

## 'Spectacular Girls' with AK-47s: Radicalism through Image Events of Islamic State

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### Abstract

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The group that has come to be known as Islamic State<sup>2</sup> (IS) treats as a primary rhetorical activity “staging of image events for mass media dissemination” (DeLuca, 1999a). They stage these namely, specifically, and strategically in and through online spaces. In this article, the author analyzes how three media image events (DeLuca, 1999a, 1999b) about Islamic State do rhetorical, radical work. The author shows how, through these pieces of online visual rhetoric and through their circulation, “women of Islamic State” identity is rhetorically constructed, how it manifests, how it is discursively mobilized, and how it functions as radical. The artifacts examined are images that appear in news articles about IS, though that were originally posted on social media. The author identifies how these three pieces of visual rhetoric function as image events (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003) and as radical (Žižek, 2002; Žižek, 2009), argues that the rhetorical, radical work of these images and their (re)contextualization manifest and mobilize girls and women of IS identities, and concludes with a discussion of intertextuality as being necessary in future research on communication and terrorism.

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**Keywords:** Islamic State, rhetoric, image event, radicalism, computer-mediated communication, intertextuality.

### Introduction: Ideas Are Also Weapons

*There is a story that when Michelangelo sculpted his statue of David, he had to work on a secondhand piece of marble that already had holes in it. It is a mark of his talent that he was able to create a figure that took account of those limitations. The world we want to transform has already been worked on by history and is largely hollow. We must nevertheless be inventive enough to change it and build a new world. Take care and do not forget that ideas are also weapons. (Subcomandante Marcos, in Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010, p. i)*

These words of an ideologist of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation tell of the human capacity to create change in our world. They remind us that we not only can, but also should strive to realize our ideas about how we want our world to be. Concurrently, these words warn us. They remind us that ideas are weapons, that while communication of ideas can be a therapeutic solution to many major social and/or political diseases, communication of ideas can also deliver the deathblow. Over the last few decades, our ever-increasing use of computer-mediated communication (McQuail, 2005; Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004) has drastically changed how we interact with and communicate ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> The group known as IS (Islamic State) is also known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

With technologies like social media platforms, online news sites, and blogs, we consume, create, and “share” with others dynamic multimedia representations of ideas about things as mundane as what preposterous thing our pets were doing last night to our most deeply felt philosophies about our social order and how we want our world to be.

Though we may not necessarily realize it, rhetoric of various forms proliferates in our communication in these virtual spaces. Thus, analyzing what and how online images communicate is an important and necessary task in which rhetorical critics should engage. I attempt to do just this by examining how certain online visual images by, of, and about Islamic State (IS) communicate as rhetoric and as radicalism.

Like other forms of rhetoric, visual rhetoric (DeLuca, 1999a; DeLuca, 1999b; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Prelli, 2006; Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2008) permeates online sites where the political meets the personal (Ginsberg, 2008; Harutyunyan et al., 2009; Smith, 2012; McCann & Kim, 2013; Tarnawa, 2010). Beginning with the proposition that we construct and reconstruct our social order with discourse, including visual discourse, I focus in this analysis on how bits (and bytes) of visual rhetoric function and how these visuals do their rhetorical, radical socio-political work.

Since we use visuals to understand and lead to others' understandings of political and social courses of action and identity formation and reformation, I commence this image politics (DeLuca, 1999a; DeLuca, 1999b) analysis with a frame that I call optics of occupation. “Optics” refers to consideration of how images used to story social and political goings on can be interpreted, i.e. how we make meaning of and communicate with and through such visuals. “Occupation” refers to the work that ideology in general and rhetoric in particular do, i.e. how visuals work as and through ideology and rhetoric. Whereas the function of ideology is to “defend the existing system against any serious critique, legitimizing it as a direct expression of human nature” (Žižek, 2009, p. 27), the function of rhetoric is to verbally persuade and use communication to induce the cooperation of others (Scott & Brockriede, 1969, p. 1). This optics of occupation frame recognizes mediated (through television, computers, phones, social media, etc.) communication as a primary form of politics in our hyper-technologized/ing world. Optics of occupation points to where (in what sites) and how (through what means) we use images in rhetorical and radical ways. I begin my discussion by approaching radicalism as a tool to reimagine our human modes of imagination:

The ultimate goal of radical politics is gradually to displace the limit of social exclusions, empowering the excluded agents (sexual and ethnic minorities) by creating marginal spaces in which they can articulate and question their identity. Radical politics thus becomes an endless mocking parody and provocation, a gradual process of reidentification in which there are not final victories and ultimate demarcations. (Žižek, 2002, p. 101)

This is an analysis of how three media image events (DeLuca, 1999a; DeLuca, 1999b) about IS do rhetorical, radical work. Through this discussion, I hope to show the importance of critical projects because how we view, learn from, and participate in the circulation of media manifestations of current events can have lethal consequences. I aim to show how through these three pieces of online visual rhetoric and their circulation, “women of IS” identity is rhetorically constructed, manifested, and discursively mobilized, and how it functions as radical.

The artifacts I examine are images appearing in news articles that were originally posted on Twitter, on Facebook, in blog posts, and/or on Tumblr. According to the Pew Internet Project's research on social networking (2015), as of January 2014, 74% of adults who use the Internet use social networking sites. Such sites, therefore, are highly trafficked. Throughout my discussion, I identify how these three pieces of visual rhetoric function as image events (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003) and as radical (Žižek, 2002; Žižek, 2009). I argue that the rhetorical, radical work of these images and their contexts manifest and mobilize the girls and women of IS identities. In the following section, I analyze how three particular pieces of visual rhetoric function as image events and as radicalism.

To understand how the three key pieces of visual rhetoric featured in this analysis are image events, I align my work with that of DeLuca (1999a) who defines an image event as a manifestation of attempts to “reduc[e] a complex set of issues to symbols that break people's comfortable equilibrium [and] get them asking whether there are better ways to do things” (Veteran Greenpeace campaigner, in Horton, 1991, p. 108). Using environmental groups like Greenpeace as examples, DeLuca (1999a) shows how by making their primary rhetorical activity the staging of image events for mass media dissemination, such groups effectively fight for positive social and political change. I draw on this definition as I examine IS visual rhetoric posted and circulated through online platforms.

IS treats as a primary rhetorical activity “staging of image events for mass media dissemination” (DeLuca, 1999a), though it does this specifically and strategically in online spaces. IS uses visuals to gain support for their group by gaining support for what they consider to be (and therefore represent as) positive social and political change, i.e. “better ways to do things” (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003). IS gains support by disseminating their organization’s rhetoric globally via Westerners and social media that they employ as tools for recruitment (Masi, 2014; Trowbridge, 2014). By utilizing social media in multiple languages IS attracts individuals worldwide to support its cause. For example, IS has established countless Twitter accounts and Facebook pages to share ideology, entice followers, denigrate enemies, and showcase successes (Alexander & Alexander, 2015, p. 68). IS image events are merely some of the group’s ideological, rhetorical, and propaganda online tools.

The visuals I examine in this analysis are not only image events. They are also radical. One reason they can be understood as radical is that Islamic State members who are “radicalized” create and disseminate these visuals. While terrorism and radicalism are often conflated, Taşpınar (2009) argues that an effective way to address the root causes of terrorism is to focus on the collective grievances behind radicalism. Taşpınar explains that this is because radicalism is at times a precursor to terrorism; thus, in certain cases, focusing on radicalism may amount to preventing terrorism before it is too late for non-coercive measures. While there are “radicalized societies where acts of terrorism find some sympathy and degree of support,” terrorism can never be understood as a social phenomenon since “there are no ‘terrorist’ societies” (Taşpınar, p. 77). Because radicalized societies are defined by their deep sense of collective frustration, humiliation, and deprivation relative to expectations, terrorists often easily exploit such social habitats (Taşpınar, 2009). IS image events, then, can be examined as radical since radicalized Islamic State members generate, “share,” and circulate particular visuals to radicalize<sup>3</sup>, recruit, and appeal to others in strategic ways.

A second reason these images are radical is that they are created and distributed for the purpose of attracting media attention to make the issues controversial, to publicize those issues, and to symbolically get to the root of the problem (Scarce, 1990; DeLuca, 1999a; DeLuca, 1999b). I refer to “radical” as Haiven and Khasnabish (2010) define it: as a word that stems from the Latin word for “root,” bespeaks a “concern for the original and ‘root causes’ of things’ [...] implies looking beyond the surface or easy answers and a desire to uncover the deep reasons for our present reality [and] implies that answers to social problems will require fundamentalist solutions, not temporary fixes” (p. v).

By analyzing how three image events, as rhetoric and radicalism, construct IS girl and woman identity, I aim to learn about what change IS considers and frames as being needed, what IS symbolically represents as being “the root of the problem” (Scarce, 1990; DeLuca, 1999a; DeLuca, 1999b) and, therefore, what are the radical roots of the issues at hand. Perhaps investigations like this might generate for scholars and political figures, policy makers, and security personnel more communication-specific understandings of what “IS” identities are, what they stand for, what ideas IS commits violence in the name of, and how IS constructs and mobilizes through the identities it proliferates in and through mediated communication.

### **Analysis: Imaging Girls & Women of IS**

*Sometimes, the repetition in the guise of a farce can be more terrifying than the original tragedy. (Žižek, 2009, p. 5 referencing Marcusein and Hegel)*

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<sup>3</sup> Taşpınar (2009) goes on to explain, “the relative popularity of certain terrorist networks in the Islamic world can only be explained within the framework of such radicalized societies where extremist violence finds a climate of legitimacy and implicit support” (p. 77).

### 1. Image Event #1: Target Practice



The first image event I examine is a visual of four individuals dressed in black, covered from head to toe, and facing the same direction. Presented in a form of traditional dress, these individuals are in an empty room resembling an abandoned warehouse, school, or office building. No other individuals are featured. The person on the right side of the image holds what looks like a handgun, two others – one standing in the background, one crouching in the foreground – cocks firearms that appear to be rifles or machine guns. The fourth individual appearing in the background is partially obscured though holds something at shoulder level (from context, the item is likely a firearm).

On February 3, 2015 Middle East Editor Richard Spencer featured the image reproduced above in *The Telegraph* online news story, "Target practice: Teenage British twins train in Syria" with subtitle, "Zahra and Salma Halane, 17, who ran away to join Isil, post their latest exploits online," and caption, "The picture posted on Twitter allegedly shows the Halane sisters performing target practice." As Spencer explains in his story (2015), the image was originally posted on Twitter:

Two British teenage sisters who went to Syria to become 'jihadi brides' have posted photographs of themselves online practising target shooting. Zahra and Salma Halane, twins now aged 17, are seen wearing black abayas or gowns and niqabs, the full face-veil compulsory for women in territory controlled by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. One woman holds a pistol, and the others are firing Kalashnikov automatic rifles. 'Fun day training for self defence in the Islamic state with humble sisters,' the Twitter account which posted the account says.

Spencer (2015) goes on to explain that the Twitter account "is believed to belong to" one of the teens, Zahra Halane. He articulates that the other teen was thought to have "retweeted" the image along with another photograph that shows a line of women firing guns in a field, and that Zahra made the picture the background image on her Twitter page.

Through his news story, Spencer (2015) participates in constructing IS. Telling the story of Zahra and Salma as two teens that "left Chorlton in Manchester last summer after completing their GCSEs<sup>4</sup> and first year of sixth form at Whalley Range School for Girls," Spencer constructs these two IS recruits as young girls who attended school and completed their exams before joining IS. Spencer recontextualizes the image featured above by including it in his news story and accompanies it with a narrative of these girls. Spencer tells his audience an IS story of girl/women recruitment and presents the girls in this image event as young, highly performing students who "both married young fighters in the town of Raqqa, but they later said both men had been 'martyred' in Isil battles."

<sup>4</sup> GCSE is General Certificate of Secondary Education. These are examinations that most pupils take at the end of compulsory school education (year 11) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (politics.co.uk, 2016).

By circulating the visual and accompanying narrative, Spencer (2015) participates in disseminating the idea that girls and women (even “good girls” who do well in school) from around the world can fit this cast and find belonging in the world of IS. This image event is one of radicalism in that it functions as a tool to reimagine our human modes of imagination (Žižek, 2002; Haiven & Khasnabith, 2010); in this case it is a tool that works by leading others to reimagine what being a girl or woman could look like.

The rest of Spencer’s story (2015) describes the two girls’ online Twitter activity – having to keep “up a constant stream of updates on Twitter, ranging from thoughts on religious scriptures to pictures of pizzas and other food they have cooked” – and explains that interspersed are “approving pictures of Isil executions.” As Spencer explains, alongside the most recent photographs are “a snap of the girls on their way to practice in a minibus, and one of all the gym shoes they are wearing.” Spencer’s description of these girls’ lives of IS – as being marked by gym shoes, pizza, and bus rides – contributes to the identity construction of IS girls as enjoying youth and its trappings. Spencer goes on to state that while “women are not allowed to fight with Isil,” the twins are used as part of “a special woman-only police force to apply Isil’s version of Islamic law in Raqqa.” The blend of written features in their tweets (including references to religious scripture to pizza to executions) constructs these IS recruits’ experience as a combination of enjoying and flaunting eating, camaraderie, and duty as women in their capacity as members of a special women-only police force. As all of this is featured, violent aspects of IS are backgrounded.

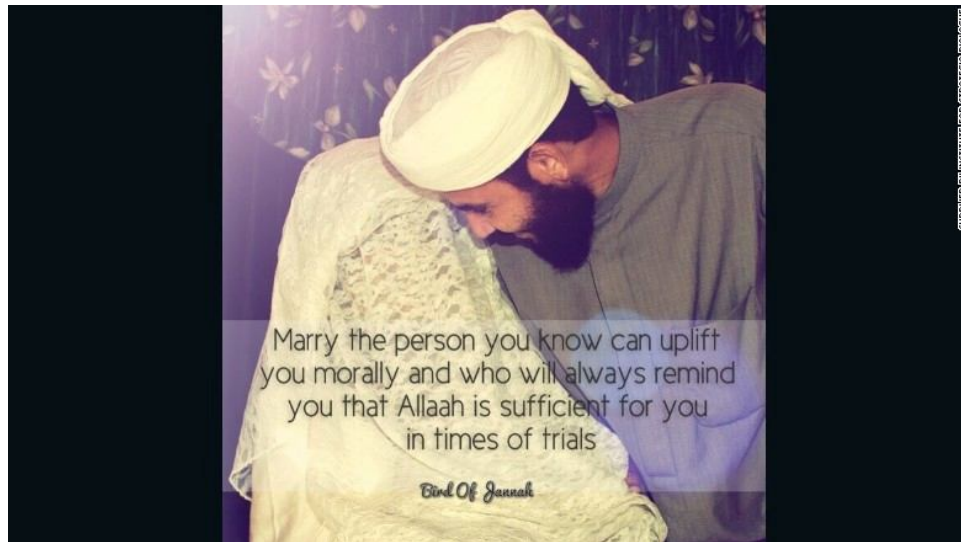
Though, how is this image doing rhetorical work? All revolutions are attempts to change the consciousness of the “enemy,” and while in the past the “only medium through which a revolution could communicate itself was armed struggle,” today mass media “provide a delivery system for strafing the population with mind bombs” (Hunter, 1971, p. 215-224 in DeLuca, 1999a, p. 4). This image does rhetorical work because it functions as a mind bomb. This works as a mind bomb because it paints a picture that is quite shocking: it depicts “good student,” “good girl” teenagers from the U.K. doing target practice for violent acts in the name of Islamic State. At the same time that the good girls are shown purportedly engaging in violent acts, they are represented as reveling in the life in/of IS: they are shown eating pizza, wearing gym shoes, riding buses together, and working as a collective of members of a special women-only police force for IS. The narrative is one of radicalism since life for these girls and others like them across the world is reimagined as life in which girls and women are in some ways empowered, in which girls and women have purposes, in which girls and women contribute to society in what are framed as meaningful ways, and in which girls and women experience certain kinds of personal and political community.

By posting this image on two of their accounts, Zahra and Salma recirculate it in and through media. As they do this they display for Twitter users what daily life as a young woman of IS entails. While this image educates online media publics about life of women in/of IS, it also exemplifies what Hunter (1971) describes about image event philosophy of mass media:

[it] translate[s] into a practice of staging image events based on the argument that ‘when you do an action it goes through the camera and into the minds of millions of people. The things that were previously out of mind now become commonplace. Therefore, you use the media as a weapon.’ (in Scarce, 1990, p. 104)

This image not only features weapons; it also functions as one. Rhetorically, this image shocks viewers by showing women in all black, covered head to toe, and wielding and cocking weapons. The image works on viewers’ ideas about young girl and women’s lives with, for, and in IS. Other online media contexts also point to this image. As they do, they recite it and recontextualize it in ways that story the featured girls as enjoying (and using Twitter to even show off) their lives as women of IS. This is an image event because the actions of the girls are done through the camera and enter the minds of millions of people. These girls and women’s experiences that were previously out of mind (i.e., their engaging in IS activity though also enjoying life, all the while) become commonplace (Hunter, 1971 in Scarce, 1990, p. 104). Thus, anyone engaging in the reproduction, sharing, and other kinds of dissemination of IS images (and text about those images) are participating in the use of media as a weapon of destruction: this media communication, therefore, functions as a tool of dispersal of IS ideology.

## 2. Image Event #2: Romance



In a 29 May 2015 *CNN* online news story, “The women of ISIS: Who are they?” journalist Atika Shubert discusses another aspect of IS life for women: romance. This second online media image event was originally featured on the personal blog of “Shams,” a person who also refers to herself as “Bird of Jannah.” In her blog, “Diary of a Muhajirah” (2015), Shams “romanticizes life with ISIS” (Shubert, 2015). The “dispatch” from Shams depicted above is one of many on her blog “that experts say is a compelling – and dangerous – recruitment tool for the terror group ISIS” (Shubert, 2015). Like the image and story of Zahra and Salma (in image event #1), the image above and accompanying story of the romance of IS are recontextualized. They are recirculated in and through media, and through this come to reach greater numbers of viewers/consumers.

Shubert’s *CNN* news story recirculates the image featured above along with a description of Shams as one of “an estimated 550 Western women who have left their homes and families to travel to Syria and Iraq and join ISIS” (Shubert, 2015). Discourse like this characterizes the featured woman as a “Westerner and frames being Western as a common characteristic of IS women recruits<sup>5</sup>. Though this woman’s “being Western” might be intriguing to many media consumers, and though the image depicted above might indicate life with and of IS as a moral, romantic one for women, the most interesting aspect of this image is the feature that renders it an image event: its context and recontext.

Commenting on the political efficacy and rhetorical power of an image event, Scarce (1990) states, “the more dramatic you can make it, the more controversial it is, the more publicity you will get” (p. 104). Scarce (1990) continues, “The drama translates into exposure. Then you tie the message into that exposure and fire it into the brains of millions of people in the process” (p. 104). This image’s rhetorically fulminatory potential is located in what surrounds it: the context in which it was originally embedded (the blog discourse that Shams writes) and the contexts to which it is subsequently posted (stories like Shubert’s 2015 *CNN* article).

According to Shubert (2015), “clues scattered through [the blog] posts [that Shams writes] suggest she is 27 [is] trained as a doctor, she left her old life behind to begin again under the ISIS regime, where she says she runs a basic health clinic for women and children, carrying out antenatal checks, prescribing antibiotics and administering vaccines.” Like the details about Zahra and Salma featured in image event #1, these details about Shams present her as a professional, accomplished, and highly educated young woman who is contributing in meaningful ways to her IS community. Just as the teen girls did in their Twitter posts, Shams includes in her blog indication of her “reverence for ISIS.”

<sup>5</sup> Recent research on the nationalities of those radicalized by IS mirrors this. According to Neumann, for example, about 80% of Western fighters in Syria have joined the group and, over a year’s time the “number of Westerners who have travelled to the region and become radicalised has mushroomed from hundreds to as many as 3,000” (in Mezzofiori, 2014).

The blog “reads as her personal love story: how she found faith, sisterhood and love in Syria” (Shubert, 2015). Like the story of the teens in image event #1, the story of Shams in image event #2 is a curious combination of personal information about Shams as a professional woman of IS and snippets of “romantic fiction” that she writes and posts (Shubert). The blog sounds like a romance of longing, desire, and passion:

Full of cliff-hangers, as when her husband, purportedly an ISIS fighter originally from Morocco, doesn't respond to texts sent while he's on the battlefield [...] Promise me you will wait until our baby's birth ... Promise me that you will stay alive?' she asks him. 'In sha Allah [God willing],' her husband responds. (In Shubert, 2015) Though not my focus in this article, a key feature of the blog by Shams is its reliance on discourses about femininity (Shams as a wife worrying about the fate of her husband), fairy tales (her husband going off to battle and leaving her to care for hearth and home), and motherhood (Shams as pregnant and relying on her husband's coming home from battle to be present for the birth).

Thus far I have discussed how image events #1 and #2 exemplify the ways in which IS uses media to construct and mobilize through identities of girls and women of IS. At this point, I return to Yanoshevsky's (2009) articulation of the importance of accounting for the ways in which image events become arguments when they are disseminated in the media. The argument that image events #1 and #2 convey is that women of IS lead lives to be coveted. In the teenagers' Twitter posts that contextualize image event #1, the many written descriptions in the posts that feature comfortable mundaneness of happy, daily teenage life (eating pizza and wearing tennis shoes) overshadow the violence of IS. This is the case even though the image depicts the girls engaging in target practice. Similarly, in image event #2, romanticization<sup>6</sup> in the blog posts that contextualize image event #2 occlude the violent activities of IS. Thus the picture that these images paint is that in IS territory IS women contribute to their societies as members of special police forces, as physicians, and as girls and women, that they revel in the goodies of life in “the Caliphate” (pizza, community, romance, and love), and that this reimagined girl and woman existence in “the Caliphate” should appeal to other girls and women across the world.

The persuasive power of image events like these is in their standing alone as IS-representative artifacts yet it is also in their contextualization and recontextualization. According to Delicath and Deluca (2003), the impact of image events on public argumentation depends on how the audience encounters, assembles, and utilizes the fragments (p. 328). This illustrates how that the greatest rhetorical “magic” of these IS image events manifests *after* the visuals are released into various media: the images subsequently interact with other texts and images that they encounter. The key is that they become embedded in other media sites, recirculations, and re-articulations through news stories, retweets, Facebook posts, blogs, and other social media sites. These image events operate as media events because through interaction with other texts and images they foster debate (Yanoshevsky, 2009, p. 1). However, they also operate as radical since they contribute to the construction and articulation of alternative versions of reality in ways that are contingent on a “from the root” revolutionization of how life should/could be and in ways that appeal to consumers (Yanoshevsky, p. 1).

These image events do the rhetorical work of building the argument about the idyllic life of IS girls and women in “the Caliphate.” Just as the first two image events construct the lives of women of IS as idyllic, image event #3 exemplifies women of IS as contributing members of their IS society as online social media recruiters who actively contribute to their IS community by gaining new members for their group.

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<sup>6</sup> Shams goes on to describe life in IS as “a utopia,” posting lists of “benefits” for foreign fighters including “free housing, health care – and [she] offers tips for what to pack” (Shubert, 2015). While realities of life in IS territory are in fact quite stark, Shams constructs her existence into a fantasy-life.



### 3. Image event #3: Online Community Members & Leaders



The third image event depicted above comes from one of the most famous women of IS, Aqsa Mahmood, who posts on social media as Umm Layth<sup>7</sup>. Media constructions of Aqsa show us another key identifying feature of IS life for women and girls: their participation and contributions to IS as online community members and leaders.

In a 29 June 2015 *Daily Record* online news story, "Scots jihadi bride Aqsa Mahmood posts despicable poem on Tumblr glorifying triple terror attacks," journalist Craig Robertson discusses "the runaway school girl [who] fled Scotland to join ISIS in Syria in November 2013, but regularly posts her hateful rants online." Accompanying the text of his article, Robertson reproduces the image above that originally appeared on Aqsa's social media sites.

As the two images previously featured, this image event reveals girls and women of IS as contributing to IS social media sites for radical, rhetorical reasons. Through their media participation, these girls and women of IS convey messages about what it means to be a woman of IS. As they do this they facilitate others' reimagining what life could be like for them, as girls and women, and those individuals might respond by seeking ways to join IS's ranks. This third image event exemplifies the IS community work that IS women do: establish networks across social media platforms, use those networks to connect with one another and recruit other girls and women, and participate in the generation and transmission of these IS propaganda, recruitment, and glorifying rhetorical messages.

As a subcategory of visual arguments, image events are staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination that offer a powerful way to appeal to audiences (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003, p. 315). Image event #3 and its contexts function as tools that instruct media consumers about women and girls of IS as online community members, leaders, and recruiters. While some stereotypes about women in or from the Middle East construct women and girls as powerless, as always already oppressed<sup>8</sup>, and as needing saving (Spivak, 1988; Ahmed, 1992; Lazreg, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 2002), social media manifestations like that of image event #3 exemplify how women in such countries – and who are affiliated with IS – exploit social media platforms as community building, recruiting, and ideology-perpetuating tools. In this way image events like #3 above function as a symbolic way for girls and women of IS to stretch their radical legs: by using these images they show off their perceived empowerment as IS members and as girls and women, they communicate through media to build up IS's ranks and homes, and they story in and through cyberspace the sense of belonging and community of IS in "the Caliphate" that appeals to potential new members of IS. While these representations of women of IS are representations of empowerment, they are representations of girl and women's empowerment that encourages acts of abuse, torture, and murder in IS's name.

<sup>7</sup> Research by Quilliam shows that girl and women jihadis like Umm Layth tend to be well educated. For example Aqsa Mahmood (Layth) is a trained radiologist, and Shams (Bird of Jannah) reveals herself on social media to be a highly trained doctor who was offered a job in an IS-run hospital (Michaelson, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> This echoes the woman question in colonial policies in which "intervention into sati (the practice of widows immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres), child marriage, and other practices was used to justify rule" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). In the words of Spivak (1988), this also echoes the idea of white men saving brown women from brown men.



Like the first two featured images, the third meets Yanoshevsky's criteria (2009) of an image event since it provides "fragments of arguments" that break away from established order, fosters public discussion by offering new ways of looking at issues at hand, and supplies new claims and refutations that fuel debates in the public sphere. As was the case was for images #1 and #2, the contexts and recontexts of image #3 mobilize it as an image event.

In the now inaccessible (due to Facebook and other social media violations) social media sites that Aqsa uses to feature image event #3, Aqsa supplements visual representations like one reproduced above with written posts about the sense of community she found and has with, in, and through IS. In her online posts Aqsa uses language of family relationships:

The strength of the brotherhood and sisterhood here is most definitely shown through difficulties where someone who has no blood ties with you and not even a relation will make sure if their Muslim sister is in need of anything and if there is any problems [*sic*]. (Robertson, 2015)

Just as it is for the other two images, news media sites and other social media platforms constantly recontextualize and re-circulate Aqsa's Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr images and written posts. Through this recirculation in social media and headlining on news sites, the ideology, rhetoric, and constructions of girls and women of IS – the messages about proper IS woman behavior, what to expect when traveling to IS territory, and what kind of idyllic community feeling a new recruit will find once they join the IS family, for example – are reinforced and strengthened as they gain more and more audience members.

Even beyond serving by supporting new claims and refutations that fuel debates in the public sphere, image events like the three featured in this analysis are used as powerful agents of change (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003). Thus, they are used as always potentially radical tools. Such image events function by appealing to social and news media consumers, and through their rhetorical work they can be terrifyingly successful at catalyzing the radicalization processes of media consuming individuals around the world. While an image event can effectively be used as a powerful agent of positive, lasting social and/or political change (Delicath and DeLuca, 2003), the three examples featured in this article illustrate how image events must be recognized as powerful tools that can exacerbate an already exceedingly precarious political situation. Such artifacts can turn the collective grievances fueling certain radicalisms (Taşpınar, 2009) into catalysts of and fodder for terrorisms.

### **Conclusion: Radical Re-Visions of the Future**

*How are people persuaded, moved? In a word: rhetoric.*

*Through rhetorical practices, people construct, perpetuate, and transform identities, discourses, communities, cultures, and worldviews. (DeLuca, 1999a, p. xii)*

The artifacts featured in this analysis are image events. They provide fragments of arguments, initiate and charge discussion, and fuel debates in the public sphere (Yanoshevsky, 2009). They are also radical. They have ties to IS, supply new claims and refutations that correlate with ever-increasing numbers of new IS recruits joining the group's ranks<sup>9</sup>, and convey political orientations committed to creating revolutionary change. These images show IS' attempts to radicalize by breaking away from established order by contributing to gradually displacing "the limit of social exclusions, empowering the excluded agents [...] by creating marginal spaces in which they can articulate and question their identity" (Žižek, 2002, p. 101). Such artifacts exemplify radical politics as "an endless mocking parody and provocation, a gradual process of reidentification in which there are not final victories and ultimate demarcations" (Žižek, 2002, p. 101).

By interpreting how images like these works as rhetorical agents, scholars can come to recognize image events as weapons of mass destruction.

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<sup>9</sup> By being featured in online conversation forums (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and the like) with such potential IS recruits, these pieces of visual rhetoric are strategically and politically used as fodder for public discourse that often results in new members joining its ranks, strengthening IS terrorist forces, and strengthening IS as a global political and social media entity.

Scholars can come to realize how these visuals work as tools that challenge “a number of tenets of traditional rhetorical theory and criticism, starting with the notion that rhetoric ideally is ‘reasoned discourse,’ with ‘reasoned’ connoting ‘civil’ or ‘rational’ and ‘discourse’ connoting ‘words’” (DeLuca, 1999a, p. 14). Because of the unending advancements of our highly technologized and technologizing age, how radical rhetoric functions continues to change in nuanced, highly sophisticated ways. However, while it goes beyond words spoken to convince or persuade audiences, visual rhetoric of image events is often interpreted and conceptualized as “civil, reasoned, verbal discourse” (DeLuca, 1999a, p. 14). This marks a disconnect that can be quite lethal. My examination of three highly circulated IS image events has attempted to show the limitations of such an understanding of rhetorical work.

I have strived to make evident through this analysis that there is a great need for critics to develop a broader understanding of what should qualify as rhetoric. In addition, scholars must develop new ways of examining how rhetoric works as well as a might be done to counter it. On a daily basis, new mediated, technologized/ing strategies are being developed, and these are facilitating people’s engagements in violent acts of terrorism that are at times rooted in radical ideology. Because of this, critics must rethink the meanings and work of rhetoric in our age of mediated communication. The Internet is not a value free space. It is space in which critics must proceed with their crucial intellectual work. In the words of Rushdie, “The moment you say that any idea system is sacred, whether it’s a religious belief system or a secular ideology, the moment you declare a set of ideas to be immune from criticism, satire, derision, or contempt, freedom of thought becomes impossible” (2005). While it might be used in some religious, spiritual, and even sacred ways, the Internet is not a sacred space to be left untouched. It is a space in dire need of critical analysis.

As this discussion has aimed to illustrate, visual arguments are often combinations of the verbal and the visual (Blair, 2004, p. 50). Entities like IS use image events, like the three featured here, along with written discourses and narratives. Such communicative tools exacerbate already precarious political situations. Through the rhetorical work that such images and their contexts do, what it means to be a girl or woman of and in IS is constructed and mobilized. Scholars must examine what happens once “image meets text” (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003, p. 328) in order to study the rhetorical relationships at play in such visual representations. Orientating to such communication in this way will facilitate examination of the persuasive work that happens in and through mediated sites. Studying image events therefore necessitates examining how the pieces of visual rhetoric interact with other text and visual components that they encounter after they are released into various media and after they are integrated into ensembles of argumentation where they act as claim, warrant, and/or data (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003). Such scholarship requires an approach attuned to the nuances and complexity of intertextuality.

Just as words do rhetorical work, images do rhetorical work. Thus, “to dismiss image events as rude and crude is to cling to ‘presuppositions of civility and rationality underlying the old rhetoric” (Scott & Smith, 1969, p. 7-8). To understand how groups like IS employ and mobilize through visual rhetoric in our highly technologized age, scholars must develop new understandings of rhetorical tactics used in and through online spaces. As we do this we must rely on new understandings and analyses of intertextuality since a critical lens toward intertextuality will help counter-terrorist efforts designed to interpret, resist, and prevent rhetorics of terrorism from doing the violent work that they does. As Porter (1986) reminds us, all texts are interdependent:

We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursor. This is the principle we know as intertextuality, the principle that all writing and speech – indeed, all signs – arise from a single network [...] ‘the web of meaning’ [...] écriture [...] logos. Examining texts ‘intertextually’ means looking for ‘traces,’ the bits and pieces of Text which writers or speakers borrow and sew together to create new discourse [...] For the intertextual critics, Intertext is Text – a great seamless textual fabric. In addition, as they like to intone solemnly, no text escapes intertext. (p. 34)

Since, like any text, artifacts of “terrorism” rhetoric and discourse stemming from radicalism work in these ways, critics must analyze these traces, bits, and pieces wherever they pop up out of our social fabric. Scholars must learn how these strands weave together, and must theorize ways to address them. Armed with an intertextual lens, scholars will be better equipped to effectively engage in analyses of contemporary artifacts to identify what rhetorical work image events are doing, and to generate and practice employing ways to analyze how that work is done. By analyzing the various types of texts we encounter online, we will strive to understand the nuances of communication of, through, and about terrorism and radicalism. Each of us must do as Scott and Brockriede suggest (1969): “take final responsibility for forming a coherent view of the vital questions living poses for us.

On the basis of our views, we must be ready to interact with others if we are to make any sort of contribution to a decent human community" (p. 205). To accomplish such a goal, communication, rhetoric, and critical scholars might begin by developing and applying ways of studying communication between and of recruiters and recruits of groups like IS, dynamics at play in such interpersonal settings, and how those committed and equipped to intervene might effectively do so in such moments. By committing to this, we will be committing to making the world safer on both sides of our screens.

## Figures

### Image Event #1: Target Practice



Image Event #1 Address: [http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/03186/Halane\\_sisters\\_\\_ta\\_3186362b.jpg](http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/03186/Halane_sisters__ta_3186362b.jpg)

Spencer, R. (3 Feb. 2015). Target practice: Teenage British twins train in Syria. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11387424/Target-practice-Teenage-Britishtwins-train-in-Syria.html>

### Image Event #2: Romance

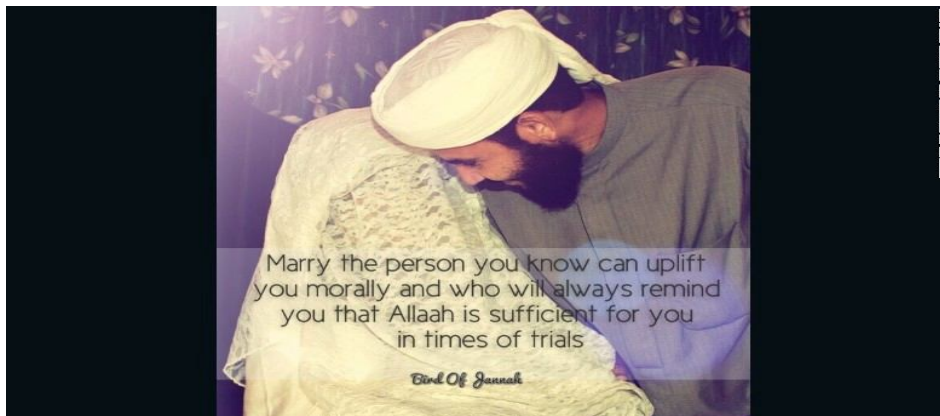


Image Event #2 Address: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/middleeast/who-are-the-women-of-isis/>

Shams/Bird of Jannah. (2015). Diary of a Muhajirah. *Tumblr*. Retrieved from [diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com](http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com)

Shubert, A. (29 May 2015). The women of ISIS: Who are they? *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/middleeast/who-are-the-women-of-isis/>

### Image event # 3: Online Community Member & Leader



Image Event #3 Address:

<http://i2.dailyrecord.co.uk/incoming/article4151304.ece/ALTERNATES/s1023/Scottish-Jihadi-Girl.jpg>

Robertson, C. (28 June 2015). Scots jihadi bride Aqsa Mahmood posts despicable poem on Tumblr glorifying triple terror attacks. *Daily Record*. Retrieved from

<http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/scots-jihadi-bride-aqsa-mahmood-5965388>

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## Note

The title of this article, "'Spectacular Girls' with AK 47s," recalls Projansky's *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (2014). Whereas Projansky focuses on girls as spectacles as the omnipresent figure of the media landscape, I analyze visual representations of and by girls and women of IS to show how visual rhetoric about womanhood of/as IS features girls and women, how girls and women create and circulate this rhetoric, and how girls and women use it to target other girls and women.