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## Modernity as a False Deity: Takfiri Anachronism in the Islamic State Group's Media Strategy

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the way the Islamic State (IS) group communicates and performs a return to the origins of Islam in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. IS performs what it imagines to be a caliphate that follows the “methodology of the Prophet”— in what represents an operationalization of long-alluded-to Islamist aims about return to Islamic authenticity and about undoing Western influences. It deems everyone who disagrees with it as simply anti-Islamic. I refer to that media strategy, which IS deploys to target its enemies as infidels, as *takfiri anachronism* (takfiri in Arabic is an adjective describing accusations of apostasy). I seek to demonstrate how IS's takfiri anachronism relies on mixed discursive textual and visual tactics that aim to conceal its contemporary political hybridity, vulnerability, and its presentist approach to Islamic texts. I analyze IS's self-presentation as a caliphate in a number of its official videos and statements. I focus on the initial IS announcement on the establishment of the caliphate and how its leader Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi performed his role as “the caliph” in the summer of 2014. I also examine how the parallelism between its videos showing the destruction of the Iraqi-Syrian common border, and its videos displaying the destruction of pre-Islamic archeological monuments, presents an absolute binary between the categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘infidel,’ which is projected across time.

## Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) group's mediatisation of brutality is one of its main strategies to terrorize its many enemies. Along with its savagery, IS's self-presentation follows a strategy that performs historic religious authenticity. This strategy is reflected in its choice of name, the rationale of its structures and policies, and its *raison d'être*. IS claims that its establishment of the caliphate in 2014 represents a return to 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia and the time of the Prophet and the Rashidun Caliphate (632–661, CE), which is believed to have put an end to the pre-Islamic time of “degeneracy” or “ignorance” known in Arabic as the *jahiliyya*. However, far from its choice of temporal anchor more than 1400 years ago, the immediate origins of IS lie in the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) group, which was established following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. ISI was launched and mostly framed as an Iraqi jihadist group fighting the US army. The organization then expanded to Syria after the country's breakdown following the uprising and unrest in 2011 (for a history of IS, see Gerges 2016). Its new name, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), reflected the expansion and move away from a nation-state affiliation. Iraq and the Levant were said to be two newly united provinces of the Islamic umma, throughout which the group strives to operate. The group rebranded itself as the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014 and was declared a caliphate.

Militant anachronism is a basic pillar of IS propaganda. As Gerges (2016) argues IS supporters believe that “the ends— reclaiming Islam's golden age and establishing the Islamic state— justify the means— viciousness and savagery” (p. 36). Thus, the reclaiming of Islamic authenticity is central to how IS justifies its brutality. By centering its communication within an imagined mid-7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, IS claims that all that has ensued since represents a deviance from the authentic Islamic message. IS likens pre-Islamic gods to modern Western influence and equates the infidels whom Prophet Mohammad fought during his lifetime to its enemies today. I call this strategy *takfiri* anachronism (*takfiri* in Arabic refers to those who accuse fellow Muslims of apostasy) because it weaponizes an ahistorical and transtemporal understanding of Islam against all those who do not endorse IS's rule by way of accusing them of apostasy. While IS is often accused of projecting the past onto the present, its performance of Islamic authenticity is in fact a strategy to conceal the devouring of Islamic history, whose interpretation is exclusively subject to its contemporary aims.

In this article, I will examine how IS performs this counter-historicism, what it seeks to accomplish in its strategy of combative *takfiri* anachronism, and also how the analysis of this IS strategy can be situated within postcolonial approaches to the study of Islamism. I apply a collective memory approach to analyse how IS implements its counter-historicist communicative strategy, particularly in its focus on the original confrontation between Islam and infidels as a defining moment to be re-interpreted and utilized in the service of presentist aims.

I focus on the analysis of the 2014 announcement of a caliphate under the leadership of Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi. I also examine the sermon video, in which Al-Baghdadi was shown to perform his role of a 7<sup>th</sup> century caliph with remarkable attention to detail from the clothes he wore to the way he led a sermon. Furthermore, I juxtapose two case-studies consisting of thematic clusters of IS videos that I argue reveal its strategy of counter-historicism. As Kraidy (2017b) suggests, the large number of IS videos produced against the backdrop of fast-changing political and security circumstances (in addition to the difficulty of accessing them) justify a case-study approach that links IS media materials to their ideological context in order to understand how and why the militant group communicates and operates.

The first case centers on videos that showcase the destruction of the borders between Iraq and Syria, which IS frames as a cancellation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, signed by Britain and France in 1916 to divide the Middle East into zones of influence following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The agreement has long been blamed for setting the Arab world

on the path of conflict and decline because of its colonial divide-and-rule intent. IS propaganda has framed and justified its rule over territories in Syria and Iraq as a corrective to the colonial legacy of erecting borders in the region.

The second case study is of IS videos typically referred to as “Destroying Idols,” which show the demolition of archeological monuments. The acts of demolition in IS-controlled territories are framed as a reenactment of Prophet Mohammad’s and the early Muslims’ destruction of statues of pre-Islamic deities in Mecca and beyond. Since its establishment, IS continued a practice by salafi-jihadists<sup>1</sup> to destroy religious structures, which they deem un-Islamic. The jihadist justification is that Islam rejects iconoclasm. The fact that Prophet Mohammad ordered the destruction of idols in Mecca upon his migration back to his birth city in year 629 CE is used as justification (De Cesari, 2015). Since 2014, IS produced a number of videos showing its fighters destroying monuments and statues, including archeological sites in Iraq and Syria and artifacts in museums.

Through these videos, IS establishes a relation of equivalence between symbols of Western modernity and false pre-Islamic deities. In its media releases, IS projects the binary between the pre-Islamic time of *jahiliyya* and the beginning of Islam onto the present—performing the claim that just as Islam ended the era of ignorance, degeneracy, and nihilism (the era of *jahiliyya*), it is doing the same today. The idols the early Muslims destroyed become equivalent to the symbols of modernity that Muslims encounter today, such as nation-state boundaries and identities, and all forms of governance that are not the IS caliphate. That relation of equivalence relies on an absolute binary between Muslim and infidel. IS claims to represent true Islam and it deems that those who reject its claims are “infidels” supposedly identical to the ones who rejected Islam during the lifetime of Prophet Mohammad.

IS’s spectacular performance of the Islam/ infidel or IS/ modernity binary aims to divert attention away from the complexities of its tactical and time-contingent interpretations of religious texts, its position as a product of contemporary ephemeral political and economic circumstances, as well as its reliance on new technologies. IS’s media materials portray its narratives and performances of return to authentic Islam as purely religious and by doing so attempt to conceal their evident relation to postcolonial Arab political culture, which has long been dominated by themes of undoing Western, colonial, and/ or Ottoman effects. IS’s eschatological claims to prepare for an imminent doomsday reinvent the modern postcolonial relevance of its politics of return. Its postmodern mix of inspirations is defined by and hidden behind an exaggerated spectacle of authenticity. In my analysis of selected IS media productions, I seek to show that IS wants people to believe that it is simply imposing the pure Islam of the past onto the present. It does so by obscuring how the notion of pure Islam (as it sees it) cannot be disentangled from its present strategies and future goals.

### **IS and a modern history of ‘return’**

While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a modern intellectual history of political calls framed around the idea of ‘return’ to an original Islam, it is important to note that these claims and allusions have wider and more complex histories. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will firstly address how, beyond Islamism, the trope of return characterizes postcolonial discourse about erasing Western influences. The second point I make is that, within Islamism, there is a diversity of modern movements that invoked notions about return and awakening from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1920s to Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in the 1980s. My third point is that while IS’s

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<sup>1</sup> Salafism refers to an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam that advocates a return to the traditions of early Islam. Salafi-jihadism refers to the ideology of militant groups that pursue warfare and violence to establish what they consider a salafi society.

performance of return and religious authenticity must be contextualized, it should also be recognized as new in its use to justify IS's particular brand of mediatised brutality.

In doing this, I apply a collective memory studies approach in my analysis, which highlights that any understanding of the past is a result of a social and political process and is shaped by contestation and manipulation (See Halbwachs, 1992/1925; Zelizer, 1995). I argue that the Islam/West binary, and the resulting notion of return, functions more like a usable memory that is given different meanings by political actors in the modern Middle East to serve their political interests. In fact, in the Arab world, the notion of a return to an authentic past has animated both nationalist and Islamist political rhetoric. The idea of return, and its coupling with the undoing of Western influence, reflects a postcolonial political culture about seeking future authentic politics through a return to a precolonial stage. For instance, Arab nationalism was often framed as a movement of return to an imagined precolonial Arab collectivity. One example is how Al-Andalus (Muslim-ruled Spain roughly from years 711 to 1492), has been popularized since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a historic golden age that could serve as a model for a secular Arab future (for more on Al-Andalus, see Gana, 2008, Shannon, 2015). A number of scholars of postcolonialism from Said (1993) to Guha & Spivak (1988) argued that postcolonial politics are characterized by a search for authentic pasts, national heroes and symbols. In postcolonial contexts, political rhetoric is often grounded in nostalgic longing for a precolonial golden age or for the moral clarity of colonial confrontation (See Wenzel, 2006).

The Islamist notion of return is implicated in postcolonial Arab political culture but at the same time it represents a rejection of secular claims of anticolonialism. To Islamists, a secular outlook is by definition part of a Western project. Modern fundamentalist Islamist politics positions itself as offering a disruption to Westernized secular politics and as representing a return to and a continuation of Islamic political life (for more on authenticity and Islam, see Al-Azmeh, 2009). This notion of undoing is partly a result of what Hallaq (2013) calls “a history of uneasy secularization” and the uncomfortable fit of the nation-state in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Islamic scholars, to varying degrees, pit Islamic law and tradition, known as the Sharia, against Western ideologies rooted in the European Enlightenment and modernity, including the acceptance of nation-state formations and the belief in national identity (Hallaq, 2013). Of course, the idea of return to Islam is also linked to the failure of Arab secularism due its co-optation by authoritarian regimes and ruling elites—strengthening Islamists’ (counter) “discourse of empowerment” (Al-Rasheed et al, 2012). Modern Islamist discourse is based on reviving central Islamic political concepts, which had largely slipped out of modern Arab political structures, such as “the caliphate” or the *umma* (Islamic community).

The theme of return as deployed by contemporary Islamist movements is often traced back to the Egyptian activist and theorist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who was a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In his theoretical work, Qutb posited a binary between Islam and *jabiliyya* (pre-Islamic age of ignorance), and projected it on to the present, suggesting that Muslims can live either in a genuinely Islamic society or in one that is akin to *jabiliyya*. In that way, *jabiliyya* becomes no longer a reference to a time in the history of Arabia but a political, social and spiritual condition “that can exist at any time and place” (Shepard, 2003, p. 525). It becomes a description of what is considered un-Islamic in the contemporary world. As Shepard (2003) notes, Qutb’s doctrine is driven by faith but situated within discussions of Islam’s relation to modernity and the West.

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 is often considered as marking a new era in the mainstreaming of fundamentalist Islam (Tibi, 1998) and in combining Islamic rhetoric with revolutionary discourse about an Islamic “awakening” achieved by “the people” as a political agent (Zubaida, 1989). Of course, the study of Islamism since then has become more of an industry following the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the proliferation of global militant jihadism. Given the long history of Islamism and the diversity in its contexts, interpretations and its political projects, how has

it been theorized, particularly in relation to discussions about modernity? The historiography and analysis of Islamism, as Sayyid (2015) suggests, has been dominated by a debate between orientalist and anti-orientalist approaches. Sayyid explains that while orientalists essentialize Islam by failing to acknowledge the diversity of Islamic currents, anti-orientalists focus on the diversity but fail to acknowledge that Islam is a nodal point for its adherents' ontological outlook and political engagement. In regards to Islamism, Sayyid explains it as a project "to transform Islam from a nodal point in discourses of Muslim communities into a master signifier" (p.48) that guides all levels of personhood and social and political engagement.

Needless to say, Islamism is a broad political project that interacts with changing circumstances. Accordingly, I approach the analysis of the binary of Islam and the West, in addition to the notion of return, from a collective memory standpoint, which acknowledges the history of their different articulations, but focuses on their contemporary discursive deployment. For the purposes of this article, I am interested in examining how IS's communicative strategy operationalized this notion of return to authenticity. IS presents itself as having reached the apex of what other Islamist and jihadist groups had long tried to achieve in their confrontation with secularists and with the West. In doing so, IS in turn will shift the way Islamic authenticity may be understood in the future as, throughout the duration of its control over territories in Syria and Iraq, it offered a model of what authentic Islam (as a master signifier) is not. In other words, the experience of IS is bound to influence how popular understandings of concepts such as "the caliphate" and "the Sharia" are shaped— by way of demonstrating what these concepts are not (since it obviously failed to convince the vast majority of Muslims of its interpretation). In the following sections, I examine one aspect of its propaganda, which I dubbed as takfiri anachronism, and through which IS strategically performed a return to authentic Islam.

### **'Declaring the caliphate'**

In his statement making the caliphate announcement, which was entitled "this is God's promise," former IS spokesperson Abu-Mohammad Al-Adnani Al-Shami, focused on that metaphor equating the binary of before and after Islam, with the contemporary binary, as he sees it, between the dark times before IS and the good times after. Al-Shami states that Arabs before Islam "were fragmented and divided between different tribes fighting and killing each other." After Islam, he continues, "they became pious. They stopped differentiating between an Arab and a foreigner... They also shunned qawmiah" (a word whose modern meaning is nationalism but it is also used to mean tribal and ethnic allegiances). Al-Shami's statement then moves to the modern era but presents it within the same binary— a humiliated 'before' and a proud 'after.' He says that "God willing, the dawn of glory has emerged" with the establishment of IS.

After making the comparison between the dawn of Islam and the establishment of the IS, the statement warns Muslims that their failure to join IS is equivalent to the acts of Islam's enemies in the 7<sup>th</sup> century— those who fought against Prophet Mohammad and his companions. It addresses Muslims, saying "unite around your caliph, so that you can return to the way you always were - the kings of the earth - the knights of war." The choice is easy, it proclaims, because Muslims should "know that we are fighting for a religion, which God promised would be victorious."

IS claims then that its alleged return to authentic Islam is in fact the only way to be a Muslim. As the Islamic message is temporally sovereign within Islamic scripture, IS tautologically implies that its future victory is also known and protected because it supposedly represents the religion that God has promised to make victorious. And as 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs rejected their former beliefs and shunned their deities when they embraced Islam, Arabs and Muslims today are asked to rebel against the false beliefs in modernity and 'return' to their religion as interpreted and embodied by IS. "Pursue your dignity and victory and, by God, shun democracy, secularism and nationalism

and other trash of the West and its thought,” the statement adds. The implication is that Western political influences are not only incompatible with Islam, but also the reasons for Islam’s decline and the obstacles that prevent Islamic civilization from thriving again. According to IS, Muslims today have a religious obligation to lend it support, just as 7<sup>th</sup> century Muslims did to Islam. This focus on the distant past conceals that IS is rooted in the present and the near past and that it is asking people for their support based on present-day politics and warfare. Its media strategy partly relies on the claim that Muslims are obliged to back “the caliphate” as a desired form of rule. As I will show, IS goes to great lengths to perform that imagined authentic caliphate.

### ‘Casting the Caliph’

Obviously, the caliphate must have a caliph. It is contingent on the leader of IS to perform the role of an authentic caliph. Al-Baghdadi sought to do that first by claiming lineage from Prophet Muhammad’s tribe and family. He also did that through his speeches and oratory practices, in addition to performative gestures using clothes and props (See McCants, 2015). In declaring and promoting the new caliph in the early days of Ramadan (coinciding with the month of July) in 2014, IS released an audio message and a video sermon featuring Al-Baghdadi. Both reiterated the alleged equivalence between the dramatic change before and after Islam with that before and after IS.

In the audio message, Al-Baghdadi sought to portray the group’s circumstantial tactics as part of a return to authentic Islam. Al-Baghdadi proclaims that it is time for today’s Muslims to “trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy.” The insinuation is that Muslims today should do as their forefathers did in destroying the false deities revered by Arabs in *jabiliyya*. He then blames the humiliation of Muslims by disbelievers on Muslim weakness as a result of the fall of the historic caliphate. Treacherous agents, he says, were put in power to rule over Muslims with an iron fist and to spread “dazzling and deceptive slogans, such as civilization, freedom, democracy, secularism, Ba’thism, nationalism, and patriotism, among other false slogans” (“A New Message,” 2014).

Al-Baghdadi also featured in a video in July 2014, in which he leads a Friday sermon in Mosul’s Great Mosque. In fact, the format of televised sermons is contemporary in its familiarity in the Arab and Muslim worlds where national leaders’ and state clerics’ participation in mosque sermons is carried live on TV and repeated in news bulletins. The props used in the video are a mishmash of new and old symbols. In the video, Al-Baghdadi wears a black turban and cloak, supposedly what Prophet Muhammad wore in year 630, CE (Rosiny, 2014). The first thing Al-Baghdadi does when he ascends to the pulpit is to clean his mouth with a twig (known in Arabic as *miswak*), which is how 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs used to clean their teeth. The use of *miswak* is considered by salafi Muslims an example of Muslim hygienical jurisprudence. At the same time, Al-Baghdadi wears what appears to be an expensive watch and is obviously surrounded by modern technologies from the microphone he speaks into, the electric fan behind him, and the machine guns carried by his bodyguards, not to mention the digital video form through which all this is mediated. The IS flag, which is another symbol of Islamic authenticity, drapes the wall of the mosque as well as the viewer’s screen in digital form as a logo.

Al-Baghdadi begins to talk about the struggles of the first Muslims and how, with God’s support, they rushed to choose an imam, a caliph, to lead them. “This is Muslims’ duty, which has been squandered for centuries. [The caliphate] has been pushed out of reality.” He proceeds to quote the inaugural speech of the first caliph of Islam, Abu-Bakr, which the latter delivered in year 632, CE. Al-Baghdadi tells Muslims “Obey me as I obey God and his messenger. If I do not obey God and his messenger you do not have to obey me” (Rosiny, 2014). He continues saying that he is not like the presidents and kings who promise a good life of luxury and security because he can only

echo what God has promised believers— a life of righteousness, piety and struggle as a gateway to reward in the afterlife.

It is clear that Al-Baghdadi seeks to distinguish himself from Arab presidents, kings, and politicians by claiming to emerge from a different political atmosphere— one that is authentically Islamic and in sharp contradiction with contemporary Arab politics and its alleged corruptions, deviances, and implementation of Western thought. All this aims to direct attention away from the newness of IS's claims over power, religious interpretations, and uses of new technologies. In addition, it is meant to feed into its takfiri anachronism— the counter-historicist performativity IS relies on to accuse Muslims of apostasy.

### **'Erasing Sykes-Picot'**

The destruction of borders between Iraq and Syria has been a prominent theme in IS propaganda and it is shown in tandem with another important theme that of the destruction of pre-Islamic monuments. Using the same terminology and visual sequences, IS shows that the choice between *jahiliyya* and Islam is the same today as the one faced by Prophet Mohammad and the forefathers of Islam. While the idols when Islam emerged were false gods, today the idols are democracy, secularism, and a nation-state system, it claims.

In a video released at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan in 2014, IS celebrates “the breaking of frontiers” – the title of the video. The video blends religious iconography with postcolonial symbolism, in addition to brutal violence in showing executions. The video showcases how IS propaganda cloaks postcolonial politics, in this instance in relation to the dismantling of colonial boundaries between Arab countries, with religious meaning and symbolism. Simultaneously, the video anachronistically projects present-day meanings on religious beliefs, in implying that contemporary political problems are a route to understand authentic Islam.

The video focuses on the shattering of the Sykes-Picot agreement, ratified in 1916 by British colonel Mark Sykes and French diplomat François Georges-Picot. The agreement carved up the Middle East into zones of influence between the British and the French following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The treaty set the basis for the post-Ottoman French mandate rule over Lebanon and Syria and British colonial rule over Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine. The treaty is often blamed for setting the region on the path of instability and for facilitating the occupation of Palestine. Arab nationalists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Syrian and Iraqi Ba’thist regimes, attacked the treaty and rhetorically vowed to undo its effects. However, they have obviously not intended to do so. In fact, despite being factions of the same ideologically Arab nationalist political party, bilateral relations between Ba’thist Syria and Iraq were one of the worst between any two Arab countries and the borders between the two were closed off for decades as their citizens were not allowed to visit the other country.

The IS video alludes to this history but recasts it in religious terms. It starts with footage of an elderly civilian man shedding tears as an IS fighter leans to respectfully kiss the man’s forehead. The jihadist anthem in the background is praising the “breaking of frontiers” and the erasure of “the drawing marks of the descendants of primates”— presumably a hateful reference to Christians and Jews. We see tractors and military vehicles raising the IS flag at what appears to be an abandoned army post. The IS vehicles seem to be destroying barrier structures that show the borders between Iraq and Syria. IS member Abu-Utham al-Libi (the Libyan) is interviewed. He says “when our brothers liberated the city of Mosul, thank God the almighty, the thrones of tyrants began to crumble here at the borders.” So the video features a Libyan declaring the destruction of the borders between Syria and Iraq. To Arab viewers, this must subtly invoke a history of lip service by Arab regimes, particularly those of Libya, Syria, and Iraq, to anticolonial politics of Arab unity. Again, the implicit message is that the IS has succeeded where postcolonial regimes did not.



The video then features IS spokesperson, Al-Adnani, who says that “these frontiers of humiliation shall be removed. The idol of nationalism has been broken.” The video aims to portray the destruction of a national symbol, a border crossing, as if it were the destruction of an idol representing a false religion — subsequently implying that nationalists are infidels. Through overstating the religious justifications for IS’s act, it manages to implicitly reinvent the broader postcolonial signification of its message.

Furthermore, by framing its global identity as that of a return to religious authenticity, IS conceals the modern and contemporary nature of its policies and recruitment strategies as reflected in the makeup of its membership. Largely recruited via social media, IS fighters hail from all over the world. They are often branded to represent their nations in targeted propaganda. Yet, that deliberate strategy of international recruitment of fighters is presented as ordinary because it supposedly adheres to the conventions of a ‘pure Islam.’ To demonstrate the extent of IS’s alleged rejection of anything to do with modernity, the video then features a Chechen member, branded Abu-Omar Al-Chichani, who speaks in Russian to say “we are very happy today to take part in the dismantling of the frontiers” established by “tyrants (who) have torn apart the Islamic caliphate and made it into states such as Syria and Iraq” and subjected Muslims to “their worldly laws.” The inclusion of a Russian portrays IS as true to the Islamic religion that sees no nationality, colour or race, while concealing the Middle Eastern and Arab-centeredness of its rhetorical focus on the Sykes-Picot treaty.

The video proceeds to interview local truck drivers. It shows an IS member asking the driver “where are you going?” “To Iraq” the man says. The IS member interrupts “where is your passport?” The man puts on a smile and says “we no longer need passports. We are all [in an] Islamic state.” The passport, of course, serves as a symbol of citizenship and the international system of states. The video portrays IS as capable of delivering what ordinary people in the region have wanted for years, which is freedom of movement across neighbouring countries. The video then goes back to the older man featured at the start of the video. He is shown weeping as if touched by the border collapse. Through him, it seeks to show the scale of what IS accomplished—the erasure of postcolonial boundaries, which no other political force in the old man’s memory was capable of doing. The video ends with an execution of soldiers— perhaps a reminder that it is only through savagery and violence that IS can supposedly accomplish its mission.

Three years later in June 2017, IS produces a similar longer version video entitled “umma wahida” or “a single umma” (umma is the Arabic word signifying the Muslim community) also about Sykes-Picot. The video tells an extended historiographic tale of Islam. It states that the only genuine Islamic rule is that of Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun Caliphate, which is the 30-year rule of four caliphs following the death of Prophet Muhammad in year 632, CE. The video suggests that the more than 1430 years that followed, and up until the declaration of the caliphate by IS, did not witness genuine Islamic rule. Therefore, they were years of deviance similar to pre-Islamic times. It starts with the exposition “before Islam, Arabs lived through one of their darkest eras” until God sent Prophet Mohammad, who united the Arabian Peninsula as one Islamic umma during his lifetime and who said that, following his death, Muslims should be ruled by a caliphate. The video’s narrator says that then there were thirty years of “blissful Caliphate” that saw the great epic battles and victories of Islam. However, following that brief era, Muslims betrayed their past and entered the era of “mulk jabri” (authoritarian rule), which supposedly has lasted until contemporary times.

Then, the video, reflecting IS’s selective understanding of history, abruptly brings up the Sykes-Picot treaty, which “emerged as an entrenchment of the weakness that befell Muslims in the lands of the Arabs.” It states that, at the time of the treaty (1916), Arab Muslims appeared like a “cold prey” after centuries of Ottoman rule. The narrator accuses the Ottomans of practicing polytheism (Arabic: shirk), abandoning the sharia, and following a policy of Turkification, which

“caused resentment among oppressed Arabs.” This criticism of Ottomanism, particularly the policy of Turkification, is typical of Arab historiography, as it is also what Arab secular nationalists consider to have been an oppressive policy. It is interesting in this context because it seemingly contradicts IS’s claims to be pan-Islamist and post-nationalist. The video narrator adds that following the weakness of the Ottomans, Arabs began to express loyalty to *qawmiya* (tribal/ ethnic/ national allegiances), which the video equates to the tribal allegiances of pre-Islamic Arabia. “National (qawmiya) states emerged in the lands of the Arabs in accordance to the drawings of the Sykes-Picot agreement,” the narrator states.

The video makes another abrupt transition to images of the 9/11 attacks, which are described as a “turning point” instigating a jihad that “corrected the Muslim compass.” Since then, jihadists have kept their eyes on the spurious borders between Muslims in order to destroy them, it says. The narrator describes borders as idols— again cloaking postcolonial concerns about colonial borders in religious terminology. These idols (the borders) must be destroyed “so that the umma returns to unity— undivided by the false borders drawn by the cross’s pawns.” With this statement, the video shows the map of the Middle East and North Africa under one IS flag. In that sense the image is very similar to Ba’thist and Arab nationalist propaganda, which have dominated official Syrian and Iraqi media and political rhetoric for decades.

The video shows images of tractors destroying border structures in the desert. One fighter says “let history record that the soldiers of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi have trampled on Sykes-Picot.” The video features an interview with an Arab tribesman, who says “before the fateh (Islamic conquest), you had members of the same tribe divided one saying ‘I am Syrian’ another ‘I am Iraqi.’ Now “both say we are Muslim... only belong to Islam.” The statement implies that IS control over Iraq and Syria is akin to the early Islamic conquests over lands of disbelievers, which are referred to as *fateh* by Muslims (meaning opening up/ liberating). The term gives religious legitimacy to conquests and implies that Islamic presence is irreversible. IS implies that the current inhabitants of these lands— if they do not accept its rule— are akin to the disbelievers whose territories were “opened and liberated” during the first conquests of Islam.

While the claim that the emerging identity following the border collapse is that of pan-Islamism, the video in fact is Arab-centric and is steeped within Arab postcolonial culture. The final interview is with a farmer saying he can finally sell his produce on both sides of the border without paying tariffs. As we see images of the supposedly abundant food in IS-controlled territory, the video concludes with a vow not to stop fighting “as long as there is a frontier separating Muslims and until the Islamic caliphate unites all Muslims.” It projects the metaphor of the shift between *jabiliyya*/Islam and before/after IS once again by equating pre-Islamic divisions to contemporary politics and insinuating that ideologies of modernity are equivalent to pre-Islamic gods. Takfiri anachronism is established in these videos about borders but also through their parallelism with those depicting the demolition of pre-Islamic archaeological monuments.

### **‘Destroying Idols’**

IS videos that show the destruction of archeological monuments follow the same narrative and structure of its videos on erasing borders in terms of portraying the *jabiliyya*/ Islam binary as a choice intrinsic to the Muslim condition regardless of time. Those who accept any manifestation of modern ideology (as defined by IS) are deemed deviants and infidels deserving of death. IS has released a number of videos on the theme of idols’ destruction. One video in 2015 showed IS members destroying monuments in the Mosul museum, which included pre-Islamic but also Abbasid and Ottoman archaeology. IS also destroyed and demolished monuments in the Syrian city of Palmyra and beheaded renowned Syrian archaeologist Dr Khaled Al-Asad. As Campton (2017) argues, the destruction of works of art and antiquities is not simply a performance of dominance,

but also an act of purification to instate what IS sees as true Islam. For his part, Harmanşah (2015) criticizes media reactions that explain IS's act as a result of Islamic iconoclasm. He asks how is it that we are convinced of IS's hatred of idols and representations, "while we consume the very powerful images that constantly flow through the global media"? Indeed, in its performance of Islamic purity and return to authenticity through monument destruction, IS has no problem using modern technologies, whether tractors, bombs, or power tools and of course social media in the process. The use of modern products is not linked to Western dominance and progress but portrayed as intrinsic to IS's power.

Just like the border videos, this genre of videos is also hybrid in terms of its postcolonial and Islamic symbolism. These videos make a new claim of identity by attacking what they describe as an idol-worshipping practice, not in terms of present-day reverence of pre-Islamic gods but in contemporary expressions of pride and allegiance to an 'un-Islamic' form of identity, which is nationalism and allegiance to a Western understanding of modernity. As De Cesari (2015) argues, archaeological sites and monuments in the Levant cannot be considered separately from a history of colonialism that saw great value in them, and, also, from authoritarian postcolonial rule, which relied on archaeology to celebrate nation-building. She adds that archaeological monuments are "a sign of the ultimate failure of the emancipatory project of the postcolonial nation-state" and their destruction portrays IS as "a radically new political agent unmoored from the fraught legacy of the past and in fact borne out of its annihilation" (p. 25-26).

One of those videos that reflects these contradictions was released in June 2016. It shows the destruction of the Nabu temple in Ninawa Province in Iraq. The video's narrator states that some people, "in the name of civilization, express pride in stones and statues that were built by infidel polytheists." However, "what some consider as signs of civilization are only symbols of the tyranny, degeneration, and moral backwardness of delusional societies," he continues. This claim falls within the context of IS's interpretation of Islam that rejects the idea of human pursuit of progress and material accumulation. Of course, once again, that claim is de-linked from IS's own conduct and reliance on new technologies.

Similar to the videos about destroying the border, we see tractors destroying a structure, in this case, the Nabu temple. Viewers are told that Prophet Mohammad destroyed idols with his own hands indicating that it is the way to reinstate righteousness and destroy the unfaithful. An IS member, Abu-Ansar Al-Ansari, is featured in the video. He laments that some people consider these monuments as "their history and make of them an identity, to which they belong, and that they consider themselves as descendants of those polytheists." Al-Ansari adds that the only reason Muslims had not destroyed these monuments before is that they did not have the means. The video is typical of the archaeology destruction genre that, in conjunction with the other videos about erasing colonial borders, falls within the context of what I am calling IS's media strategy of takfiri anachronism.

## **Conclusion**

As Kraidy (2017a) claims, IS videos present a hybridized and hyper-mediatised spectacle of temporality, territoriality and terror. Accordingly, IS media strategy can be understood as postmodern in the sense of offering a "tumultuous compresence of all styles" (p. 244). This is apparent in its performance of historic authenticity as intermingled within the use of new technology in content, such as boasting about new weapons while claiming to re-instate the past, or in form as in using digital media to disseminate its politics of return. In one single IS video, the viewer may encounter anthems about a looming judgement day and a historiographic presentation of Islamic civilization with promises for a new golden age. One may see a celebration of jihadi globalism, as fighters are branded by their national origins, much in the way of a Benetton ad joyfully

commodifying diversity. At the same time, we see interviews with local Syrian and Iraqi truck drivers and farmers. IS shows abhorrent savagery but also scenes of banal normality, such as of shops and markets. It claims to represent Islamic universalism and purity, while at the same time engaging with an Arab political culture that promises a return to a golden age, directs its anger at the failures and divisions of postcolonial Arab regimes and elites.

IS's media strategy of takfiri anachronism establishes a relation of equivalence between manifestations of modernity and pre-Islamic false religions. It also encompasses the emotive division between *jahiliyya* and Islam, with the latter portrayed simply as allegiance to IS, its policies, and interpretations. The former is portrayed as a transtemporal state of deviance from (IS's interpretation of) Islam. The binary is also between two affective states: humiliation, associated with *jahiliyya*/ modernity and dignity, linked to support for the group. IS claims that it is projecting the past onto the present in its entirety. But that is only what it makes visible in its propaganda. Visibility, as Zelizer (2017) argues, goes hand in hand with memory, since both explain the strategy to shift attention away from what is designated as forgotten and unseen. This approach explains Western coverage of terrorism but can also be applied to IS's own memory work (Zelizer, 2016).

IS's video spectacles focus attention on its performances of Islamic authenticity and portray its self-serving appeals in religious terms. Uniting territories in Iraq and Syria, though framed as an undoing of colonial effects, is only significant as a form of religious purification. In this way, IS distinguishes itself from the demands of secular Arab nationalists. Its destruction of pre-Islamic monuments by using bombs, tractors and power tools is not an assault on fragile historic relics but an obliteration of the false gods of modernity and nationalism. Whether it is a border post or an ancient monument, both are framed as the present-day equivalent of the false gods that Prophet Mohammad and the first Muslims destroyed in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. In a telling remark, one of its preachers proclaimed in a sermon in February 2015 that, had Prophet Mohammad been alive today, he would have surely joined IS (Muzanjer, 2015). The IS preacher was accused of blasphemy by Muslim clerics and attacked on social media (Mahni, 2015). So as IS claims that it is following and implementing a true and authentic Islam that follows "the methodology of the Prophet," it is Islam and the name of Prophet Mohammad which have been discursively subjected to IS's twisted strategy of takfiri anachronism.

In fact, the politics of spectacle in IS videos exemplify its approach to the interpretation of Islam and its claims that its application of Islamic texts is literal (See Sidiqui, 2015). Similar to its visual performance of Islamic authenticity, IS hyper-performs its application of aspects of Islamic law in order to conceal how an inevitable contemporary adaptation is inherent in the application of these laws. Certainly, this is an important point to make in relation to approaches to religious scripture in general. It is also a point that the fields of media, communication, and performance studies are particularly equipped to make. It is that present-based acts of interpretation and articulation are inevitable no matter how strong the claims are made of being textually "literal."

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