

Understanding ISIS's Provincial Propaganda: A Visual Framing Analysis of Wilayat Sinai's Imagery in 2016

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Abstract

The Egyptian government has imposed a media blackout on North Sinai in the past few years, which has played a role in amplifying two competing narratives. The Sinai media war has become a full-fledged multimedia battle between ISIS's Wilayat Sinai (WS) and the Egyptian Military, in which visuals have played a crucial role. Understanding how the most prolific province, outside Iraq, Syria, and Libya, visually frames the Sinai Peninsula at large and uses visual techniques that can induce identification and connection with the photo subjects is invaluable for crafting effective and nuanced counter-communication campaign. Using visual framing analysis of all WS's 454 images disseminated between January 1 and December 31, 2016, this paper breaks down the images into 8 distinct visual frames that include not only military action and executions, but also health care, beauty, jihadi life, and media distribution. The study also examines the use of visual techniques, known to prompt identification and connection with photo subjects, across the different visual frames and explore their implications on viewer perception.

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ISIS has realized the power of images and exacerbated its use as a weapon in the media battlefield. Since the declaration of the so-called caliphate in June 2014, the group has been disseminating visuals in multi-language magazines, videos, newsletters, infographics, and photo reports, among other tools of propaganda. Still images, in particular, have constituted about 90 percent of ISIS's propaganda output between January 2015 and August 2016 (Milton, 2016). Not only are still images capable of using rhetorical tools in conveying various issues, events, or subjects (Hardin, Walsdorf, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011), but they also imply a relative proximity to the truth (Messaris & Abraham, 2001), have the power to authenticate and prove (Barthes, 1982), activate deep structures of belief (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007), and hence influence viewers' perceptions. Still images accompanied by news stories were also found to influence viewers' perceptions and attitudes with regards to various issues, including race (Abraham & Appiah, 2006), obesity (McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011), and the Appalachian tick disease (Gibson & Zillmann, 2000); impact the selective reading of text when using victimization imagery (Zillmann, Knobloch, & Yu, 2001) and/or threatening images (Knobloch, Hastall, Zillmann, & Callison, 2003); and affect memories of past events (Mendelson, 2004; Sacchi, Agnoli, & Loftus, 2007). ISIS's imagery includes one-sided images conveying threat, which are capable of distorting viewers' perceptions of the issue in the same direction immediately and over time, as well as non-arousing descriptive images that can influence the viewers' perceptions over time (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). Thus, as ISIS loses on the military front, an equally important fight for hearts and minds is yet to be addressed in the media battlefield.

ISIS Visual Propaganda Studies

ISIS's visual propaganda has mostly been studied in the context of its English-language publication *Dabiq* or the propaganda output disseminated via Twitter. Examining *Dabiq* imagery, researchers have focused on its glossiness and similarities with AQ's English-language magazine *Inspire* (Furedi, 2016; Kovacs, 2015), tracing the originality of the images (The Carter Center, 2015), exploring the about-to-die visual trope (Winkler, Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2016), and breaking down the images by visual frames (e.g. war, utopia, brutality, etc.), purpose (e.g. inform, frighten, or unite), and/or narrative themes (e.g. social, political, or religious) (Damanhoury, 2016; Fahmy, 2016; NATO, 2016). Meanwhile, studies examining ISIS's output via Twitter or Telegram have focused on identifying and quantifying themes and frames across large samples of propaganda (Milton, 2016; Winter, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Zelin, 2015) and understanding how ISIS uses visual elements to reach regional audiences (Wahid, 2015).

The literature on ISIS's visual propaganda often stops at thematic groupings without investigating the different pictorial conventions ISIS's photographers and photo editors willingly choose to employ. One reason could be the examination of large samples of propaganda output, which reached 9000 pieces in one of the studies, and hence were only broken down by thematic categories ranging from military, governance, commercial, lifestyle, and religion without investigating the visual grammar component (Milton, 2016). Similarly, Zelin (2015) used the military and governance frames in addition to others like Hisba (moral policing) and promotion of the caliphate. Winter (2015a) further expanded upon his earlier thematic categories (military, utopia, brutality, mercy, victimhood, and belonging) by generating a set of subcategories under the military and utopia themes. A second reason is that some of the studies examining ISIS

propaganda output did not only focus on still images or videos, but also on written statements, news bulletins, and other audio productions, and hence makes it hard to incorporate the pictorial conventions across all units of analysis. In the meantime, Fahmy (2016) went beyond thematic groupings across 500 *Dabiq* images to examine the purpose and the underlying visual narratives. Winkler et al. (2016) conducted one of the few studies to dig into the different pictorial conventions after examining three visual frames (certain, possible, and presumed deaths) across more than 1100 *Dabiq* images.

This study attempts to investigate the visual framing of ISIS's propaganda in the context of Wilayat Sinai (WS) – the name of the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) militant group after pledging allegiance to ISIS and declaring a province in Sinai in November 2014 – using both tools: visual frames and pictorial conventions. Due to the stark differences in the content and frequency of propaganda coming out of different ISIS provinces, this study attempts to examine the visual imagery from WS only in order to provide an in-depth and nuanced understanding of its visual strategies over the course of one year. Focusing on propaganda at the provincial level can guide the development of localized and highly contextual counter-propaganda campaigns. Whereas the visual frames can reveal the different thematic groupings and patterns over time, examining the pictorial conventions helps us understand the ways by which they can convey social meaning and prompt the viewer's involvement with the photo subjects. Hence, this paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by not only breaking down the images into visual frames, but also incorporating the different conventions used throughout the images ranging from camera position, distance from the photo subject, and eye contact to subjective camera angles. In addition, unlike the majority of previous studies analyzing various ISIS propaganda as a whole, this study focuses only on WS's images in 2016, disseminated on

ISIS's *Nashir* channel on Telegram, as a provincial case study in an attempt to answer two main research questions:

RQ1: What are the visual frames WS uses in its propaganda?

RQ2: How does WS use pictorial conventions in its visual frames to prompt character involvement with the photo subjects?

After providing a brief history of militancy in Sinai, the study will introduce the current visual propaganda war in North Sinai and highlight the impact of images on viewers' perceptions and the role of image production in prompting character involvement. Then, it will lay out the methodology, before discussing how WS uses visual framing in the media war over the hearts and minds of Egyptian Muslim youth in general and the Sinai Bedouin community, in specific.

Militancy in North Sinai

Historically, Sinai did not have a radical Islamist current fighting against the state until quite recently, according to leadership figures in the Egyptian state security (Sabry, 2015). During the time Egyptian militant groups, like al-Jihad and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, were carrying out attacks in mainland Egypt between the 1970s and 1990s, including the assassination of former president Sadat and the Luxor massacre, Sinai did not witness such chaos until later in the 2000s. In fact, popular resistance fighters in Sinai were fighting alongside the military against the Israeli occupation of the Sinai Peninsula between 1967 and 1973 (Hussein, 2010; Sabry, 2015).

The security situation in Sinai has dramatically changed since 2004 with the emergence of Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) as a key militant group. On October 7, 2004, JTJ militants carried out three synchronized bombings in Taba and Nuweiba, two famous touristic destinations

in Sinai, killing at least 30 people, mostly tourists, and injuring more than 100 people (Al-Bayan, 2005). The 2004 bombings were the first major terrorist attacks in Sinai and the first on Egyptian soil since the 1997 Luxor massacre (BBC, 2004), but they were definitely not the last. Militants carried out two major attacks in Sharm El Sheikh in 2005 and Dahab in 2006. The Sinai attacks had severe repercussions on thousands of Sinai Bedouins whom the Egyptian security forces cracked down upon and arrested (Human Rights Watch, 2005, 2006). Whereas the three waves of attacks targeted mainly touristic areas in South Sinai, the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula was relatively calm up to that point. Nevertheless, North Sinai was later to become the site of a militant insurgency against the Egyptian state following the 2011 revolution.

The Sinai militancy has evolved in unprecedented ways since the revolution, starting with Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) bombing the natural gas pipeline – exporting it to Israel through North Sinai – for the first time on February 5, 2011 (Barnett, 2014). Between February 2011 and March 2012, ABM militants bombed the pipeline no less than 13 times without claiming it publicly until July 2012 (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, 2012). ABM's animosity soon turned against Egyptian security forces and escalated in the following years, particularly after the ousting of former president Morsi in July 2013, to reach its peak by pledging allegiance to ISIS in November 2014 and changing its name to WS (Fahim & Thomas, 2014). North Sinai has since become the hub of attacks against Egyptian security forces. Throughout 2016, 681 attacks have been reported in North Sinai, over 60 percent of which were publicly claimed by WS (TIMEP, 2016a, 2017). However, the fight between WS and Egyptian security forces involves another crucial component, media.

Sinai Media War

The northern part of the Sinai Peninsula has been suffering a media blackout for decades with the exception of the relative ease between 2000 and 2011 (Sabry, 2015). A number of journalists and reporters in North Sinai were arrested (Masress, 2013) and sometimes assaulted by security forces (Marroushi, 2013), which made it extremely dangerous to report from the field by the end of 2013. As the number of attacks in North Sinai exceeded 230 in the first seven months of 2015 (TIMEP, 2015), the Egyptian military campaign intensified throughout the peninsula. In the meantime, Egyptian President al-Sisi approved an anti-terrorism law in August 2015, under which journalists who publish news contradicting the Ministry of Defense's official statements can be fined between 25 to 64 thousand dollars (BBC, 2015). With the government successfully imposing a strident media blackout on North Sinai and ruling out contradictory information by journalists, the Sinai media war between the Egyptian military and the North Sinai insurgency has involved two opposing narratives, that of the official spokesperson of the Egyptian military, currently Staff Colonel Tamer Elrefaay, on the one hand, and WS's narrative on the other.

The Sinai media war is a fully-fledged multimedia battle, in which visuals play a crucial role. The Egyptian security forces seem to understand the importance of official social media presence in complementing the military's counter-terrorism Operation "Martyr's Right" since September 2015 (Eleiba, 2015), with over 6.7 million and about 600 thousand followers of the spokesperson's official Facebook page and Twitter account respectively. Staff Colonel Elrefaay's official accounts disseminate images, videos, and written statements on the updates of the military campaign in Sinai, among other military news. Similarly, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior's official Facebook page – with almost 6.3 million followers - dedicates a fraction of its

posts to update the followers on the security situation in North Sinai. In the meantime, out of 37 provinces across 10 countries, WS has been the most prolific in propaganda dissemination outside ISIS's strongholds in Iraq and Syria (Milton, 2016; Winter, 2017).

Viewers' Perceptions and Character Involvement

Despite the complexity involved in creating character involvement through image production, subjective camera angles have been known to play an important role in promoting identification with photo subjects (Cohen, 2009; Ortiz & Moya, 2015). Identification can be understood as a process in which the viewer imagines him/herself as a particular character in the text, and hence merges with that character in one role (Cohen, 2001). Branigan (1984) applied the differentiation between first and third person narration to visuals, and hence characterized visual subjective narration through the use of point-of-view (POV) shots, which allow the viewer to be in the same place of the character in the scene, or what Smith (2004) calls alignment. Ortiz and Moya (2015) expands on that notion by identifying three different types of subjective shots ranging from the embodied point-of-view (EPOV) shot that does not refer to the character's body and the referentially embodied point-of-view (REPOV) shot that shows parts of the character's body to out-embodied (OE) shots that tend to give an external look at the character's body. This new conceptualization of subjective camera angles takes into consideration a number of technological advancements, including action cameras, selfie sticks, and other camera accessories. Using these visual techniques, ISIS has been able to produce visuals that mimic first-person-shooter games, such as Call of Duty and Counterstrike, and hence appeal for many young males (Perlmutter, 2016). Subjective camera angles were found to create a greater sense of presence in the scene of the image as well as frequent arousal responses (Cummins, Keene, & Nutting, 2012). In addition, the interplay between reaction and POV shots has been known to

promote emotional identification with the character (Ortiz & Moya, 2015). Subsequently, Sanders and Tsay-Vogel (2015) found that identifying with a character can lead to moral disengagement as the viewer grants moral pardons to the character.

Image production can also prompt a connection between the viewer and photo subjects and convey symbolic meaning through various pictorial conventions, ranging from viewer position/camera angle and direct eye contact to viewer distance (Cohen, 2009; Jewitt & Oyama, 2008; Kress & Leeuwen, 1996). First, the distance between the photo subject and the viewer can be used to personify or de-personify people. Close and medium shots tend to prompt a connection with the photo subjects and depict them as individuals, compared to long shots, which tend to characterize the photo subjects as “types” rather than individuals (Cohen, 2009; Jewitt & Oyama, 2008, p. 146). Hence, the choice of shot sizes can be deliberately made to connect or disconnect the viewer from the photo subject. Second, the viewer position/camera angle can be used to depict the symbolic power of the photo subject (Fahmy, 2004; Mandell & Shaw, 1973). In that sense, looking down at a person would prompt lower evaluations in terms of power compared to looking up to a person in the image. For example, AP photographs after the fall of the Taliban regime increasingly portrayed Afghani women at the eye level prompting symbolic equality, compared to their portrayal as symbolically powerless using high angles before the fall of Taliban (Fahmy, 2004). Third, the eye contact can be used to establish an imaginary connection between the photo subject and the viewer, through which the former sends a message to the latter (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996). In that sense, a somber hostage looking directly at the viewer as an ISIS militant is about to execute him would send an entirely different message than that of a smiling ISIS suicide bomber looking directly at the viewer as he sets off on a suicide bombing operation. Taken together, viewer distance, viewer position/camera angle,

and eye contact can impact the viewer's processing, perception of power relations, and connection with photo subjects.

Methodology

Scope

To obtain a better understanding of WS's images, this study examines the entire population of 454 images in 114 posts that were disseminated on ISIS's official Telegram channel *Nashir* between January 1 and December 31, 2016. WS's images include photo reports, breaking news photos, and the breaking news graphics template. One photo report post or a breaking news photo post usually contains multiple images, which explains the discrepancy between the number of images and the number of posts. In 41 incidents, *Nashir* editors chose to embed text inside the red/blue breaking news graphics template when reporting on military operations against the Egyptian security forces and assassinations of their personnel in North Sinai (See Figure 1). Given the relative consistency of the breaking news graphic template and the lack of any photographic elements, all 41 incidents were excluded from the analysis, and hence the study focused only on the breaking news photos and photo reports.



Figure 1. Breaking News Graphic Documenting a Series of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) Targeting Military Forces; posted September 26, 2016.

Content and Visual Framing Analyses

This study applies Entman's (1993) definition of framing, as a process in which communicators select certain aspects of an issue and make them more salient in order to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52), to visuals. The author employed a two-stage process: a quantitative content analysis to examine pictorial conventions, followed by a qualitative visual framing analysis to examine the recurring visual themes. First, to assess the pictorial conventions, the author used the coding instrument devised by Winkler et al. (2016) in their analysis of ISIS's images in *Dabiq* magazine after adapting it to the context of Sinai. After conducting a training on the new coding instrument, two coders, including the author, analyzed the entire population of images, yielding an overall inter-coder reliability of .93 using Cohen's Kappa. Table 1 includes the inter-coder reliability levels achieved on each of the 12 coding categories. The modified instrument contains a number of pictorial conventions such as camera angle, distance, and eye contact in order to assess their social meaning.

Second, the study employed an inductive approach in its choice of frames, which were selected based on the context of this specific conflict in North Sinai. This inductive bottom-up approach allows alternative frames to emerge from the analysis (Vreese, 2005). Hence, to assess the visual depiction of Sinai, the author analyzed the images to identify recurring themes to generate context-specific visual micro-frames – those used for a specific topic only unlike context-transcendent ones like gain and loss frames (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, & Lee, 2009). The revised coding instrument contained a military category as well as a non-military one, with coding options for law enforcement, social services, local markets, and natural landscape, which helped identify the visual frames.

Table 1

Inter-Coder Reliability of Coding Instrument

Variable	Percent of Agreement	Cohen's Kappa
Number	100	1
Distance	93.83	0.90
Viewer Position	96.04	0.89
# of Humans	94.71	0.92
Facial Expression	97.58	0.95
Eye Contact	96.48	0.94
Body Stance	93.39	0.90
Death	98.46	0.84
Nature of Non-Military Scene	96.26	0.93
Flag	99.78	0.97
Religious Symbols	99.78	0.97
Destruction	97.58	0.95

Findings

Between January 1 and December 31, 2016, WS disseminated a total of 413 photographic images, out of which 234 images (56.6%) appeared in 58 individual breaking news photo posts with an average of 4 images per post, while the remaining 179 images (43.3%) appeared in 15 photo reports with an average of 12 images per report. Mapping the number of WS imagery in 2016 with WS's claimed attacks and the Egyptian security forces' counter-terrorism operations in North Sinai throughout the same period (TIMEP, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017), a surprising positive rather than negative correlation emerges between WS's imagery and Egypt's counter-terrorism operations. Hence, the numbers of WS images dropped from one quarter to another in the first nine months of 2016 in correlation with the relatively declining security pressure on WS in North Sinai (See Figure 2). As the reported counter-terrorism operations in Sinai slightly increased from 57 operations in the third quarter to 63 in the fourth quarter, WS's imagery

doubled from 39 to 80 within the same period. WS’ imagery sort into eight visual frames: military, law enforcement, war spoils, community destruction, beauty, jihadi life, health care, and media distribution (See Figure 3). After explaining each visual frame and its components, I discuss how ISIS’s photographers employed a number of pictorial conventions that are known to prompt identification and connection with the photo subjects.

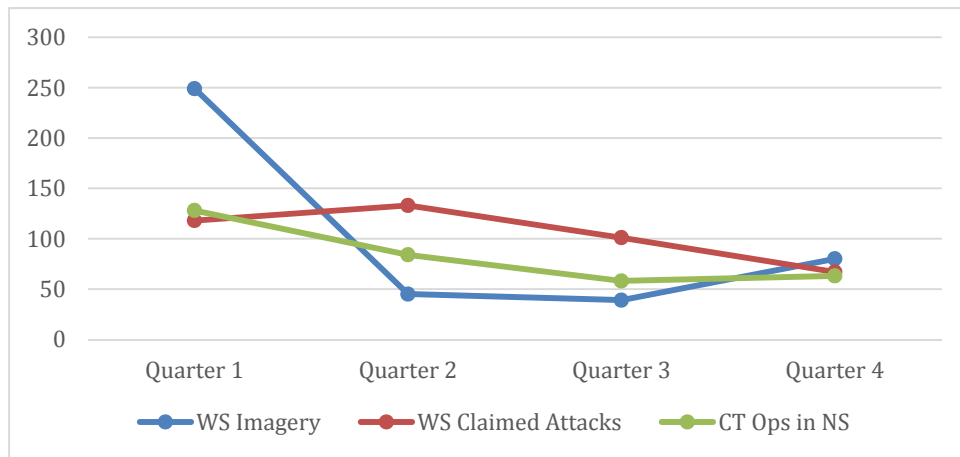


Figure 2. Wilayat Sinai’s Imagery vs. Security Situation in North Sinai 2016.

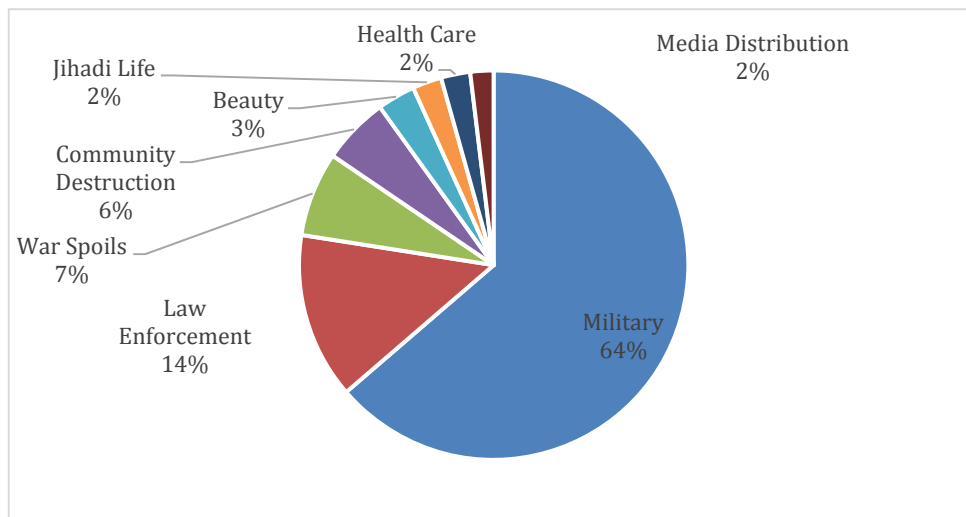


Figure 3. Visual Frames in Wilayat Sinai’s Imagery in 2016.

Military Visual Frame

Military is the most recurring visual frame in WS images with 263 images (64%) containing an act of military or a eulogized “martyr,” which is a percentage higher than previous studies examining the aggregate of ISIS propaganda from all provinces on Twitter or in *Dabiq* (Fahmy, 2016; Milton, 2016; Winter, 2015a, 2015b; Zelin, 2015). The main commonality throughout the military images is the presence of an WS militant and/or a violent act against Egyptian security forces in Sinai. However, WS images display a wide range of military acts that cannot be adequately understood without further breaking them down into nuanced visual micro-frames (See Figure 4). Taken together, the military visual frame broadly defines the security forces’ fight against WS as an act of apostasy, presents apostasy as a cause for the engagement of the “soldiers of the caliphate” in military training and various types of attacks against the Egyptian security forces, and highlights the fight against apostasy as a path to martyrdom (moral goal) and a necessary treatment for the current situation.

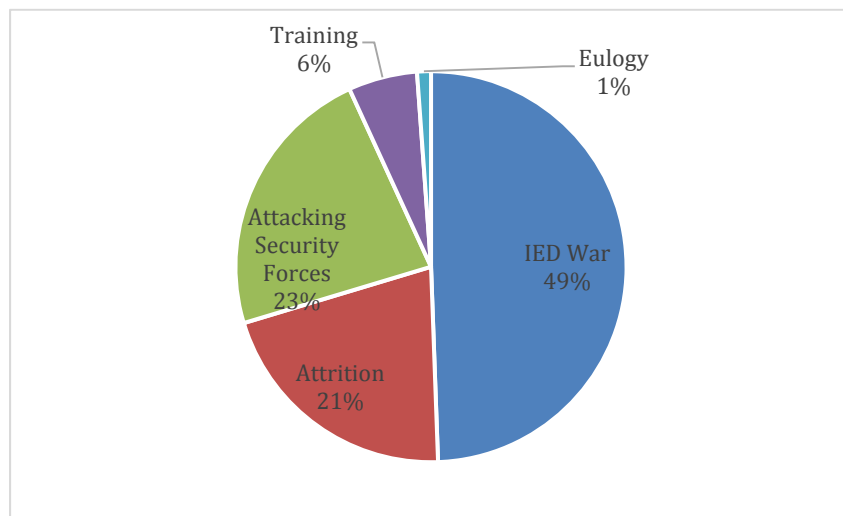


Figure 4. Military Visual Micro-Frames in Wilayat Sinai's Imagery in 2016.

IED War. The most prevalent visual micro-frame is the improvised explosive device (IED) war, which presents the consequential outcomes of IED explosions on ISIS enemies. The IED war is a label that ISIS has used to describe the security situation in WS, in which militants have largely been dependent on IEDs to attack security forces. For example, ISIS uses the headline “The IED War is Ongoing in the Sinai Province” in the 50th issue of its Arabic-language newsletter, *al-Naba’*, to describe the situation in Sinai (Al-Naba’, 2016). The IED war micro-frame appears in 130 images across 29 breaking new photo posts and 2 photo reports. Visual characteristics common to this micro frame include eye level camera position looking at military/police vehicles and/or personnel on the road at a social/public distance and detonation of explosives without the presence of any WS militants or visible weaponry. The abundance of IED war images – almost one-third of all WS images – offers a plausible explanation for the positive correlation between WS imagery and counter-terrorism operations in Sinai since the visualization of the IED war capitalizes on the presence of security forces’ vehicles and personnel at a distance. The clear majority of the IED war images appears in a sequence, meaning that one post on Telegram would contain three or more images taken in sequence to show the vehicle on the road, followed by the detonation of the IED on the side of the road and the impact of the explosion (See Figure 5). Every IED war image is coupled with a photo caption labeling the security forces as apostates. Overall, the IED war frame puts the target at a public distance and does not identify the perpetrator in the photo captions, and hence characterizes the security forces as types rather than individuals in a way that prevents the creation of identification or connection with the security forces.



Figure 5. Three images of an IED attack on a military vehicle in Central Sinai; posted March 4, 2016.

Attacking Security Forces. The second most recurring visual micro-frame is attacking security forces, which depicts the Egyptian security forces as inferior and weak in the battle against WS militants. The attacking security forces micro-frame appears in 60 different images. Visual characteristics common to this frame include eye level camera position looking at security forces' checkpoints, vehicles, and personnel under attack from a social/public distance during combat as well as high angle shots looking down at dead military/police personnel at an intimate/personal distance or security forces fleeing from battle at a social/public distance. This micro-frame differs from the IED war and attrition micro-frames in that the viewer can see the Egyptian security forces being targeted in battle by various weapons other than IEDs. Ten percent of the attacking images employ subjective camera angles, including four referentially embodied point-of-view (REPOV) shots embedding the viewer in the WS militant's position, as he holds a weapon while attacking and killing Egyptian soldiers and officers (See Figure 6), and two embodied point-of-view (EPOV) shots embedding the viewer in the militant's position looking from the sniper as he kills a military officer. Overall, the attacking visual frame tends to portray the Egyptian security forces as weak and inferior, push them away from the viewer – as in the IED war images – unless the image shows a dead soldier's body, while not only bringing the viewer closer in distance to WS militants to prompt connection, but also attempting to create

identification and merge the viewer with the WS militants in one role using POV shots in several instances.



Figure 6. A REPOV shot of a WS militant killing an Egyptian military soldier; posted October 15, 2016.

Attrition. Another military-related visual micro-frame is attrition, which focuses on WS militants in the battlefield. The attrition micro-frame appears in 55 images. Visual characteristics common to this micro frame include WS masked militants firing rockets or holding rifles and AK47s as they aim for invisible targets, who are only identified in the photo captions. Although the vast majority of the attrition images are shot at an eye level, four images tend to look up to the militants, hence prompting the viewer to evaluate them as powerful and superior. Moreover, out of 41 attrition images featuring WS's masked militants, at least one militant appears at an intimate/personal distance across 25 different images, hence suggesting closeness with the militants. With the faces of WS militants always covered, the masks serve as a visual identifier of the group and its militants. Furthermore, seven images (13%) employ subjective camera angles in the form of what Ortiz and Moya (2015) call out-embodied (OE) shots. The seven images promote identification with the WS militant by placing the camera over his shoulder in order to see what the militant sees and targets (See Figure 7). Overall, the attrition visual frame tends to prompt connection by featuring militants at an intimate/personal distance and at an eye

level in most cases, while also attempting to create viewer identification with the militants as they target the security forces by using subject camera angles in several images.



Figure 7. An OE shot of a WS militant in a photo report; posted March 2, 2016.

Training. The training visual micro-frame presents WS militants' physical preparations for battles and covert military operations. The training micro-frame appears in 15 images across two photo reports only. Visual characteristics common to this frame include mostly eye level camera positions looking at small groups of WS masked militants in training camps as they engage in physical, shooting, and break-ins trainings. Although the majority of the training images are shot at an eye level, 20% of the images tend to look up to the militants in action, hence prompting the viewer to evaluate them as powerful and superior. Moreover, at least one militant appears at an intimate/personal distance in almost three-fourths of the training images, hence suggesting closeness with the masked militants, who share the same look, uniform, and physical activity. Overall, the training visual frame tends to bring the viewer and WS militants in an intimate/personal distance as well as on an equal level in the vast majority of the images, which together prompts connection with the militants.

Eulogy. The eulogy visual micro-frame presents and honors WS's "martyrs" after a military operation or a terrorist attack. The eulogy micro-frame appears only in 3 images throughout 2016, in which the visual characteristics include clean-looking WS militants at an

intimate/personal distance either looking directly at the viewer or with eyes closed after dying in battle. All three images were disseminated between November 27 and December 14, a period characterized by a slow-down in WS's media production. Whereas two images employ eye-level shots of WS militants in breaking news photos, the third appears within the photo report "The repelling of the apostate military's campaign in the areas south of Sheikh Zuwayid" and uses a high-angle shot as it looks to the peaceful bearded face of a dead young man (Figure 8), who is identified in the caption as a martyr. In all three images, viewer distance serves as a way of bringing the viewer closer to the eulogized militants besides the imaginary connection resulting from the militants' gaze to the camera. Overall, the eulogy visual micro frame attempts to prompt connection with the militants by featuring them in intimate/personal distance, depicting them as clean compared to the corpses of security personnel and executed Sufi clerics, and identifying them as martyrs.



Figure 8. A close-up shot of a dead WS militant from an intimate distance; posted November 27, 2016.

Law Enforcement Visual Frame

Law enforcement is the second most recurring visual frame in WS images, with a total of 57 images (14%). The main commonality throughout the law enforcement images is the presence of an act that is claimed to be a form of law and order in the so-called province. This visual

frame contains two different micro-frames that are tied together by that notion of law and order: executions and hisba/Islamic police. Taken together, the law enforcement visual frame broadly defines the collaboration with security forces as treason and the consumption or trading of cigarettes, alcohol, and/or drugs as a sin; presents the act of treason and presence of impure materials as causes for execution and confiscation/burning respectively; and highlights the cleansing of the society from alleged spies and impurity as a moral goal; and recommends execution and confiscation/burning as the treatment.

Executions. The executions visual micro-frame presents WS's punitive actions against alleged criminals within the province. The executions micro-frame appears in 41 images, in which the visual characteristics include a mix of eye-level and high angle shots looking down at alleged spies and/or military/police personnel at an intimate/personal distance either on their knees as a WS militant beheads/shoots them or lying dead on the ground in blood after the execution. In the meantime, over one-fifth of the images depict the execution of two old Sufi clerics in a photo report posted on November 18. With over 75 percent of the execution images bringing the kneeling or lying hostage closer to the viewer, the images display the hostage as weak and inferior juxtaposed with the standing WS masked militant(s) appearing as powerful agent(s) taking the former's life. Moreover, four images (10%) display the hostage in desperation at an intimate/personal distance looking directly at the viewer before the execution, which creates an imaginary connection with the viewer and depicts the consequences of any collaboration with the Egyptian security forces (See Figure 9). One image employs a REPOV shot that embeds the viewer in the militant's position as he looks down to some police personnel while holding the rifle pointed to his head before the execution; and thus, prompts identification with the WS militant in that image (See Figure 10). Like the IED war micro-frame, all execution

images appear in sequence, meaning that one post would contain two, three, or more images taken in sequence to show the alleged spy, personnel, or Sufi cleric about to die, followed by a shot of the WS militant beheading/shooting him and finally a shot of the dead corpse. The consecutive still images present a narrative that enhances the viewer's presence in the punishment scene. Overall, the executions visual micro-frame is the only frame that prompts a connection with the "enemies" by bringing military/police personnel and collaborators with the security forces or Sufi clerics closer and in direct eye contact with the viewer, yet at the same time this interaction serves as a warning about the consequences of not only fighting/collaborating with security forces against WS militants, but also following and/or propagating a Sufi perspective of Islam.



Figure 9. An image of police personnel before his execution; posted on August 25, 2016.



Figure 10. A REPOV shot of police personnel before his execution; posted January 28, 2016.

Hisba/Islamic Police. The hisba/Islamic police visual micro-frame presents WS's preventive actions to rid the province from cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. The hisba/Islamic police micro-frame appears in 16 images across two photo reports only, in which the visual characteristics include high camera angles looking down at cigarettes and/or drugs at a social/public distance as hisba men confiscate and/or burn them. Whereas seven images focus only on the confiscated and burnt substances without any humans in the scene, the other nine images tend to focus on the drugs in the hisba men's hands or show them at a social/public distance carrying out their work. In that sense, the hisba micro-frame tends to visualize the crack down on impurity without personifying the hisba men. Overall, hisba images present acts by WS as a whole to allegedly protect the community from sins, and thus avoid prompting identification or connection by means of subjective camera angles, direct eye contact, or intimate/personal distance to identified WS members.

War Spoils Visual Frame

The war spoils visual frame presents the security forces' weaponry, vehicles, and other belongings confiscated by WS after battle. The war spoils frame appears in 29 images (7%). The

main visual characteristics throughout the war spoils images are high angle shots looking down at confiscated weaponry and vehicles along with ID cards of security forces' personnel, which hint at WS's ability not only to engage in combat with the military and police, but also to walk away with their belongings. Although almost all war spoils images do not feature WS militants, they tend to use the ID pictures to prompt a connection with the images of the security personnel instead. A total of 9 images (31%) show the security personnel looking directly at the viewer through their ID pictures whether their weapons lay next to them in the same image or in subsequent ones, which creates an imaginary interaction with those who were allegedly assassinated as per the photo captions (See Figure 11). In addition, the high camera angle in the vast majority of the war spoils images (83%) prompts viewers to evaluate the security forces as inferior and less powerful like in the executions visual micro-frame. Overall, the war spoils visual frame presents the confiscation of weaponry and IDs as an evidence of the group's victory in attacking military/police checkpoints and assassinating security personnel, while using direct eye contact with the viewer to serve as another warning about the consequences of fighting WS.



Figure 11. A high angle shot of the picture IDs and weapons of a soldier who was allegedly assassinated in Arish; posted June 17, 2016.

Community Destruction Visual Frame

The community destruction visual frame presents the consequential outcomes of the security forces' alleged attacks in Sinai. The community destruction frame appears in 23 images (6%) across two photo reports only. The main visual characteristics throughout this visual frame are mostly eye level camera positions looking at destroyed houses, mosques, schools, and agriculture land without featuring any human beings (See Figure 12). Hence, the community destruction images do not employ any pictorial conventions that prompt viewer identification or connection. Overall, the community destruction visual frame attempts to exhibit victimhood and exacerbate grievances by visualizing destruction and utilizing photo captions that victimize Muslims in Sinai and vilify the Egyptian military.



Figure 12. An image of houses allegedly destroyed in military airstrikes; posted October 24, 2016.

Beauty Visual Frame

The beauty visual frame presents the beauty of Sinai and its natural landscapes. The beauty frame appears across 13 images (3%) in one photo report only. The main visual characteristics throughout these images are eye level camera positions looking at natural landscapes of greenery, flowers, water streams, and agricultural land without featuring any human beings (See

Figure 13). Hence, like the destruction visual frame, beauty images do not employ any pictorial conventions that can prompt viewer identification or connection with photo subjects. Overall, the beauty visual frame presents a different side of Sinai as a land of beauty and goodness.



Figure 13. An image of a water stream following the rain fall in Sinai; posted February 28, 2016.

Jihadi Life Visual Frame

The jihadi life visual frame presents the social life of WS militants when they are not fighting. The jihadi life frame appears across 10 images (2%) in one photo report and one breaking news photo post. The main visual characteristics throughout jihadi life images are mostly eye level camera positions looking at groups of WS militants, who are posing to the camera with the ISIS flag in hand, eating together, guarding an outpost or reading Quran in the free time. Out of 10 jihadi life images featuring WS masked militants, at least one militant appears at an intimate/personal distance across 7 different images, hence suggesting closeness with the militants. Moreover, the militants in one-fifth of the images appear to be looking directly at the viewer, which can create an imaginary connection between the viewer and the militants, despite their masked or blurred faces (See Figure 14). Consistent with the look of WS militants in the above mentioned visual frames, concealed faces visually identify the militants

from any other group instantaneously. In the meantime, the two images showing a militant who is not sticking to a group tend to use OE shots to prompt identification with them as they read Quran (See Figure 15) or guard an outpost. Overall, the jihadi life visual frame does not only attempt to prompt connection with WS militants, who are usually presented as sticking together in their social life when they are neither fighting nor training, but it also prompts identification by using subjective camera angles to put the viewer in the militants' perspective in a few images.



Figure 14. An image of WS militants celebrating victory in battle; posted January 14, 2016.



Figure 15. An OE shot of a WS militant reading Quran in his break time; posted January 10, 2016.

Health Care Visual Frame

The health care visual frame presents a social service that WS claims to provide to community members. The healthcare frame appears across 10 images (2%) in only one photo report. The main visual characteristics throughout the health care images are medicines, medicinal herbs, and medical equipment ranging from scissors and bandages to pressure sensors. Although seven of the health care images feature humans, six show only human hands or arms using the medical equipment (See Figure 16). Similar to the hisba micro-frame, the health care visual frame visualizes WS's alleged health care provision without personifying any of the human subjects. Overall, health care images present acts by WS as a whole to allegedly help and treat community members, and thus avoid prompting viewer identification or connection with WS militants by means of subjective camera angles, direct eye contact, or intimate/personal distance.



Figure 16. An image inside a "Mujahideen Health Clinic" claimed by WS; posted March 27, 2016.

Media Distribution Visual Frame

The media distribution visual frame presents WS's claimed media efforts in Sinai. The media distribution frame appears across eight images (2%) in two breaking news photo posts only. The main visual characteristics throughout the media distribution images are WS militants who are either distributing or reading ISIS's Arabic-language newsletter *al-Naba'* at some deserted location. At least one militant appears at an intimate/personal distance across all eight images, hence suggesting closeness with the militants who appear mostly at the eye level. In the meantime, half the images employ subjective camera angles ranging from two REPOV to two OE shots that prompt identification with the militants distributing or reading the publication (See Figure 17). Overall, the media distribution visual frame attempts to visualize the dissemination of ISIS's central publications on ground in Sinai, while prompting connection with the WS militants in half the images, using shots at an eye level and an intimate/personal distance, and embedding the viewer in the militants' position in the other half, using subjective camera angles.



Figure 17. A REPOV shot of a WS militant distributing *al-Naba'* to another militant; posted September 28, 2016.

Conclusion

Given the media blackout in North Sinai, this study provides a nuanced understanding of WS's visual frames in its social media war against the Egyptian security forces, which is essential in developing counter-propaganda campaigns that fit the Egyptian context. While some studies pointed at the overdependence on the utopia frame in ISIS propaganda in 2015 (Winter, 2015a), it is clear that focusing only on WS's imagery tells a different story. Three-quarters of WS's images incorporate the military and law enforcement visual frames, which both work together to depict and celebrate the group's alleged victory in the fight against Egyptian security forces and its control over parts of the Sinai Peninsula. Hence, counter-propaganda campaigns lumping together audiences in the West, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, among other locations, and expecting good results are destined to fail. On the contrary, counter-propaganda campaigns must take into consideration the different contexts, in which ISIS provinces operate in order to reach particular audiences. In the case of WS, the overdependence on one-sided images conveying threat to the military, police, and anyone who collaborates with them poses a potential threat that could distort the viewers' perceptions in alignment with the images (Zillmann et al., 1999). Furthermore, examining less recurring context-specific visual frames in the context of WS, such as healthcare, beauty, and media distribution, hints to other potential fronts in the social media war, that must be addressed. With the Egyptian military spokesperson and the Ministry of Interior's Facebook pages being the only official sources of news about the situation in Sinai to over 12 million followers, they have no choice but to step up their efforts in the media battlefield. The social media war requires the development and the careful use of visual frames that can address people's concerns about the security situation in North Sinai and debunk WS's visual narratives about their claimed victory and service provision.

Additionally, by digging deeper in WS's visual strategies and moving beyond the mere description and quantification of visual frames, this study determines the pictorial conventions used by WS to prompt involvement with the photo subjects. WS imagery usually seeks to prompt connection with the militants across a number of visual frames, but also tends to create a connection with security forces personnel and collaborators in very few cases, only when they are in weak and desperate positions right before they die or following their assassination. Such images appear in the execution and war spoils visual frames. Using high angles, viewer distance, and direct eye contact, the viewer usually looks down at soldiers/collaborators about to die from an intimate/personal distance or looks directly to them in ID pictures next to confiscated belongings with photo captions claiming their death. By bringing the security forces personnel/collaborators closer to the viewer only in positions of fear, weakness, and death, the images serve as a warning against fighting and/or collaborating with security forces against WS. Beyond that, ISIS's photographers willingly choose to push security forces away from the viewer in the vast majority of images using social/public distance in order to de-personify and present them as types rather than individuals (Jewitt & Oyama, 2008). On the other hand, WS's visual strategy shifts greatly when portraying its own militants. WS mainly employs distance and camera position as well as eye contact, to a lesser extent, to prompt connection with militants across four visual frames: attrition, training, jihadi life, and media distribution. In the four visual frames, the viewer usually gets a closer look at the militants as they fire rockets/bullets at Egyptian security forces, train in camps, eat and mingle with their fellow militants, and distribute/read ISIS's publications from an intimate/personal distance and at the eye level. With the masked and/or blurred faces serving as a visual identifier of WS militants, militants appear to be looking directly at the camera/viewer in a few images, in which they are celebrating victory

after battle or hanging together while holding their weapons and/or the black ISIS flag. Hence, juxtaposed with security forces or alleged spies looking directly at the viewer in positions of desertion, weakness and submission, the masked militants look directly at the viewer in groups and only in positions showcasing strength and preparedness. In a number of cases, the viewer also looks up to the militants as they are training. These pictorial conventions work together to create a feeling of closeness with (Jewitt & Oyama, 2008), equality or symbolic power of (Mandell & Shaw, 1973), and imaginary connection to (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996) WS militants.

WS also seeks to prompt identification with militants in order to align the viewer with the group's extreme position and horrific actions. Using subjective camera angles, WS embeds the viewer in the scene in 18 images across five visual frames: attacking security forces, attrition, media distribution, jihadi life, and execution. In the five visual frames, the viewer can assume the role of a WS militant firing rockets/bullets, attacking security forces with snipers, killing Egyptian soldiers, executing hostages, guarding important outposts, reading Quran, and distributing/reading ISIS's publications. Subjective camera angles can prompt identification and alignment with the characters (Cohen, 2009; Smith, 2004) as well as create a greater sense of presence and frequent arousal responses (Cummins et al., 2012). Understanding these visual techniques are important for counter-propaganda campaigns aiming to prompt greater viewer identification with the Egyptian soldiers and officers in their fight against terrorism in North Sinai as well as former militants who defected from the group.

The lack of experimental data examining the actual impacts of visual frames and techniques on visual perception is a limitation of this study. Whereas the existing literature provides empirical evidence regarding the impact of visual frames and pictorial conventions, experimental research in the context of militant groups' visual propaganda is lacking. Hence,

more future research could examine the impact of visual frames and pictorial conventions in the context of insurgencies and asymmetric conflicts. In the meantime, context remains crucial in visual analyses, especially when dealing with visual propaganda. A shot looking up to a hostage in an orange suit before his execution wouldn't be expected to exhibit symbolic power. Thus, a qualitative close reading of the images bolsters nuanced visual analyses and contextualizes the scenes.

This study attempts to build on existing literature of visual perception and ISIS propaganda in order to provide a methodological tool that can quantitatively and qualitatively examine the use of visual frames and techniques at the propaganda production stage. ISIS's imagery is often examined together, and hence lumping the more recurring images from prolific provinces in Iraq and Syria, such as Ninawa, Aleppo, and ar-Raqqa provinces, with the less recurring images from relatively dormant provinces in Saudi Arabia or West Africa. Instead, this study sought to provide a nuanced understanding of ISIS's visual strategies in one province that is less prolific than media offices in ISIS's strongholds, but at the same time more active than many other claimed provinces. Accordingly, counter-messaging campaigns have to take into consideration the different visual frames and techniques that are employed in different locations rather than applying the same visual strategies to whole regions. In the case of Sinai, understanding the visual strategies WS uses can guide the Egyptian Military's Moral Affairs Department and the Military spokesperson's social media accounts as well as NGOs in developing nuanced communication campaigns and visual strategies in the Sinai media war.

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