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# ISLAMIC STATE, FILTERS, AND PHOTOSHOP

## How the Islamic State edits its images to support its narratives.

The carefully curated aesthetic of the Islamic State's (IS) visual media has helped its 'brand' achieve global recognition. However, its skilful editing of photographs also serves another purpose; to subtly shape how its outputs are 'read' and reinforce the narratives it wishes to advance.

Whilst images have traditionally received less attention than text in studies of extremist propaganda, the visual-heavy media outputs of contemporary terror groups – in particular, al-Qaeda and IS' digital magazines – have brought about new interest in this area. This work demonstrates how jihadi groups use images of particular symbols with cultural or theological significance such as lions (a motif of bravery, strength and valour in Islamic art and culture) to add weight to their narratives. This content-focused approach, however, fails to address how the 'slick' and 'glossy' visuals in these publications appeal to and inspire an audience who have grown up in a world of 'Instagram aesthetics' and photo-editing software on their phones.

Virtually every photograph within IS' English-language magazines (Dabiq and Rumiyah), even those that depict relatively mundane content, display signs of extensive editing with programmes such as Photoshop or Lightroom. Included are adjustments to colour, contrast, light and dark balance and the digital addition of photographic techniques or effects such as lens flare – or a phenomenon where bright light enters a camera and scatters, resulting in a haze or starburst. These amendments influence the stories that these images tell, even if only subtly – something IS looks to exploit to ensure that the photographs in its magazines reinforce the narratives contained within the text.

IS' use of stereotypical 'Western' social media aesthetics is often acknowledged but little explored outside of a branding context. Synonymous with Instagram, digital filters mimic those

added to camera lenses to give photographs a distinct 'look' by modifying the balance of contrast, sharpness and the intensity, saturation and luminosity of certain colours. The flat, muted tones and limited colour palettes that characterise the pictures in IS' magazines can be quickly and easily applied to new images through pre-saved filters. The reds of blood and gruesome injuries are also commonly made more vivid in these publications in an effort to elicit different emotional reactions depending on whether IS deems the subjects as innocent victims or deserving of such violence.



X-Pro II

Nashville

Inkwell

Elsewhere, colour is manipulated in Dabiq and Rumiyah in other, much more subtle ways. Images of Western cities are often edited in line with Instagram trends for 'moody' urban and street photography – long exposures and contrasting neon colours of lights contrasting with dark shadows painting particularly garish portraits of these decadent, immoral and corrupt societies. However, images accompanying articles urging individuals to travel from the West to Syria and Iraq flip this colour palette on its head; the cityscapes becoming highly desaturated, grey and bleak in contrast to golden, sunlight-illuminated planes that symbolise making this journey.

Photographs of the coffins of US troops are given similar treatment. Images are desaturated to emphasise the unwinnable grind that America's contemporary military engagements have come to represent. IS' enemies are given a sallow, sinister appearance, their pupils reduced to solid black, and they resemble demons or monsters.

Another photo-editing technique, synonymous with Photoshop and Instagram, that is frequently used within Dabiq and Rumiyah is vignetting – or the reduction of an image's brightness around the periphery, compared to the centre. One issue of Dabiq features an image of former Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and

a rabbi engaged in close dialogue; the dark vignette framing the two men only serving to emphasise the closeness between them. Such editing serves to paint IS' enemies or 'disbelievers' as being steeped in darkness or ignorance and supports narratives that these duplicitous enemies of Islam are conspiring in the shadows to bring about its downfall. In this sense, images help cultivate an aesthetic not only for IS itself but also for its enemies.

Like darkness, light is also central to IS imagery. Sun-drenched pictures of fighters, citizens and locations under its control dominate the visual landscape of Dabiq and Rumiyah. Whilst this light has often been captured by the original photographer, images are frequently digitally manipulated to add or increase the appearance and intensity of sunshine falling on fighters, civilians and locations that make up IS' caliphate.

Unsurprisingly, such edits advance narratives that the subjects are righteous, blessed or otherwise on the path to salvation. Lens flares are also commonly added to images of guns to give the effect that the sun shines out from the barrel; something that supports narratives that a glorious future or paradise will only be achieved through violence.

Assumptions that photographs capture events 'as they happened', or are neutral, value-free and evidential rather than carefully curated, make them a powerful resource for extremist groups to deploy in their propaganda. Interrogating the 'texture and technique' of the Islamic State's photography editing reveals the subtle ways in which images are manipulated to become an extension of the narratives advanced in the text in its English-

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language magazines. Other militant groups have already looked to step up their propaganda in response to IS' comprehensive media strategy, including its 'slick' aesthetic.

Therefore, understanding and attempting to counter the appeal of extremist media requires further appreciation and interrogation of the sophisticated photo-editing techniques these groups use to enhance how text and images intersect at various levels to provide engrossing narratives. Highlighting how certain images have been deliberately manipulated may, however, provide practitioners with opportunities to challenge the authenticity of extremist narratives and the credibility of their authors.

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Vignette

Tilt Shift

Sharpen

Filters