe by violence (as in Chile and Iraq), by imperialist practices (such as those of the World Trade Organization, the IMF, and the World Bank) or through primitive accumulation (as in China and Russia) if necessary. (Harvey, 2007, p. 181)

As such, "political struggles over the proper conception of rights, and even of freedom itself, move center-stage in the search for alternatives" (Harvey, 2007, p. 182). At the core of Islamic State's writings is a denunciation of the nonuniversal applicability of human rights and a demand for their equal application and

universal reinstatement. The militant group banks on individuals' frustration with the devaluation of Muslim lives under neoliberal governance.

For instance, each issue of *Dabiq* opens with a quote by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq" ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, p. 2). So, before reading through the articles of the ezine, the audience is instantly thrown into a state of urgency and crisis. The quote posits that world politics is constituted by a conflict between the forces of evil and good that are currently at war. In light of this, the reader must choose the "right" side before Armageddon occurs. This eschatology is complemented by addressing readers in more "mundane" terms by pointing to existential anxieties that stem from a "banal life of slavery to employment which renders Western Muslims as subjugated to an apostate master" ("A Call to Hijrah," 2014, p. 3). The language of the quote gestures toward injustice and inequality, themes that I discussed above, and also highlights the domineering thrust of neoliberal governance. Ultimately, Islamic State is offering its readers a chance at redemption and salvation through a seemingly reconstituted vision of the world.

To unpack this argument further, it is important to think of Islam in this instance as a captivating force because of a historically specific form of frustration that is unique to a post-1990 temporality.[12] Within this context, Islam appears to be victimized by repeated Western interventions that take place under the pretense of human rights. Harvey (2007) explains that under this regime, "the US dedicates itself to extend the sphere of freedom across the globe" (p. 182). In that context, modes of Western intervention aim to preemptively "rescue" or "save" populations from the perceived evils of Islam, thereby transforming past bystanders and perpetrators of atrocities into saviors who seek justice for a victim, or a victim-to-be. In this case, the militant group presents itself as the only force that can harbor and shelter angry suffering bodies that have been persistently victimized by a perceived unjust world (al-Baghdadi, 2014b; "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood," 2014).

Reinstating Radical Difference, Reproducing Insecurity, and Reclaiming Justice

In actualizing its promise of justice as equality in insecurity, Islamic State is reproducing the status quo by universalizing equality in insecurity that Muslims continue to suffer from. Effectually, Islamic State is legitimizing through its actions the very precarity of human life that it critiques. At the same time, Islamic State is reproducing the idea that human lives and deaths are not equal. Indeed, Islamic State militants are not equal in status to Crusaders. There is a divide within the subject of Islamic State: He is as much a murderer as a sacrificial and heroic figure. He is both martyr and killer. Indeed, his sacrifice is so great that the blood of his victim is rendered so insignificant by his martyrdom. Perversely, Islamic State's attempts at equality through death reassert radical inequality. The moment of actual equality is so fleeting that it can be pinned down to the moment both perpetrator and victim die. Following this instance, the militant life is more valuable than that of his victims. In that sense, the martyr challenges the life-value hierarchy by inverting it:

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[12] For a political theology reading of Islamic State, refer to Ahmad Dallal's (2017) *Prophets, Messiahs and the "Extinction of the Grayzone": The Political Theology of ISIS*.

Let the goal of your deed be that the word of Allah becomes the highest, for Abū Mūsa said, "Allah's Messenger (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) was asked about a man who fights out of bravery, out of zeal, or out of riyā' (showing off), which of these is fighting for Allah's cause? So Allah's Messenger (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) said, 'Whoever fights so that the word of Allah is the highest is fighting for Allah's cause.'" (al-Muhajir, 2015)

For Islamic State, martyrdom and sacrifice are presented as dutiful expressions of virtues such as courage and bravery ("The Extinction of the Grayzone," 2015). This renders the militant's sacrifice as highly significant, not because of the terror it inflicts, but by virtue of the position that this *jihadi* will gain in Heaven. There is even a recurring obituary section in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* that praises the martyrs of Islamic State. The section is entitled "Among the Believers Are Men" and gives homage to the fighters. The militant and the victim do not hold the same status in this life or the hereafter. Indeed, Islamic State celebrates in each of its issues of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* martyrs, heroes who are believed to hold a status in *Jannah* (paradise). They are believed to be virtuous, courageous, and brave, unlike their victims who are "apostates": "And remember that Allah's Messenger said, 'Never shall the kafir [disbeliever] and his killer be united in the Fire' (Reported by Muslim from Abu Hurayrah)" ("Just Terror Tactics," 2016, pp. 13–15). As such, any attempt at realizing equality ends up reproducing inequality differently.

In addition, Islamic State discourse is homologous to that of neoliberalism: They both thrive on crisis. By spreading insecurity, Islamic State is reproducing neoliberal agendas of "accumulation by dispossession" by pushing the boundaries of what Harvey (2007) meant when he coined the term.

Although Islamic State's claim that it is "remaining and expanding" has been put into question today, the militant group's success can be partly attributed to its sophisticated multimedia productions and its deployment of affect through a discourse of justice, security, and equality. Indeed, Islamic State has been persistent in its uncompromising commitment to spread its ideology and fight the "hypocrite" West. The path toward a seemingly impossible justice can only be reached through Islamic State and its "just terror tactics." The eschatological yearnings advanced by the militant group also serve to create a sense of urgency and a need for action. In fact, Islamic State accepts and uses neoliberal terminology in an effort to hold the West accountable to its promises of equality among people. Therefore, the militant group is itself trying to uphold the universal concepts that human rights promise ("Terrorism is to insist upon your rights and not give them up"; al-Baghdadi, 2014a, para. 34). In that sense, Islamic State is at the same time a repudiation and a reproduction of neoliberal ideas. In addition, the militant group's attempt at equality between the West and the Muslim world reproduces inequalities and creates crises in the world that provide opportunities for neoliberal governance to further expand its reach. Not coincidently, Islamic State was met with a rise in protectionism and nationalist policies in Europe and the United States. The "international community" alongside global regimes of rights have regained fervor, and people in the Middle East and beyond have repeatedly pleaded for increased intervention from regimes of power to put an end to the rise of Islamic State. Ironically, Islamic State's repudiation of neoliberal capitalism serves to reproduce the status quo with even more thrust, as the militant group only seems to be participating in politics by other means.

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