Drone imagery in Islamic State propaganda: flying like a state

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The attempt to assassinate Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro with an explosive-laden drone on 4 August 2018 seemed to vindicate the fears and warnings of drone scholars, policy makers and security practitioners who cautioned that remote-piloted aircraft (RPA) technology could be leveraged by non-state actors to inflict mass casualties or assassinate public officials. Drawing the focus away from the armed medium-altitude, long-endurance (MALE) drones privileged by western powers, the incident in Caracas seemed to herald a new era of 'remote terrorism', in which remote-piloted weapons systems could be used to wreak havoc from a distance and strike evocative symbols of state power. A few months later, widespread disruption at Gatwick Airport demonstrated the potential for even unarmed drones to disrupt civil society and key infrastructure, causing severe economic damage and anxiety, and providing a powerful illustration of the limits to a state's control over its airspace. Even more recently, the use of long-range drones by Houthi rebels in attempts to assassinate Yemeni military leaders and strike infrastructure deep inside Saudi Arabia demonstrates that armed drone systems are now an integral part of the military and propaganda arsenal of certain non-state groups.[1]

The acquisition of drone technology by violent non-state actors has been analysed extensively from a technological perspective, as a new technique of political violence to achieve existing aims.[2] In this article, however, we argue

that the non-state use of drones, particularly armed drones, introduces a new symbolic dimension which distinguishes this technology from other technologies of political violence, particularly in the usage of associated media images. The non-state use of RPAs, we argue, entails a symbolic contestation of state sovereignty, distinct from the immediate security dangers posed by the drones and the munitions they drop. The diffusion of images of non-state use of RPAs, in turn, has a potentially far wider reach than any immediate military effect of RPA use, and can be marshalled by non-state actors to claim legitimacy and effective control of territory, introducing—in the case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—a claim to de facto sovereignty. Thus, this article provides a theoretical contribution to understandings of contention embodied in political violence by arguing for the presence, through strategic choices reflected in propaganda, of a struggle over normative concepts of sovereignty.

We provide an evaluation of our theoretical claim through a study of ISIS' depiction of drone usage in its online propaganda, arguing that its use of drones should be understood in two ways: first, as combat air support; second—and more importantly—as an integral part of the ISIS propaganda machine. In respect of the first, we argue that ISIS' tactical use of drones is of limited military value, and that its objective is to demonstrate a capability to use airborne technology rather than to achieve a definite military advantage. The second category addresses the symbolic use of drones. We argue that ISIS' extensive use of unarmed drones, both as a means of conducting pre-attack reconnaissance and to film ground operations—particularly the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIEDs)—treats drones as an integral instrument within the ISIS propaganda machine, and as weapons within a political and strategic struggle.

Through this empirical study of ISIS drone propaganda, we demonstrate that drones provide violent non-state groups not only with a potentially effective means of carrying out violent attacks, but also with a vehicle for the contestation and reconfiguration of concepts of sovereignty. We ground this argument through engagements with political geography and visual security studies, specifically with arguments concerning the relation between air power, airborne vision and conceptions of security. As political geographers have emphasized, a state's sovereignty encompasses the totality of its territorial extent as delimited by its internationally recognized boundaries, along with the ground under it and the airspace above it. The control of airspace is—and has been since the aftermath of the First World War—the prerogative of states.[3] Any aircraft, manned or otherwise, is subject to the authority of a state, and it is states that possess control of the airspace.[4] As small drones are easy to obtain and employ, are hard to detect, and can interfere with the lawfully regulated air traffic, they pose a particularly salient challenge for states. Drones operated by non-state actors, therefore, can symboli-

[3] Stuart Banner, *Who owns the sky? The struggle to control airspace from the Wright Brothers on* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
[4] Alison J. Williams, 'Reconceptualising spaces of the air: performing the multiple spatialities of UK military airspaces', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36: 2, April 2011, p. 256; Alison J. Williams, '*Hakumat al Tayarrat*: the role of air power in the enforcement of Iraq's boundaries', *Geopolitics* 12: 3, July 2007, p. 513.

cally undermine the sovereign authority of the state, irrespective of the immediate security threat posed. We further engage with discussions of 'vertical geopolitics' in political geography, which examine the vertical and volumetric dimensions of territory, sovereignty and air power, among others. We argue, drawing especially on Alison J. Williams's work on the spatial and political significations of air power, that ISIS uses aerial images taken by drones to highlight its claim to possess key attributes of sovereign statehood, of which control of airspace constitutes a crucial element.

The article proceeds in four stages. We begin by surveying earlier non-state uses of armed drones, in order both to contextualize ISIS' use of drones and to demonstrate the distinct character of ISIS' media portrayal of drones. We then draw on visual security and vertical geopolitics to argue for the role of drone flights and the propaganda diffusion of images of such flights in performing sovereignty.[5] A description of the empirical research conducted and of the contents of ISIS drone propaganda follows, detailing the three principal categories of images taken by drones present in ISIS propaganda. Finally, we develop the argument about the use of drones both to contest and to claim attributes of sovereignty, detailing the performative, legal and visual aspects of this claim of effective sovereignty.

Terrorism and drones

While commercial variants of drones have become more popular, affordable, sophisticated and accessible over the past decade, terrorist interest in drones is anything but new. A number of violent non-state actors, both groups and individuals, have experimented with drones to enact terror, often with little result. Before the rise of ISIS, however, this extensive experimentation with the use of RPAs—armed and unarmed—tended to treat drones as conventional weapons deployed to achieve existing objectives. Drones were considered mainly as a new means of enacting terrorist violence or gaining a tactical advantage, in line with other techniques of political violence and irregular warfare.

In his 2002 testimony to the US Senate Governmental Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, Christopher Bolkcom identified seven features that made RPAs attractive to terrorist groups: (1) low acquisition costs; (2) a variety of purchasing pathways; (3) potential for high accuracy; (4) operational flexibility; (5) high likelihood of air-defence penetration; (6) high survivability pre-launch; and finally (7) low levels

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[5] To be clear, we understand sovereignty here as the effective control and ordering of territory, which in this case is achieved by ISIS through overflying. Roxanne Euben similarly uses an understanding of sovereignty which is not tied to a concept of western (Westphalian) statehood, namely sovereignty as the Hobbesian and Foucauldian power over life and death of its subjects. Simon Mabon, meanwhile, debates briefly the relevance of employing the concept of sovereignty in non-western settings, before opting to retain it. In our view, these understandings of sovereignty are, by and large, complementary and in line with our approach. See Roxanne L. Euben, 'Spectacles of sovereignty in digital time: ISIS executions, visual rhetoric and sovereign power', *Perspectives on Politics* 15: 4, Dec. 2017, pp. 1007–33; Simon Mabon, 'Nationalist Jahiliyyah and the flag of the two crusaders, or: ISIS, sovereignty, and the "Owl of Minerva"', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40: 11, Nov. 2017, pp. 966–85.

of infrastructure needed to support their deployment.[6] Since Bolkcom's testimony, a series of publications have investigated the use of drones by violent non-state actors or insurgent and terrorist groups,[7] although this topic has traditionally been overshadowed by debates surrounding the use of military-grade platforms, particularly regarding privacy, human rights, ethics and legality.

The first documented evidence of a terror plot involving drones surfaced in the aftermath of the 1995 sarin attack in the Tokyo underground by the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo. The group had experimented the previous year with two remote-controlled helicopters as a means of distributing sarin, but both had crashed during testing.[8] Building on the works of Gips, Miasnikov and Bunker,[9] Don Rassler assembled a comprehensive list of suspected cases of terror plots involving drones up to late 2016.[10] These included, among others, a 2002 attempt by a group of Virginia-based individuals linked to Lashkar-e-Tayyiba to acquire drone technology from US companies;[11] the discovery of an RPA during a Pakistani military raid on a Haqqani Network *madrassa* in Miranshah, North Waziristan;[12] the arrest in 2011 of Rezwan Ferdaus, a US citizen who studied physics at Northeastern University, for plotting to pilot explosive-laden remote-control planes into the Pentagon and US Capitol;[13] and a number of domestic terrorist plots in Europe.[14]

In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of drone-related terror plots, Rassler's work draws an important distinction between 'terror entities that have shown a more limited interest' in drones and those whose 'drone use

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[6] 'Statement of Christopher Bolkcom, analyst in National Defense Congressional Research Service', Senate Governmental Affairs Committee Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, hearing on cruise missile proliferation, Washington DC, 2002.

[7] Dennis Gormley, 'Globalization and WMD proliferation networks: the case of unmanned air vehicles as terrorist weapons', *Strategic Insights* 5: 6, July 2006, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/11187/gormleyJul06.pdf; Jay Mandelbaum, James Ralston, Ivars Gutmanis, Andrew Hull and Christopher Martin, *Terrorist use of improvised or commercially available precision-guided UAVs at stand-off ranges: an approach for formulating mitigation considerations* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 1 Oct., 2005); Robert J. Bunker, *Terrorist and insurgent unmanned aerial vehicles: use, potentials, and military implications* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2015); Chris Abbott, Matthew Clarke, Steve Hathorn and Scott Hickie, *Hostile drones: the hostile use of drones by non-state actors against British targets* (London: Oxford Research Group, 2016); Larry Friese, N. R. Jenzen-Jones and Michael Smallwood, *Emerging unmanned threats: the use of commercially-available UAVs by armed non-state actors* (Perth: Armament Research Services, 2016).

[8] Bunker, *Terrorist and insurgent unmanned aerial vehicles*.

[9] Michael Gips, 'A remote threat', *Security Management* 46: 10, Oct. 2002, pp. 14–16; Eugene Miasnikov, *Threat of terrorism using unmanned aerial vehicles* (Moscow: Institute of Physics and Technology, 2005); Bunker, *Terrorist and insurgent unmanned aerial vehicles*.

[10] Don Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation: terrorism, drones and supportive technology* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Oct. 2016), https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/10/Drones-Report.pdf.

[11] *United States* v. *Ali Asad Chandia, also known as Abu Qatada and Mohammed Ajmal Khan, also known as Abu Khalid*, United States District Court of Virginia, Alexandria Division, 14 Sept. 2005.

[12] Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*, pp. 17–18.

[13] Peter Finn, 'Mass. Man accused of plotting to hit Pentagon and Capitol with drone aircraft', *Washington Post*, 28 Sept. 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/mass-man-accused-of-plotting-to-hit-pentagon-and-capitol-with-drone-aircraft/2011/09/28/gIQAWdpk5K_story.html; Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*, pp. 18–22.

[14] Jeevan Vasagar, 'Students "planned terror attack using remote control planes"', *Telegraph*, 25 June 2013, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/10140642/Students-planned-terror-attack-using-remote-control-planes.html; Jack Nicas, 'Criminals, terrorists find uses for drones, raising concerns', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 Jan. 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/criminals-terrorists-find-uses-for-drones-raising-concerns-1422494268; Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*, pp. 22–3.

958

is sustained and developed enough to be considered a "program"'.[15] According to Rassler, four terrorist groups—Hezbollah, Hamas, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and ISIS—either have employed drones with sufficient frequency, or have established sufficiently identifiable medium- to long-term infrastructure dedicated to support such operations, to warrant their activity being labelled a 'program'. For Rassler, these groups—along with, more recently, the Yemeni Houthi rebels—are the only ones to have successfully used weaponized drones.[16] ISIS, Yemeni Houthi rebels and Hezbollah are the only groups that appear to have successfully used weaponized drones to kill.[17]

Among these groups, Hezbollah arguably has the longest-standing drone programme, the genesis of which can be traced to 1997, when the movement started to intercept poorly encrypted Israeli drone feeds.[18] By this means the group was able to gain useful intelligence on the locations that the Israeli security apparatus was monitoring across its border in Lebanon—most importantly, the infiltration route that a team of Israel's elite Shayetet 13 naval commandos would later use during a sensitive operation. This information enabled Hezbollah to ambush and kill twelve naval commandos.[19] Most of Hezbollah's drone technology is believed to be derived from, or have originated in, Iran, which has maintained an active military drone programme since the Iran–Iraq War.[20] Hamas, similarly, has

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[15] Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*, p. 5.

[16] Since the publication of Rassler's 2016 report, Iran has also provided drones to Houthi rebels fighting against Saudi Arabia in Yemen. In January 2017, the Houthis released a video depicting an attack by three explosive-laden, remotely operated unmanned maritime craft on a Saudi frigate. Two days later, the United Arab Emirates air force shot down an Iranian drone launched from the Yemeni city of Mokha. Moreover, two MALE drones were displayed at an event attended by senior Houthi officials on 26 Feb. 2017. Houthi rebels have used explosive drones, along with missiles, to attack the territory of Saudi Arabia, including repeated attacks on Saudi airports which have killed civilians. There have also been reports of Houthi rebels deploying larger-scale RPAs—akin to MALE drones—for surveillance. Finally, in a high-profile attack, a Houthi explosive drone killed six soldiers and injured a number of high-level Yemeni Army commanders in January 2019: 'Yemen's Houthis attack Saudi ship, launch ballistic missile', Reuters, 31 Jan. 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi-idUSKBN15E2KE; 'Forces destroy Iranian drone in Yemen's Mokha', *Al Arabiya*, 28 Jan. 2017, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/01/28/Forces-destroy-Iranian-drone-in-Yemens-Mokha.html; 'Yemen war: civilian killed in Houthi attack on Saudi airport', BBC News, 24 June 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48743421; Andrew Liptak, 'Drones are giving Houthi rebels an edge in the ongoing war in Yemen', *The Verge*, 3 May 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/3/18527205/drones-explosives-yemen-war-houthi-rebels-edge-violence-borders; Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, 'Mideast insurgents enter the age of drone warfare', *Wall Street Journal*, 2 May 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/mideast-insurgents-enter-the-age-of-drone-warfare-11556814441; 'Yemen soldiers killed in Houthi drone attack on base', BBC News, 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46822429.

[17] Nick Waters, 'Houthis use armed drone to target Yemeni Army top brass', Bellingcat, 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/01/10/houthis-use-armed-drone-to-target-yemeni-army-top-brass/; Wintour, 'Yemen peace talks at risk'; 'Yemen war: civilian killed in Houthi attack on Saudi airport'; Gili Cohen, 'Hezbollah strikes Nusra front positions near Syria border, Iran says', *Haaretz*, 22 Sept. 2014, https://www.haaretz.com/hezbollah-attacks-nusra-front-near-syria-1.5304809; Angus McDowall, 'Hezbollah uses drones against Islamic State in Syria: Hezbollah-run media', Reuters, 21 Aug. 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-syria-idUSKCN1B11H4. Hezbollah, however, seems to have used drones only to kill members of other non-state actor groups, namely the Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, although, as detailed below, explosive drones have been used against Israeli targets without causing any deaths.

[18] Chris Woods, *Sudden justice: America's secret drone wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 274.

[19] Roee Nahmias, 'Nasrallah describes 1997 ambush', Ynetnews, 8 Sept. 2010, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3932886,00.html.

[20] Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*, p. 26. In 2004, a 2.9m Iran-made drone operated by Hezbollah managed to enter Israeli airspace for five minutes before crashing into the Mediterranean Sea. Five months later, a Misrad-1 RPA reportedly operated by Hezbollah made an incursion into Israeli airspace, conducting an 18-mile recon-

959

extended its long strategic partnership with Hezbollah and Iran into technological areas.[21] While the scope of the Hamas drone programme is difficult to gauge, the Overland Crossing Authority of the Israeli Defense Ministry reported that between 2016 and 2018, 180 complete drones and 352 drone parts were seized at the Erez and Karem Shalmon crossings.[22] Moreover, in late 2016 Hamas acknowledged the death of Mohammed Zawari, the apparent supervisor of its drone programme, shedding light on the group's little-known drone operations.[23]

With the exception of Hezbollah exploiting hacked drone feeds to gain intelligence, the use of drones by violent non-state groups can generally be understood as a technical innovation intended to improve efficiency in pursuing existing objectives.[24] Most of the scant literature on the subject of non-state drones has therefore been concerned with technical or strategic challenges: how to disrupt the supply of drones to non-state groups, prevent their use for terroristic attacks or mitigate the damage they inflict.[25] ISIS' drone programme, however, differs

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naissance flight over cities in the Galilee region. During the Lebanon War in 2006, Hezbollah launched a number of Iran-made drones into Israeli airspace, the majority of which were destroyed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). However, two noteworthy incidents occurred during the conflict: on 14 July, Hezbollah packed a small drone with explosives and rammed it into an Israeli warship, causing a fire that took several hours to put out; and on 13 August, Israel shot down three Hezbollah drones in northern Israel that were carrying roughly 70lb of explosives each. Hezbollah's drone flights into Israel continued over the next several years: in 2012 a modified Iran-made Ahyub drone was intercepted by two IDF F-16 fighters near the Dimona nuclear facility, 140 miles inside Israeli airspace. More recently, Hezbollah has used drones to strike ISIS positions, bunkers and fortifications near the border with Lebanon. See Grossman, *Drones and terrorism*, pp. 99–100; Milton Hoenig, 'Hezbollah and the use of drones as a weapon of terrorism', *Federation of American Scientists Public Interest Report* 67: 2, 2014, https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Hezbollah-Drones-Spring-2014. pdf; Alessandria Masi, 'Hezbollah allegedly using drones against Al Qaeda in battle for Qalamoun', *International Business Times*, 12 May 2015, https://www.ibtimes.com/hezbollah-allegedly-using-drones-against-al-qaeda-battle-qalamoun-1918696; Joshua Davidovich, 'Israel reportedly fears drone was sent by Iran to spy on Dimona nuclear plant', *Times of Israel*, 7 Oct. 2012, http://www.timesofisrael.com/officials-reportedly-fear-drone-may-have-been-iranian-attempt-to-spy-on-dimona/; McDowall, 'Hezbollah uses drones against Islamic State'.

21 On 16 Nov. 2012, the IDF claimed they had destroyed what they described as a Hamas drone development programme in the city of Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip. The following year, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank arrested Hamas activists plotting to build drones laden with explosives. During the summer 2014 war in Gaza, Israel's missile defence system intercepted Hamas drones on two separate occasions. Hamas' military wing claimed that the second drone was launched with the intention of carrying out an attack deep in Israel. Another Hamas drone reportedly malfunctioned and crashed after attempting to infiltrate Israeli airspace. See 'Israel says it knocked out Hamas drone program', CBS News, 16 Nov. 2012, https:// www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-says-it-knocked-out-hamas-drone-program/; Avi Issacharoff, 'PA forces thwart Hamas attack drone plot in West Bank', *Times of Israel*, 25 Oct. 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/ pa-forces-uncover-hamas-attack-drone-plot/; Caroline Alexander and Gwen Ackerman, 'Hamas bragging rights grow with drones use against Israel', Bloomberg, 16 July 2014, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/ articles/2014-07-16/hamas-bragging-rights-grow-with-drones-use-against-israel; 'IDF intercepts another Hamas UAV', Ynetnews, 17 July 2014, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4545505,00.html.

22 Alex Fishman, 'The new explosive drone threat from Gaza', Ynetnews, 7 July 2018, https://www.ynetnews. com/articles/0,7340,L-5318598,00.html.

23 'Hamas accuses Israel of killing its Tunisian drone expert', BBC News, 17 Dec. 2016, https://www.bbc.com/ news/world-middle-east-38354958.

24 Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, *How terror evolves: the emergence and spread of terrorist techniques* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

25 James Rogers, 'The edge of drone warfare', TEDx Talks Odense (Odense, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=_GbXictC9eU; Marc Goodman, 'How terrorists are turning robots into weapons', *Defense One*, 16 Apr. 2015, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2015/04/how-terrorists-are-turning-robots-weapons/110362/; James Rogers, 'Countering weaponised drones', *Counter Terror Business*, 20 Oct. 2017, https://counterterror-business.com/features/countering-weaponised-drones; Abbott et al., *Hostile drones*; Rassler, *Remotely piloted innovation*.

from earlier instances in that it uses drones not only in continuity with other weapons systems, but to open up tactical and strategic possibilities that were previously unavailable. In this sense, as demonstrated in Don Rassler's 2018 report on the scale and supply chain of ISIS' drone programme, 'the significance' of this programme 'lies less in its technical sophistication and more in the collection of simple, low-cost, and replaceable devices that made up the group's drone fleet as well as the group's use of those drones in a number of creative ways'.[26]

Unlike the Hezbollah and Hamas drone programmes, which have been shrouded in secrecy, the Houthi rebels have regularly used weaponized drones for attacks on high-profile targets, such as Riyadh airport and a Yemeni military parade. ISIS, meanwhile, has taken publicity-seeking a step further by making drone imagery a significant component of its propaganda media machine. We argue that for ISIS, unlike other non-state groups, making the drone activity visible is an end in itself, separate from the tactical value of these weapons. ISIS propaganda has routinely and consistently showcased the use of its drones within its propaganda material, providing researchers with a unique opportunity to study the scope, scale and purpose of the ISIS drone programme. ISIS, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to examine the perception of drones by non-state actors, owing to the unprecedented visibility of its drone programme. While these propaganda images provide limited knowledge of the actual use of drones in combat, they allow us to gain invaluable insight into ISIS' understanding of the perception of drones, their media value, and their significance in the wider geopolitical–media scene.

Vertical geopolitics and sovereignty

Over the past 15 years, political geographers have repeatedly emphasized the necessity to grasp space in its three dimensions, encompassing 'vertical as well as horizontal geographies of power'.[27] Revising Max Weber's famous definition of the state as the 'human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory, this "territory" being another of the defining characteristics of the state',[28] geographers have emphasized the way in which political power is distributed unevenly, not only across territory,[29] but also in 'volumetric' three-dimensional space,[30] thereby 're-creating sovereign space as a volume' in which power is distributed in a plurality of non-homogeneous 'airspaces'.[31] This body of work has brought renewed complexity to concepts of

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[26] Don Rassler, *The Islamic State and drones: supply, scale, and future threats* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2018), p. 2, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/07/Islamic-State-and-Drones-Release-Version.pdf.

[27] Stephen Graham, *Vertical: the city from satellites to bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 6.

[28] Max Weber, 'The profession and vocation of politics', in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 310–11 (emphasis in original).

[29] Stuart Elden, *Terror and territory: the spatial extent of sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Stuart Elden, *The birth of territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Claudio Minca and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Carl Schmitt and the concept of the border', *Geopolitics* 17: 4, Oct. 2012, pp. 756–72.

[30] Stuart Elden, 'Secure the volume: vertical geopolitics and the depth of power', *Political Geography*, vol. 34, May 2013, p. 49.

[31] Williams, 'Reconceptualising spaces of the air', p. 256; Williams, '*Hakumat al Tayarrat*', p. 508.

power, territory and sovereignty, rejecting the notion of sovereign territory as a homogeneous, unproblematic and two-dimensional area. In other words, state sovereignty is expressed not only in the control of the ground, but also in the control of the air, that is, both in the ability to control and regulate all aerial traffic,[32] and in the ability to fly over territory.

A number of recent studies have highlighted this vertical dimension of sovereignty and its link to air power: most importantly, these studies demonstrate multiple ways in which control of the air can influence, modify or overtake control of the ground. Eyal Weizman, for instance, argues that Israel, following its ground withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, replaced ground control with aerial surveillance and domination, mainly through drones, noting that 'although political sovereignty is traditionally expressed in the state's control of ground territory, at present the most effective and contested political sphere is the airspace over Palestinian territories'.[33] Numerous works have addressed the use of air power to establish and enforce imperial control of territory, notably Priya Satia's 'The pain of love' and Thomas Hippler's aptly titled *Governing from the skies*, which both discuss the use of air power for colonial policing by the British empire in 1920s Iraq.[34] Both argue that air power was used as the main tool to assert and enforce sovereign control over rebellious groups without actually entering into contact with them, reducing the need for ground troops. Further recent works have highlighted the potential of aerial power—notably drones—to lead to forms of aerial neo-imperialism, among them Ian Shaw's argument concerning the aerial 'enclosure' of humanity and Antoine Bousquet's genealogy of the 'global imperium of targeting'.[35]

In all these works, the ability to position oneself above, to fly over, the other is taken as an indicator of power and domination. As Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead and Alison J. Williams note, 'being above is powerfully strategic. Height and verticality are values that are commonly associated with dominance and the projection of force.'[36] The relations of power embedded in visuality from above reinforce this association of verticality and domination: Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley associated drone warfare directly with means of visual production and representation, contending 'that central to the production of drone warfare are the asymmetries among who controls what is seen, how it is experienced, and by whom it is experienced'.[37] These asymmetries of seen and unseen rely, in large part, on a vertical differentiation between the view from above and the view

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[32] Alison J. Williams, 'A crisis in aerial sovereignty? Considering the implications of recent military violations of national airspace', *Area* 42: 1, March 2010, p. 53.

[33] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 254.

[34] Priya Satia, 'The pain of love', in Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead and Alison J. Williams, eds, *From above: war, violence and verticality* (London: Hurst, 2013), pp. 223–45; Thomas Hippler, *Governing from the skies: a global history of aerial bombing*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017).

[35] Ian G. R. Shaw, *Predator empire: drone warfare and full spectrum dominance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Antoine Bousquet, *The eye of war: military perception from the telescope to the drone* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[36] Peter Adey, Mark Whitehead and Alison J. Williams, 'Introduction: visual culture and verticality', in Adey et al., eds, *From above*, p. 2.

[37] Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley, 'Scopic regimes and the visual turn in International Relations: seeing world politics through the drone', *European Journal of International Relations* 25: 2, June 2019, p. 432.

from below. Hugh Gusterson, thinking along much the same lines, describes the (American) drone as

a technology that is almost magical [which] gives its owners, who are looking on the scene from high in the sky, a godlike power over life and death … And we are invited to experience it through a narrative of mastery and control—of the cool, righteous exercise of overwhelming power.[38]

The view from above is one of superiority, associated with scientific rationalization and control.

The association of control and aerial power is further reinforced through symbolic imagery. In his history of aerial hijacking, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage traces the struggles over the control of aircraft in Peru in the early 1930s, and later in pre-revolutionary Cuba: groups that could fly over territory used this ability as a validation of their claim to sovereignty and legitimacy.[39] Stephen Graham, furthermore, argues that 'vertical and other spatial metaphors literally work to constitute and reconstitute social power'; for this reason, 'political and social struggle takes on an increasingly three-dimensional character, reaching both up from and down below ground level'.[40] Graham, drawing on linguistic, iconographic and visual metaphors, demonstrates that altitude is recurrently associated with power, whether in a governmental or work hierarchy, religious imagery or mapping. Similarly, Adey, Whitehead and Williams argue for the presence of a longstanding link between aerial vision and sovereignty: 'From map-making, aerial survey and photogrammetry, the view from the air is complicit in producing, sustaining and eroding territorial sovereignty on the ground below.'[41]

Data collection

In late 2015, ISIS switched from Twitter to Telegram as the principal platform for disseminating the bulk of its official visual propaganda. The move was prompted by Twitter's updating of the language of its stance on abusive behaviour to include statements 'threatening or promoting terrorism', and subsequently banning ISIS accounts *en masse*.[42] Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan describe Telegram as 'a free, cross-platform messaging app that offers secure messaging … in which users must be invited to join chats in order to gain access to the content'.[43] Aside from robust security features,[44] Telegram also offers both 'group chats'—multidirectional

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[38] Hugh Gusterson, *Drone: remote control warfare* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 3–4.

[39] Veilleux-Lepage, *How terror evolves*; Willie Hiatt, *The rarified air of the modern: airplanes and technological modernity in the Andes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[40] Graham, *Vertical*, pp. 15, 6.

[41] Adey et al., 'Introduction', p. 3.

[42] Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'A typology of Islamic State's social media distribution network', in Allan Thompson, ed., *Media and mass atrocity: the Rwanda genocide and beyond* (Toronto: Centre for International Governance Innovation Press, 2019), pp. 453–82.

[43] Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati and John Horgan, 'Navigating ISIS's preferred platform: Telegram', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31: 6, 2019, pp. 1242–3.

[44] Jason Murdock, 'The best encrypted messaging apps to keep you safe from hackers and snooping', *International Business Times*, 6 Apr. 2016, http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/best-encrypted-messaging-apps-keep-you-safe-hackers-snooping-1553488.

963

chat rooms that can host up to 100,000 members—and 'channels', a unidirectional messaging service allowing administrators to broadcast messages to an unlimited number of subscribers. In recent years, ISIS has developed a clear preference for using Telegram channels to engage with its core supporters, allowing it to broadcast its propaganda media to a large number of sympathizers around the world.[45]

In order to explore the propaganda use of the ISIS drone programme, we employed a subset of an ISIS propaganda database constructed by the Transcultural Conflict and Violence Initiative at Georgia State University.[46] This database was constituted by monitoring Telegram channels associated with ISIS for 'photo reports', an ISIS propaganda product consisting of a sequence of images often linked by theme and location. Once saved from Telegram, each image was tagged with key identifiable markers such as the date posted, which official media channel produced the content, and information from the caption. The data collection from Telegram between 9 October 2016 and 30 December 2018 yielded a total of 19,749 images, establishing the initial dataset; within this dataset 524 images showed drone activities.

The 524 images of drone activities collected were compared with an ISIS drone-strike dataset covering the whole of 2017 compiled by Nick Waters, a Bellingcat analyst, in order to validate our dataset.[47] Waters's dataset was chosen as it represents the most comprehensive collection of imagery of ISIS drone strikes publicly available, containing a total of 443 images of 208 individual drone strikes.[48] Using publicly available image duplicate-detecting software, we confirmed that in addition to containing 83 images not found in the Waters dataset, our dataset contained 99.32 per cent of the images Waters had uncovered, buttressing the validity of our collection methodology.

Subsequently, the images were analysed by each author independently to identify salient themes, using an approach drawing on inductive visual content analysis.[49] To analyse the images, we drew on both the content of the images themselves and the captions accompanying them. The purpose of this approach was to identify the main categories of content material, in order to prepare for an analysis of the role of these images within the wider ISIS propaganda ecosystem. The images were then classified in five categories:[50] (1) *drone strike:* depictions of RPAs releasing or having released ordnance on a target, and the effects of the strike; (2) *filming of operations*: images of attacks or fighting by other means, notably VBIEDs and other martyr attacks; (3) *reconnaissance*: images taken by drones flying

[45] Bloom et al. 'Navigating ISIS's preferred platform', p. 1245.
[46] Mia Bloom, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Ayse Lokmanoglu, Bhashithe Abeysinghe, Carissa Goodwin and Raj Sundermann, *Documenting the virtual caliphate database* (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 2019).
[47] Nick Waters, *Drone proliferation database*, Dropbox, 2018, https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zmcyhobfjpoge8c/AAAmR0ye1T-cIZv5XlwEDjP3a?dl=0.
[48] Nick Waters, 'Here it is. Every drone strike published by Islamic State in 2017 (I believe) 208 strikes, 450+ images & videos', Twitter @N_Waters89, 18 Jan. 2018, https://twitter.com/N_Waters89/status/953980406419853312.
[49] For a similar methodology, see Wojciech Kaczkowski, 'Qualitative content analysis of images of children in Islamic State's *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines', *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations* 1: 2, April 2019, pp. 26–38.
[50] We concentrate in this article on the first three categories, as we are interested in ISIS' depiction of the employment of drones.

over territory, but showing no visible combat operations or enemy forces; (4) *drones*: images of grounded drones, ranging from drones in various stage of construction or repair, or about to be deployed; and (5) *infographic*: graphic representations of data concerning the drone strikes conducted by the group.[51] In addition, for each image, we collected the reported location—country and *wilayat* (province)—the date the image was reportedly taken, the date the Georgia State University research team captured the image, a translation of accompanying captions, and, in the case of a drone strike, the type of target. The images we obtained are all taken from ISIS-curated propaganda materials; therefore, we do not claim that these provide an accurate portrayal of the actual use of drones in combat by ISIS. We simply do not have data available to assess exactly how ISIS uses drones in combat. Rather, we use these images to gain insight into ISIS propaganda efforts and the group's understanding of the symbolic role and significance of drones.
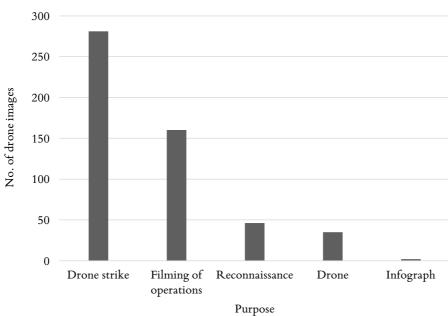
Figure 1: Purpose of drone identified in images

ISIS drone propaganda

Since the beginning of its activities in Syria, ISIS has made use of drones as means of collecting imagery intelligence. As mentioned above, a cursory overview of ISIS propaganda featuring drones shows that they have been employed to carry out attacks, document suicide-bomber attacks in order to disseminate the photos

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[51] An intercoder reliability test employing Cohen's kappa was conducted to determine measurement consistency. The overall interreliability for the coding instrument was measured at 0.92, well above Cohen's threshold of 0.80. See Jacob Cohen, 'A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales', *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 20: 1, April 1960, pp. 37–46.

965

through ISIS media channels, and collect observations. By late 2016, ISIS had begun weaponizing drones to attack *peshmerga* soldiers in northern Iraq; armed drones were subsequently used against Iraqi army targets during the campaign in Mosul, and later in the battles that took place over eastern Syria during the second half of 2017. Arguably, the most significant drone use for offensive purposes occurred on 24 October 2017, when ISIS used a drone to drop two IEDs onto a large Syrian army ammunition depot located in the Deir ez-Zor stadium, ultimately destroying it.[52] ISIS has also used drones to document suicide-bombing attacks for propaganda purposes, for example recording VBIEDs being driven to their targets, their detonations and the aftermath; and recording several of its recent drone strikes from the point of view of the drones themselves, using commercial drones, such as the DJI Phantom. Finally, an example of drones collecting intelligence can be found in videos depicting reconnaissance flights, by a DJI Phantom commercial drone, prior to the takeover of the Al-Tabqa airfield west of Raqqah. As Colin Clarke has noted, such reconnaissance flights allowed ISIS 'to scout out what the base looked like' and identify sensitive or vulnerable areas 'before going in with more kinetic attacks' such as using multiple suicide bombers to gain entry.[53]

Demonstrating offensive capabilities

The use of drones by ISIS to drop munitions accounts for just over half the images present in our database: 281 out of 524 images. Generally, such drones involve modified quadcopters, to which mortar shells, grenades or other forms of explosives have been attached and from which they can then be dropped. Captions generally do not refer to exact targets, but rather to types of targets. The overwhelming majority of images of offensive use of drones depict the dropping of ordnance on moving targets that are part of enemy forces.[54] Given that all images were obtained from ISIS propaganda channels, these represent a sanitized and necessarily distorted view of ISIS use of drones and its success. Thus, every single drone-strike image published by ISIS shows the ordnance reaching its intended target, several of the images showing shots that seem exceedingly difficult. This can be attributed to the fact that ISIS only publishes pictures of successful drone strikes. In fact, on numerous occasions a photo series showed smouldering impact craters near the targets, indicating previous unsuccessful attempts to strike the target for which no pictures were published. As such, the propaganda surrounding armed drones can be understood as a demonstration of strength; ISIS, through these curated images, demonstrates its capacity to engage in airborne attacks, even if the actual military value of these attacks is arguably limited.[55]

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[52] 'Syria: footage shows Islamic State drone blowing up stadium ammo dump', ABC News, 25 Oct. 2017, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-25/footage-shows-is-drone-attack-on-syrian-government-stadium/9085750.

[53] Quoted in Yasmin Tadjdeh, 'Islamic state militants in Syria now have drone capabilities', *National Defense*, 28 Aug. 2014, http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2014/8/28/islamic-state-militants-in-syria-now-have-drone-capabilities.

[54] Our database does not include any examples of ordnance described as targeting command posts or enemy leaders, or any specifically identified target.

[55] It seems that ISIS' tactical use of drones did have some limited military effectiveness, although it appears

Most scholars tend to associate western drone warfare with some form of targeted killing, and it is in this respect that scholars such as Ian Shaw, Grégoire Chamayou and others speak about the neo-imperial imposition of total American power, or what Antoine Bousquet calls a 'global imperium of targeting'.[56] The propaganda surrounding the use of drones for offensive operations by ISIS, in contrast, does not similarly claim to achieve a global reach. ISIS gives extensive publicity to its use of armed drones, in a way that is probably meant as a *quid pro quo* for the use of western drones—a demonstration of advanced war-fighting capabilities. However, ISIS seeks to demonstrate strength in a purely tactical sense; its use of drones to drop ordnance is shown in roles of combat air support and interdiction, hitting targets near the front or on the way to the front.

By all accounts, despite some minor battlefield successes, ISIS drones have had relatively limited military success. Their strategic role in propaganda material, therefore, is separated from their military function, and relies on their ability to see and capture images from the air, rather than on their weaponization. Antoine Bousquet, in the *Eye of war*, posits an ever greater fusion of the 'eye' and the 'weapon'.[57] In Bousquet's account, the western ideal of the 'martial gaze' lies in the notion of the weaponization of the eye: to see is potentially to destroy.[58] In the case of ISIS, these two functions are separate: the drone has an observation function which is separate from—and as important as, if not more important than—its use as an offensive weapon. ISIS has constantly exploited the symbolic value of drone images. Capturing images is therefore of use not merely in its contribution to targeting and to a military advantage, but in its expansion of the reach of other weapons, and in its use to effect a media impact which is far greater than anything that ISIS' rather meagre and rudimentary drone force could ever achieve on the battlefield. To the extent that ISIS drones can be said to have any kind of strategic effect, that effect lies in their propaganda value, not in their military role.

A significant proportion of ISIS images taken by drones show large explosions and destructive action. These images—160 out of the 524 in our dataset—do not, however, show the effects of drone-dropped ammunition; rather, they show the moments surrounding 'martyrdom', that is, the execution of VBIED attacks. In the captions provided along with these images, the name of the perpetrator is often given, along with a short prayer—'May Allah accept him'. The contrast here between uses of drones for striking—in which targets are designated merely by type—and the propagation of drone-taken images of VBIED attacks—in which

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to have been much less significant than the depiction of drones in ISIS propaganda would suggest. See Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'ISIS drones are attacking US troops and disrupting airstrikes in Raqqa, officials say', *Washington Post*, 14 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/14/isis-drones-are-attacking-u-s-troops-and-disrupting-airstrikes-in-raqqa-officials-say/; David B. Larter, 'SOCOM commander: armed ISIS drones were 2016's "most daunting problem"', *Defense News*, 8 Aug. 2017, https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/sofic/2017/05/16/socom-commander-armed-isis-drones-were-2016s-most-daunting-problem/.

[56] Shaw, *Predator empire*; Grégoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013); Bousquet, *The eye of war*.

[57] Bousquet, *The eye of war*.

[58] Derek Gregory makes a similar argument, arguing that the Vietnam War saw the appearance of the ever-shortening 'kill chain', where detection of traffic along the Ho Chi Minh trail would lead to immediate destruction: Derek Gregory, 'Lines of descent', in Adey et al., eds, *From above*, pp. 41–69.

the perpetrators are named—highlights the focus of ISIS' propaganda use of drones: the emphasis is placed not so much on the results of the attacks as on the act of attacking itself. The naming of perpetrators of suicide attacks highlights the act of attacking the enemy through personal sacrifice, rather than the results of the attack; in fact, in many cases, the picture of the perpetrator is superimposed on the image taken by the drone. In the same way, the lack of precise designation of the targets of drone bombings suggests that ISIS is more concerned with demonstrating its ability to fly over and bomb the enemy from the air—its ability to undertake the action itself—than with demonstrating its ability to inflict meaningful damage on the enemy.

In this role, therefore, drones serve as signal boosters for other attacks. Whereas, as Bousquet argues, western powers seek the ever-further integration of the visual and destructive capabilities of drones in order to fulfil the ideal of the martial gaze, ISIS' use of drones exploits specifically their visual component to heighten the visual effect of other attacks. While ISIS drones are prevented by their technical capabilities from having a direct strategic effect, as their range is limited, their use within an integrated propaganda machine multiplies their value. The impact of martyrdom attacks and selective drone strikes is heightened when the symbolic value of suicide attacks is combined with the view from above provided by the drone. The further dissemination of these images allows these purported tactical successes to acquire a global reach.

Demonstrating control of territory

The third category of images found in our dataset, designated as 'reconnaissance' in figure 1, does not show any active combat situations—neither aerial bombardment nor ground attacks—but rather simply shows drones flying over territory. These images, we argue, make clear ISIS' exploitation of the symbolic link between air power and sovereignty described above to further establish its claim to the effective exercise of—and therefore a legitimate claim to—sovereign statehood. Drawing on Alison J. Williams's work, we consider that the diffusion of images of flight over contested territory constitutes a form of 'political discourse' which, as Williams notes, 'performs political positions'.[59] More specifically, these images exemplify a demonstration of performative sovereignty, through which ISIS seeks to show that it can act as a sovereign power. This is significantly different from other forms of drone use for terrorism: while previous terrorist plots involving drones sought to undermine public order and security, and create widespread fear,[60] we argue that ISIS' depiction of drones in propaganda seeks not to destroy public order but to support its state-building exercise.

As Stuart Elden argues, 'territory is a process, not an outcome';[61] in other words, territory, as the foundation of sovereignty (as Weber argues), is continu-

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[59] Williams, 'Reconceptualising spaces of the air', p. 259.
[60] James Reinl, 'Cheap drones are changing the calculus of war in Yemen', *Public Radio International*, 3 June 2019, https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-06-03/cheap-drones-are-changing-calculus-war-yemen.
[61] Elden, 'Secure the volume', p. 36.

968

ously constructed by the active control of space and terrain. ISIS, therefore, is not seeking merely to deter threats to its sovereign territory; it is seeking also to spatialize its claim over the territory overflown by its drones. Our argument, therefore, is that the diffusion of images of territory being overflown by ISIS-controlled drones aims to demonstrate that ISIS exercises de facto control over the territory which it claims. Such control does not necessarily bind ISIS to a Westphalian concept of *de jure* statehood—which would be an unlikely referent for it—but rather emphasizes the effective control of the ground and the air by the group.[62] Through these flights, ISIS contests the territorial sovereignty of the state in which they fight (and which they claim), seeking to 'rende[r] the sovereignty of that state contingent',[63] while simultaneously 'constituting a novel form of *aerial* sovereignty'.[64] Williams, similarly, discusses this performative aspect through aerial 'power projection [which] can be conceptualised as referring to the "stretching" of power from the centre outwards and … this provides a geopolitical imagery of power as being highly mobile, yet tied to the centre and projected outwards'.[65] Drones, in some ways, might even be more effective tools of power projection than regular aircraft, given the explicit connection between the 'centre' and the aircraft, drones being controlled from a remote location. Williams further highlights 'the importance of analysing the production and representation of military airspaces as a way to understand how states project their power to create and maintain a strong image of their abilities and help deter threats to their sovereign territory'.[66]

If state failure is understood as the de facto absence of a sovereign power,[67] which is taken as the justification for foreign intervention, ISIS here seeks to demonstrate its reverse: the de facto presence of a state, made visible through its diffusion of aerial images, which renders the space governed and ordered. As Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael note, the rise of ISIS was not a cause of state failure in Iraq and Syria, but a consequence of the absence of state authority.[68] Therefore, ISIS seeks to demonstrate the manifest failure of the existing order, and its own ability to enforce order where the post-2003 Iraqi state failed to do so.[69] By diffusing images taken from above, ISIS is exploiting these associations created by visual imagery to reinforce the perception of control of territory and to appropriate for itself the perspective of 'mastery and control' which, effectively,

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[62] On the tension between western, Westphalian understandings of sovereignty and ISIS' expression of the concept, see Mabon, 'Nationalist Jahiliyyah'.

[63] Campbell A. O. Munro, 'Mapping the vertical battlespace: towards a legal cartography of aerial sovereignty', *London Review of International Law* 2: 2, 2014, p. 234.

[64] Munro, 'Mapping the vertical battlespace', p. 235 (emphasis in original).

[65] Williams, 'Reconceptualising spaces of the air', p. 255.

[66] Williams, 'Reconceptualising spaces of the air', p. 255.

[67] Williams, 'A crisis in aerial sovereignty?', p. 53.

[68] Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Iraq in the twenty-first century: regime change and the making of a failed state*, Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 217.

[69] One of ISIS' first propaganda videos, entitled 'The end of Sykes–Picot', emphasizes this point. This video is discussed later in this section. See Al-Hayat Media Center [ISIS], 'The end of Sykes–Picot', 2014, https://jihadology.net/2014/06/29/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-end-of-sykes-picot/.

969

places the group in a position of visual domination.[70] ISIS' exploitation of the 'visual field that is produced through the drone' to reinforce its claim to effective sovereignty is not insignificant[71] but furthers longstanding associations between aerial power and the control of territory, which are as much legal, rhetorical and visual.

One final point must be noted: this use of visual images to reinforce a narrative of sovereign statehood is far from unique in ISIS media. Images taken by drones overflying territory function in similar ways to other elements of ISIS' visual propaganda. Recurring themes in ISIS media propaganda include demonstrating sovereign power, the reconfiguration of territory and the exercise of functions central to statehood, all three of which underpin the use of drone propaganda. Roxanne Euben's analysis of ISIS beheading videos supports the first point. In her account, the videos of the beheadings of western hostages seek to 'enabl[e] Da'ish to perform and publicly display its invincible sovereignty' through the exercise of masculinized violence, in contrast to the humiliation of western hostages.[72] Drawing on Foucault's analysis of ritualized public violence as the symbolic inscribing of sovereign power, Euben argues that ISIS' diffusion of beheadings, beyond any tactical purposes of deterrence and intimidation, 'recast [ISIS] as a righteous and lawful sovereign power'.[73]

This demonstration of sovereign power is associated with a refoundation of territorial order. One of the first English-language videos disseminated by ISIS in June 2014—a month and a half before its video of the execution of James Foley—is entitled 'The end of Sykes–Picot', in reference to the borders imposed by the 1916 French–British agreement.[74] This video opens with a shot of an ISIS fighter—identified as 'Abu Safiyya from Chile'—raising the ISIS flag, before showing the same fighter at 'the so-called border of Sykes–Picot', saying 'we don't recognize it and we will never recognize it', promising to 'break' this border and 'other borders also'. The fighter, symbolically, then points out abandoned Iraqi Army positions and walks over the border line, referring to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—then the leader of ISIS—as 'the breaker of barriers'. This video establishes the rejection of the traditional statist territorial order as a central aim of the group. The diffusion of drone images, within this wider propaganda framework, contributes to the group's claim to be founding a new territorial, sovereign order, in which it exercises effective sovereign power, in open defiance and rejection of the Westphalian state order implemented—as the reference to 'Sykes–Picot' makes clear—by western colonial powers.

Simon Mabon, similarly, argues that, 'by their own admission, [ISIS] considers itself a state, albeit couched in theological terms', and that its propaganda materials

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[70] Gusterson, *Drone*, pp. 3–4.
[71] Grayson and Mawdsley, 'Scopic regimes', p. 450.
[72] Euben, 'Spectacles of sovereignty in digital time', p. 1010; see also Simone Molin Friis, '"Beyond anything we have seen": beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS', *International Affairs* 91: 4, July 2015, pp. 725–46.
[73] Euben, 'Spectacles of sovereignty in digital time', p. 1020.
[74] Al-Hayat Media Center [ISIS], 'The end of Sykes–Picot'.

970

reflect this claim to statehood.[75] Drawing on, among others, the same video from 2014, Mabon argues that ISIS propaganda seeks to demonstrate the key attributes of sovereign statehood, namely a hierarchy of authority, the assent of citizens to its rule and the control of territory. This last point, he notes, represented a particular challenge for the group, in a situation where fighting entailed a constant reconfiguration of borders.[76] In this sense, the display of aerial photography contributes to the demonstration of control of territory, allowing the group to spatialize its claim to authority within a defined territory. While Mabon engages briefly with the risks of the 'Westphalian straitjacket', namely that imposing western notions of sovereignty on non-western settings may erase non-state-centric dynamics, he nevertheless maintains that an engagement with concepts of sovereignty can highlight 'aspects of the ISIS brand that seek to achieve this outcome' of state-building.[77]

Finally, as several commentators have noted, ISIS visual propaganda is full of imagery depicting the functions of a well-established sovereign state in all its mundane aspects.[78] These include images of ISIS currency, medical offices and other elements of the bureaucracy of a functioning state, all aimed at demonstrating ISIS' ability to build an effective state, with all its visible manifestations, and thereby advancing the notion of 'Islamic State' as a legitimate state in order to gain the long-term support of local populations. This is of critical importance to ISIS in its attempt to socialize the Muslim world into the ideas and values embodied in its notion of the caliphate.[79] ISIS propaganda has long sought to highlight these performative aspects of state sovereignty, and the aerial images taken by drones continue this component of their propaganda effort.

ISIS' propagation of imagery of drones overflying terrain, without engaging in combat, reflects a longstanding association of flight with sovereign power and the control of territory. This association is in line with other elements of ISIS propaganda, notably its depiction of normal, ordered and regulated daily life. Claims of effective sovereign power permeate all elements of ISIS propaganda, and visual metaphors of power are recurrently featured in propaganda materials. As Graham notes, 'vertical metaphors of social power … gain their power from the way they are used ubiquitously in ways that are unintentional and unconscious'.[80] The use

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[75] Mabon, 'Nationalist Jahiliyyah', p. 969.

[76] Mabon, 'Nationalist Jahiliyyah', p. 974.

[77] Mabon, 'Nationalist Jahiliyyah', p. 982.

[78] Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'Paradigmatic shifts in jihadism in cyberspace: the emerging role of unaffiliated sympathizers in Islamic State's social media strategy', *Journal of Terrorism Research* 7: 1, Feb. 2016, p. 42; Charlie Winter, *Documenting the virtual 'caliphate'* (London: Quilliam, 2015), p. 52; Georgia J. Michlig, Riyadh Lafta, Maha Al-Nuaimi, and Gilbert Burnham, 'Providing healthcare under ISIS: a qualitative analysis of healthcare worker experiences in Mosul, Iraq between June 2014 and June 2017', *Global Public Health* 14: 10, 2019, pp. 1414–27.

[79] Ismael and Ismael note that ISIS believes that legitimate sovereignty originates in God and not in popular support, and therefore argue that the provision of state services seeks to achieve popular support as a precondition not for popular sovereignty, but rather for population control and to demonstrate the 'lack of Islamic authenticity' of other regional states. This does not, however, challenge the use of propaganda images to claim ISIS' unchallenged control and authority within the given territory. See Ismael and Ismael, *Iraq in the twenty-first century*, p. 224.

[80] Graham, *Vertical*, p. 17.

of drones in ISIS propaganda to further a claim to sovereignty, therefore, aligns with a significant thrust of ISIS media efforts and reasserts pervasive associations between air power, domination and statehood, which drones are ideally suited to express.

Conclusion

While there is a common misperception that ISIS fights in a disorganized manner and will throw whatever forces it possesses into battle without any wider plan—Barack Obama famously compared ISIS to a 'jayvee [junior varsity] team', suggesting a lack of capability and sophistication in comparison to Al-Qaeda[81]—that is clearly not the case in respect of its mediatized use of drones. Its use of drone images for propaganda is carefully planned for maximal effect, in coordination with VBIED attacks and other actions. Propaganda dependent on the visual faculties of drones is therefore not incidental to the employment of drones by ISIS, but an integral part of its drone programme. Therefore, while ISIS does not directly mirror the use of MALE drones by western powers, it clearly envisions its rudimentary air force as more than a mere tactical tool, and depicts it in ways which highlight its claim to statehood and the possession of an advanced fighting capability.

The ISIS drone programme represents the first instance of a highly mediatized use of drones by a terrorist organization, in which drones are embedded as much in the propaganda machine as in war-fighting. As such, it offers an unprecedented opportunity to gain insight into the group's understanding of the function and symbolism of drones. Furthermore, it allows for the consideration of visual aspects of political contention, and of the use of visual propaganda to challenge and disrupt norms and claim normative change. In this article, we have argued that ISIS' use of drones highlights the group's claim to effective control of territory and airspace, furthering its claim to 'seeing like a state',[82] flying like a state and acting like a sovereign state. This article highlights the communicative value of drone imagery, and argues that the non-state use of drones entails a form of symbolic political contention which exceeds the violent potential of such weapons. The imagery of drones released in ISIS propaganda recalls several aspects of aerial sovereignty, notably through demonstrations of the de facto control of airspace.

While we have focused here on the role of drones in this respect, the argument that tactics are selected in part on the basis of their communicative value, and their ability to disrupt and challenge established normative underpinnings of state power, is not necessarily limited to drones, as the final section shows: drone propaganda is distinctive, in that it draws on vertical tropes and imagery, but is in no way exceptional in its display of sovereign power. We hope to point here at the poten-

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[81] David Remnick, 'Going the distance: on and off the road with Barack Obama', *New Yorker*, 20 Jan. 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick.

[82] James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

972

tial for a combination of political geographical studies of verticality and visuality with studies of rhetoric surrounding and enabling aerial political violence. In particular, the use of drones by ISIS may point to an increasingly diffuse employment of low-tech means by non-state actors to challenge state power visually and rhetorically, combining mass media with accessible technology. The intended audiences for such propaganda, its rhetorical effects, and its impact on radicalization and the diffusion of political violence, certainly merit more attention. Such work could further explore the mutually constitutive relationship between visuality and violence,[83] and the role of images and scopic regimes in International Relations.

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[83] Kyle Grayson, *Cultural politics of targeted killing: on drones, counter-insurgency, and violence* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Grayson and Mawdsley, 'Scopic regimes'; Alex Edney-Browne, 'Vision, visuality, and agency in the US drone program', in Marijn Hoijtink and Matthias Leese, eds, *Technology and agency in international relations* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 88–112.

973