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Propaganda mala fide: Towards a comparative semiotics of violent religious persuasion

Abstract: Not all religious proselytizing is conducive to violence, yet some is, and adopts specific words, images, sounds, and other signs in order to convey its message. Defying frontiers among historical epochs, confessions, and disciplines, the essay develops a cross-cultural, trans-historical, and comparative reading of violent religious propaganda, focusing on messages and media that promote radicalization and the consequent mission to defeat the enemy disbeliever. In particular, the essay puts the current phenomenon of jihadist online propaganda into historical and comparative perspective.

Keywords: propaganda, religion, violence, jihad, terrorism, Islamic State

1 Introduction

The word "propaganda" derives from the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* ('sacred congregation for the propagation of faith'), a congregation established by Gregory XV's bull *Inscrutabili Divinæ* on June 22, 1622 in order to promote the diffusion of Catholicism and regulate Catholic ecclesiastical affairs in non-Catholic countries (Leone 2010b: 334, n. 51). Propaganda is a central element of all human groups that want to maintain and/or expand their domain, be it economic, political, or cultural. Religious groups are not an exception.[1] Proselytizing religions aim at the conversion of "non-believers"; non-proselytizing religions aim at contrasting any agency that might convert their members to other creeds (Leone 2014a). In some cases, religious propaganda is so effective as to completely

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[1] Bibliography on religious propaganda is extensive but fragmented. On religious propaganda in ancient Rome, see Marco Simón et al. (2002); on late antique and medieval propaganda, see Morenzoni (2013); on preaching and propaganda in the Middle Ages, see also Makdisi et al. (1983); on religious propaganda in early-modern England, see Royer-Hemet (2014). A comprehensive, cross-confessional study of the phenomenon is missing.

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revolutionize the life of an individual (Leone 2004). After contact with religious propaganda, the individual changes, converts, or radicalizes, and existential turning point brings about a new mission: defending one's creed, combating the disbeliever, perpetrating the most ferocious violence if necessary. Not all religious proselytizing is conducive to violence, yet some is, and adopts specific words, images, sounds, and other signs in order to convey its message (Leone 2007). Religious propaganda, indeed, in all historical epochs, has never been disembodied, but always conveyed by specific media, messages, and texts, be it the preacher's coded gestures in a sixteenth-century Catholic mission in the Mesoamerica (Leone 2011a) or the hashtagged Twits through which present-day jihadists announce their terrorist deeds.

Defying frontiers among historical epochs, religious confessions, and disciplines, the present essay is meant to develop a cross-cultural, trans-historical, and comparative reading of violent religious propaganda, focusing on texts, messages, and media that promote radicalization and the consequent mission to defeat the enemy disbeliever. In particular, the essay aims at putting the current phenomenon of jihadist online propaganda into historical and comparative perspective. The enflamed sermons of medieval Christian preachers inciting believers to repent, convert, and embark on crusades (Cole 1991; Maier 1994, 2000); the gruesome early modern frescos instilling in novices the ardent desire of destroying "the idols" of distant missions (Leone 2010b: 212); the web forums where US anti-abortionists learned how to bomb abortion clinics (Leone 2008); and the Facebook pages where present-day young European jihadists dream about beheading "the infidels": these texts, messages, and media are different from several points of view, such as the religious *imaginaire* to which they resort; the formats, genres, and media they adopt; the sociocultural and historical contexts in which they proliferate, etc. Yet, they also share a common goal: converting, radicalizing, and turning to violent religion. Moreover, they feature a common rhetoric dynamic: addressing the individual, they are able to use words, images, and other signs in order to bestow on him/her a new identity, and involve him/her in a grand narrative whose cornerstone is fight, violence, and the annihilation of the confessional enemy.

An interdisciplinary approach composed of history and anthropology of religion, cultural and media studies, religious and visual studies, security studies and law, with cultural semiotics and rhetoric acting as interdisciplinary sinews among them, is therefore proposed to develop a common protocol in order to collect present-day jihadist propaganda materials, analyze them through interdisciplinary methodology, and compare and contrast them with texts, messages, and media of violent confessional persuasion in other historical epochs, sociocultural contexts, and religious traditions. The ultimate goal of the

essay is to detect the main lines of continuity and discontinuity in these materials: is there a specificity of violent propaganda that resorts to religious tradition in order to build its authority and persuasive power (Leone 2013). In which way does it differ from violent propaganda issuing from secular discourse (nationalism, political ideology, etc.)? What is the impact of the foundational myths of each religious culture in shaping its violent propaganda? And how has the evolution of communication technology, from verbal language to pictorial perspective, from the Internet to social media, changed the dynamics of religious radicalization?

The essay therefore focuses on jihadist violent propaganda, but seeks to understand what is behind it even beyond the present geopolitical situation. How can a message that appeals to sacred authority convince to fight, kill, slaughter, and torture? What is it, in the rhetorical structure of words, images, sounds, and other signs that captures the identity of believers and lead them to radicalization, intolerance, and violence?

2 An anxious social demand of knowledge: Jihadist propaganda today

The questions above bear on the comprehension of religious violence as a trans-historical and cross-cultural phenomenon, but simultaneously point at an extremely urgent issue of the present time. Late September 2014, EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove declared that about three thousand citizens with European passports are currently among the fighters of the Islamic State (aka IS, ISIL, ISIS, or Daʿesh; hereafter, IS).[2] One hundred and thirty Canadian citizens joined the IS according to early 2014 estimates of the Canadian Government.[3] Late October 2014, US defense secretary Chuck Hagel confirmed that over one hundred US passport holders are currently fighting for ISIS.[4] These figures are rapidly growing. North-American and European governments are presently concerned about the terrorist activities that these citizens are carrying on in Syria and in Iraq. Moreover, European governments worry that these citizens might constitute a potential threat to the security of

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2 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29372494 (accessed 26 June 2015).
3 http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/2014-pblc-rpr-trrrst-thrt/index-eng.aspx#a04 (accessed 26 June 2015).
4 http://washington.cbslocal.com/2014/09/04/cbs-news-hagel-confirms-more-than-100-americans-fighting-for-isis-in-iraq-syria/ (accessed 26 June 2015).

European countries, since they might return to Europe after receiving military and terrorist training in Syria and Iraq and participate in the organization of terrorist attacks against civilians in European cities. Mehdi Nemmouche, the suspected perpetrator of the May 24, 2014 shooting at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels, Belgium, which killed four people, is believed to have spent over a year in Syria and to have had contacts with Jihadists, recording a video bearing the IS flag.[5]

Major intelligence and military efforts are currently being undertaken in order to thwart the expansion of IS in the Near and Middle East, as well as to trace the movements of people from Australia, Europe, and North-America to Syria and Iraq and vice versa. In the urgency of countering this phenomenon, though, a major issue is being neglected: how come that western citizens, in most cases born and raised in western families, often with no Arab and/or Muslim backgrounds, have suddenly converted to violent jihadism, left their social context, traveled to Syria or Iraq, and become perpetrators of ferociously violent acts against enemy fighters and civilians? What propaganda triggered their conversion and/or radicalization? To what words, images, and other messages were they exposed? And, most importantly, what communicative patterns and persuasive strategies encouraged them to embark in such a tragic existential path?

As research on this topic has disquietingly found, in most cases, personal contact with other jihadists was marginal in igniting religious conversion and/or radicalization. Most IS members holding western passports, indeed, did not convert and/or radicalized in "real" places, such as mosques, Islamic centers, or prisons. On the contrary, their existential turning point took place in "virtual" places, such as jihadist websites, web forums, and, increasingly, social media like Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and even Instagram and WhatsApp. The new channels of violent jihadist persuasion have forced European intelligence services to dramatically change their strategies: monitoring physical places like mosques, Islamic centers, or prisons is becoming more and more irrelevant compared to the need for monitoring web communication.

Yet, violent jihadist communicative patterns and persuasive strategies on the web are much more difficult to survey, for both quantitative and qualitative reasons. On the one hand, sources, centers, and knots of such communication proliferate and evolve at incredible speed. On the other hand, most analysts lack competence in order to effectively read these messages, decode their visual and verbal rhetoric, decipher their narratives, and, therefore, understand why they

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5 See http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2014/06/01/tuerie-de-bruxelles-un-suspect-francais-arrete_4429835_3214.html (accessed 25 June 2015).

so frequently conduce to dramatic existential turning points. The role of social media in virtually recreating the orality and the aura of religious assemblies, for instance, is generally being ignored, deserving urgent investigation.

3 Object and methodology of analysis

Military action against IS is currently the object of heated debate in many European countries. Yet, whatever the ideological stand on this military initiative might be, no definitive solution of the problem will be found without in-depth questioning of its roots, that is, the astonishing willingness of many young western citizens to join IS and commit the worst atrocities in its name. Knowing who these people are, who talks to them, and with what goals are extremely hard tasks. Yet, what can be objectively analyzed is what puts them in contact and communication, that is, the myriads of jihadist words, images, and other texts that circulate in the web. Analyzing these materials from a cross-cultural, trans-historical, and interdisciplinary perspective is the only way to understand and, possibly, defuse their persuasive potential.

The research protocol described by the essay therefore pursues the following four objectives:

1. Singling out the main sources of jihadist propaganda on the web, with specific attention to sources that explicitly address the young western audience;
2. Sampling these messages in order to detect recurrent communicative patterns and persuasive strategies; previous research has shown that most of these messages are conceived for an audience that is not fluent in Arabic (such as potential converts among western citizens with second or third generation migration backgrounds or with no Arab and/or Muslim backgrounds; Bouzar and Caupenne 2014); indeed, some of these messages contain Arab expressions, but are mostly in English and French, and to a minor extent also in German, Italian, Spanish, and other European languages; moreover, previous research has also pointed out that the visual dimension of these messages (including "special effects" and professional or semi-professional editing) is much more relevant than their verbal content, often quite limited (Bouzar and Caupenne 2014). As a consequence, semiotics must be adopted as the main methodology in order to dissect these messages and understand their persuasive rationale; semiotics indeed can be considered a contemporary version of ancient rhetoric; it studies present-day communication but focuses on the aspects of it that escape traditional linguistic analysis, such as images, sounds, editing, etc. At the

same time, rhetoric and semiotic analysis must go hand in hand with a strongly interdisciplinary procedure, aiming at placing each propaganda item in its precise historical, sociocultural, and religious context, as well as at understanding its technical features and implications in terms of international security and law.

3. Elaborating a typology of persuasive narratives; there is no one way to religious conversion and/or radicalization; each existential path to violent jihad is different. Yet, when conversion and/or radicalization happen "online," they happen because jihadist propaganda has presented potential fighters with a convincing narrative; with an existential scheme in which young western citizens suddenly see a new role for themselves, a role that they can play by embracing the jihadist cause (Leone 2014c). What are these narratives? What roles they do propose (defender of armless Muslim civilians in Syria against a despotic regime; adventurous traveler to an exotic land; potential martyr; etc.)? How are these narrative roles embodied visually, for instance in videos circulating in the web, and how are they proposed for contagious imitation?

4. Comparing these communicative patterns and persuasive strategies with those used by violent religious propaganda in other historical, sociocultural, and confessional contexts. This is the riskiest task of the protocol, since it challenges the short-period perspective of journalistic comment and other "grey literature" with a wide-angled point of view: what do these patterns and strategies share with those emerging from other instances of violent confessional persuasion? Is there a cross-cultural and trans-historical efficacy of violent images in fascinating viewers and turning them into radical believers? Are there grand narratives, such as that of mission and martyrdom, which appeal to converts across epochs and faiths? And, on the opposite, what is the peculiar dynamic of radicalization that unfolds as a consequence of specific religious backgrounds and communication technology, for instance, as a result of the virtual bonds established by social media, or in response to the visual brilliancy enabled by digital editing?

4 Beyond the state of the art

Literature on religious fundamentalism is extensive. Bibliography on its rhetoric is scant. Comparative studies on its propaganda are sorely missing. Since September 11, 2001, research and bibliography on Islamic religious fundamentalism and violent jihadism has been burgeoning. In 2013 and 2014

only, a multiplicity of essays has been published on several aspects of this phenomenon.[6] Works comparing Islamic fundamentalism with other religious fundamentalisms are less frequent.[7] Works on the rhetoric of jihadism are rare.[8]

Despite increasing worldwide attention on jihad web propaganda, a systematic survey of this phenomenon is missing, particularly as regards the web conversion and/or radicalization and/or recruitment of young western citizens by IS. Furthermore, scholarship in the field still requires fine-tuning of a qualitative methodology able to detect and possibly counter the persuasive strategies of such propaganda. The cross-cultural and trans-historical approach proposed by the present essay is not to be found anywhere else.

One the one hand, religious terrorism is the antithesis of communication. It does not aim at transmitting any message to its victims, but at annihilating them. On the other hand, yet, religious terrorism is extremely powerful communication for those who witness the tragedy, directly or through media, and are either terrified or fascinated by it (Bolt 2012). Terrorism acts revolutionize the social attitudes of individuals and groups, pushing them to radically change their lifestyles (Lynch and Argomaniz 2015). They instill fear, but can also attract wicked admiration (Lewis 2012). From September 11 on, terrorist jihadist groups have resorted to increasingly sophisticated communication in order to accompany and guide the reception of their violent deeds (Mitchell 2011). Obeying a global tendency, for jihadists too it was not sufficient to perpetrate violence and instigate terror. It was equally fundamental to let the world know that violence had been committed, and what was the appropriate cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic interpretation of it (Tulloch and Blood 2012).

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6 On Somalia, Hansen (2013); on Syria, Lefèvre (2013); on Afghanistan, Rubin (2013); on Pakistan, Ullah (2013); on Chechnya and Eurasia, US Congress (2013); on West Africa, Gow et al. (2013); on Indonesia, Rohmaniyah (2014); for a comparative survey on the Middle East and the relation between 'Arab Spring' and jihadism, Rosefsky Wickham (2013) and Telhami (2013); for a study on the link between radicalization in the Middle East and in Europe, Joffé (2013); on Jihadism in Germany, Hafez (2013) and Schneiders (2014); in the UK, Wali (2013); in Holland, Ross (2013); in Belgium and France, Viollet (2013); in Spain, Jordán (2014); in Russia (Volga region), Markedonov (2013). Recent general surveys are Davidson (2013) and Milton-Edwards (2013).

7 Moaddel and Karabenick (2013); on the French context, see Guitton (2013).

8 Besides the previous publications of the author of the present paper (Leone 2007, 2008, 2011c, 2012, 2014c), see also Ballod and Weber (2013); Hussain (2013) on the Pakistani context. Even less numerous are updated studies that specifically focus on jihad web propaganda: Lohlker (2013), Lombardi (2014); on the use of images, El Difraoui (2013) and Winkler and Dauber (2014).

However, whereas in the beginning terrorist jihadist groups would fabricate messages to be transmitted by mainstream media (think at the role of Al Jazeera in distributing Osama Bin Laden's videos [Linder 2011]), from the second half of the 2000s on, these groups more and more aimed at developing their own media. The shift has been a consequence of the planetary diffusion of social media. Through them, indeed, terrorist jihadist groups can not only reach large audiences, but also learn how to become increasingly proficient at it. As several analysts have already underlined, there is a technical abyss between the amateurish videotapes that Osama Bin Laden would broadcast through Al Jazeera and the sophisticated visual editing by which the so called Islamic State flaunts its tragic accomplishments to the world (Winkler and Dauber 2014). Moreover, whereas in the past a temporal gap would occur between perpetration of a terror act and communication interpreting it for the global audience, nowadays the gap has practically disappeared. As some commentators have pointed out, while in the past war acts were accompanied by rolling of drums, today terrorist jihadist violence is simultaneously ushered by drones of Twits and YouTube videos (Adl 2012).

Timing and technique are not the only elements that marked the evolution of terrorist jihadist communication in the last decade. The target of such communication has also changed. Osama Bin Laden's videos were primarily addressed to an Arabic-speaking and Muslim audience. Most westerners could access their content only through the linguistic and cultural mediation of translators and interpreters. Moreover, these videos would mostly target westerners as addressees of threats. Communication developed by the IS, especially from the second half of 2014 on, has had a different communicative agenda: it addresses westerners not only as targets of terrorist threats, but also as potential affiliates. That is why IS communication increasingly resorts to European languages, and mainly to English and French, but also to German and Spanish, in order to communicate with its audience. In these messages, the visual dimension is becoming more and more preponderant, yet it too seems to adopt the codes and styles of western visual communication (for instance, Hollywood narratives and visual effects [Gopnik 2014]). Made by western affiliates for other potential western affiliates, the current IS communication seems to bridge more and more the gap between state war propaganda and terrorist communication; social media, indeed, have enabled terrorists to directly reach a global audience as effectively, and sometimes even more effectively, than traditional state broadcasting propaganda.

The purposes of IS communication toward European citizens are manifold: 1) accompany, describe, and interpret terrorist acts in order to make their own geopolitical narrative globally predominant against the geopolitical narrative

diffused by western governments and media; 2) instill terror in order to push to a destabilization of western lifestyles and consequent sociopolitical tension; 3) gain ideological and financial support among old and new sympathizers; 4) recruit new members. This last goal represents the real novelty of IS terrorist jihadist communication. With over three thousand IS fighters holding western passports, the phenomenon is difficult to underestimate.

From the point of view of western countries, it involves three major security risks: 1) the risk that especially young western citizens are indoctrinated by IS propaganda and persuaded to join terrorist activities in the Middle East, and specifically in Iraq and Syria. Fight casualties in these countries already include hundreds of young western citizens; 2) the risk that some of these western fighters return to their countries after being indoctrinated and militarily trained, with the agenda and the ability to perpetrate major terrorist attacks against civilians in western cities; 3) the risk that supporters of IS who are western residents are given detailed knowledge about how to perpetrate major terrorist attacks against civilians in western cities.

Given these risks, a major effort of intelligence is required. This effort must aim at several goals. On the one hand, investigative goals; it will prove increasingly fundamental to 1) know history, evolution, present state, and prospective lines of development of jihadist terrorist media agencies; 2) analyze media strategies these agencies adopt; 3) analyze texts produced and distributed through these agencies; 4) study the circulation of these messages in the web; 5) gather evidence and formulate hypothesis about the cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic impact of these media campaigns and messages on western audiences; 6) investigate the potential and actual western targets of jihadist terrorist propaganda, in order to understand whether they share a common social, cultural, or psychological background.

On the other hand, investigative goals must lead to theoretical goals: jihadist terrorist propaganda is not an isolated phenomenon in history, but one that can be compared and contrasted with other instances of violent confessional persuasion, emerging in other sociocultural contexts, historical periods, and religious domains. Jihadist messages must therefore be put in a cross-cultural, trans-historical, and interdisciplinary perspective, in order to understand the transversal features of violent religious propaganda. Gaining authority through reference to sacred texts (Leone 2012); representing "infidels"; inciting believers to their forced conversion or to their annihilation; evoking through words, images, and other signs the idea of an idolatrous enemy to be violently subjugated; instilling the desire of embarking on dangerous religious missions and invoking the sweetness of martyrdom; destroying the religious artifacts of the Other: all these elements appear recurrently in history, often

adopting expressive and emotional formulae that subtle lines link to past representations, but that the evolution of media technology pushes toward new levels of efficacy. Experimental and risky semiotic analysis must therefore aim at developing an unconventional reading of contemporaneity through the lenses of both cultural history and comparative theory: what types of texts are commonly produced and circulated by violent religion? Where does their efficacy lie? Which of their features are specific of a confessional, historical, and sociocultural background, and which, on the contrary, travel from context to context as a tragic representational patrimony of the humankind?

5 IS "western" propaganda

IS European propaganda is a new phenomenon that has attracted alarmed media attention but still little scholarly research. One of the risky tasks semiotic analysis must face is exactly that of sifting through "grey literature" in order to select reliable sources of data and insights. As regards the recent history of jihadist terrorist media, Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo (2007) published a survey for *RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty*. The survey lists insurgent groups active in Iraq, providing essential information on their history, ideology, target, and media logo and organization; up to 2007, these groups were 1) Islamic State of Iraq (ISI/Al-Qaeda); 2) Mujahidin Army in Iraq; 3) Islamic Army in Iraq; 4) Ansar Al-Sunnah Army (previously Ansar Al-Islam); 5) Iraqi Resistance Movement-1920 Revolution Brigades; 6) the Islamic Front of Iraqi Resistance (JAMI). Tensions, fights, and fusions among these groups increasingly led to the formation of what is now known as the Islamic State (IS), which maintains the same logo of the Islamic State of Iraq. Kimmage and Ridolfo also list virtual and transnational media agencies that produce and diffuse messages with the logo of IS: 1) Al-Sahab Institute for Media Production; 2) Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF); 3) Al-Fajr Media Center; 4) Al-Boraq Media Center; 5) Al-Furqan Institute of Media Production. Jihadist terrorist propaganda is created and diffused also by individual producers and forum contributors, whose identity and development are even more difficult to trace. Some of them, like the Kuwait-based radical cleric Hamid al-Ali,[9] have attained international status and audience.

The Al-Furqan Institute of Media Production was the first media agency of ISI. Created in November 2006, soon after the establishment of ISI, it would produce all its films, audios, and videotaped addresses, as well as the ISI/Al-Qaeda-affiliated

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9 Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali (born 1960).

periodical *Biographies of Notable Martyrs*. With the establishment of ISIS (currently IS), I'tisaam Media Foundation, formed in March 2013, became its main media outlet; it distributes through the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF; see Bilger 2014). GIMF had already manifested interest in reaching a western audience, for instance by translating addresses by members of Al-Qaeda's central leadership (see the French translation of Ayman al-Zawahiri's statements); GIMF also produced a French translation of an Al-Furqan-produced ISI/Al-Qaeda statement on the Baghdad security plan. In 2014, ISIS established the Al Hayat Media Center, with the explicit goal of targeting western audiences. It produces materials in English, German, Russian, and French (see Gertz 2014). In July 2014, IS launched the digital magazine *Dabiq*, meant to present the group and its activities in a multiplicity of languages.

Gambhir (2014) provides a detailed analysis of communicative format, content, and strategies of this magazine.[10] IS usage of social media, and in particular of Twitter, has attracted widespread attention.[11] On apps developed by IS in order to boost its hashtags on Twitter, see a study by the Anti-Defamation League published in June 2014 (ADL 2014a).[12] On (mostly failed) attempts by social media companies to block jihadist communication in social media, see Friedman 2014 and a study by the Anti-Defamation League published in July 2014 (ADL 2014b). Al-Furqan also produced the two videos showing the decapitation of US photojournalist James Foley and US journalist Steven Sotloff. Both videos featured professional visual editing and attracted worldwide attention and commentaries, mostly by journalists, but also by scholars (Montani 2014). Other aspects of IS propaganda have been the object of more circumscribed attention. Prusher (2014) provides insights on the ISIS logo and flag. Khalaf and Jones (2014) show how IS media agencies produce professional reports – comprehensive of statistics and charts – of its brutalities in order to attract funding and recruit members. On the foundation of the IS agency *Ajnad Media Foundation*, specialized in jihadist chants, see the January 15, 2014 report on SITE.

Jihadism online radicalization and recruitment has already been studied in the US. There is strong evidence, indeed, that Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the alleged perpetrators of the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombing that killed three people and injured 264 others, radicalized through watching online the videos of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born Muslim cleric killed in a

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10 See also the August 1, 2014 analysis published by Michael W. S. Ryan for the Jamestown Foundation.
11 See Khalaf and Jones (2014) for a sketch of analysis; see also Berger (2014) for a detailed study.
12 See also Frenkel (2014) and Stone (2014).

US drone strike in Yemen in 2011, who encouraged attacks against the West on behalf of Al Qaeda through dozens of English-language videos, articles, books, and lectures.[13] Anwar al-Awlaki was a regular contributor to *Inspire*, Al Qaeda's first-ever English-language digital magazine, which would provide detailed bomb-making instructions and call on followers to "destroy" America. In *Inspire*, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev found instructions on how to make the pressure cooker bombs that they planted at the Boston Marathon. In 2013, Abtalul media group, an Afghanistan-based propaganda agency supporting the Taliban, started publishing *Azan*, an online jihadist magazine modeled after Saudi Arabia-based *Inspire* magazine (which ended its publication in June 2013). In Autumn 2013, *Azan* published a seventy-two page issue on "To the Jihadis in the West."[14]

As is evident from this brief survey, information on jihadist western online propaganda comes from disparate sources and offers different levels of analysis. A systematic and scholarly study of the phenomenon is sorely missing. Previous surveys of web jihad, indeed, such as Lohlker (2013), Ramsay (2013), or the 2012 report by the US Congress,[15] do not take into account recent developments of the phenomenon, which took momentum especially in the second half of 2014.

Furthermore, no anthropological, cross-cultural, and trans-historical reading of jihadist propaganda has been attempted thus far.

6 A rapidly changing landscape: Some guidelines

Given the rapidity by which the geopolitics of terrorist jihadism presently evolves, no semiotic analysis can do without an on-going reappraisal of the geopolitical situation, media panorama, and scholarly literature concerning terrorist jihadist web propaganda; indeed, one of the risks of semiotically analyzing these materials consists in the extremely fast evolution of the

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13 On Anwar al-Awlaki biography and profile, see the report by the Anti-Defamation League published in November 2009 (ADL 2009); on his influence on perpetrators of jihadist attacks in the US, Nigeria, Canada, and UK, see the (2014) report by the Anti-Defamation League; on homegrown US jihadism see also the (2007) report by the New York City Police Department (Silber and Bhatt 2007).

14 For a detailed analysis, see the December 3, (2013) report by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL 2013).

15 See also Ulph (2005), Burton (2006), Rogan (2006), Roversi (2008), Weimann (2006), Jordán and Torres Soriano (2007), Bunt (2009), US Congress (2009), Jenkins (2011), Lohlker (2012), Torres Soriano (2014).

phenomenon that the analysis is meant to study. Semiotic analysis must be based on exhaustive knowledge of the state of the art as regards research on terrorist jihadist online propaganda. Preparation of the present essay focused in particular on the following sources of information:[16] 1) scholarly publications (articles, books, working papers) published about the subject, in English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, and other languages; 2) open-access investigative reports prepared by police and security agencies in western countries, with particular attention to the US, Canada, Australia, UK, France, Belgium, Netherland, Spain, and Italy; 3) white papers published by private research centers and think-tanks.[17]

Sources of terrorist jihadist propaganda on the web are multiplying and diversifying; traditional media like journals, magazines, radio, and television are increasingly replaced by new and social media; most of the conversion and radicalization processes that lead to the recruitment of new jihadist terrorists currently happen online, through social media like Facebook and Twitter. Semiotic analysis must also

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16 They have been classified according to a) source of publication; b) date of publication; c) geopolitical area(s) they bear upon; d) Jihadist organization(s) they focus on; e) Jihadist media agencies they consider; f) Jihadist material(s) they analyze.

17 They have been classified according to the following parameters: i) focus of the research center (in terms of geopolitical area(s), Jihadist group(s), and material(s) investigated); ii) infrastructures and resources (databases and other archives); iii) specific methodology, with assessment of pros and cons; iii) added value to research on web terrorist jihadist propaganda; iv) good research practices. Among research centers on terrorism whose research has been useful for the preparation of the present essay: 1) International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR, http://www.icsr. info) at King's College London; 2) Rand Europe, Cambridge (http://www.rand.org/randeurope. html); 3) The Center on Terrorism at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York (http:// johnjayresearch.org/ct/); 4) The Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid (http://www.realinstitutoelcano. org); 5) ITSTIME – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies at the Catholic University of Milan (http://www.itstime.it); 6) The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/); 7) The Centre for Policing, Intelligence, and Counter Terrorism (PICT) at Macquarie University, Sydney (http://www.mq.edu.au/about_us/faculties_and_departments/faculty_of_arts/department_of_po- licing_intelligence_and_counter_ terrorism/); 8) The Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St. Andrew University (http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cstpv/); 9) The Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the National Defense College, Stockholm (https://www.fhs.se/en/ research/research-centres-and-programmes/center-for-asymmetric-threat-studies/about/); 10) The Monterey Terrorism Research and Education Program at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (http://www.miis.edu/academics/researchcenters/terrorism); 11) International Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Research Center of Herzliya, Israel (http://www.ict. org.il/); 12) Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism, University of Leiden at the Hague (http://www. campusdenhaag.nl/ctc/).

rely on systematic survey of the media sources of terrorist jihadist propaganda, in order to a) assess the impact of each media source in the creation and propagation of jihadist propaganda; and b) evaluate the adoption of new media sources, in particular those created in the last years; media technology indeed is evolving at such speed that it is not unlikely that the main media sources of future terrorist jihadist propaganda are still to be invented and/or tested.

On the basis of comprehensive survey of state-of-the-art and media sources, guidelines for exhaustive analysis of terrorist jihadist propaganda can be outlined. For each propaganda message, the analysis must a) reconstruct its historical and geopolitical context; b) gather data about its diffusion and circulation; c) accumulate materials about its reception in the form of online comments and both verbal and visual quotations in forums and social media; d) most importantly, analyze the various messages through generative semiotics, the method of semantic analysis elaborated by Franco-Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas and his school from the 1960s on (Greimas 1966, 1970, 1975, 1983).

This methodology consists in dissecting and analyzing texts according to progressive levels of complexity and abstraction, from the general values that texts communicate to the particular stylistic features of such communication. In particular, messages must be decoded through generative semiotics in order to answer the following questions: i) What is the *imaginaire* to which messages resort in order to construct their rhetoric? (Leone 2011b) ii) What mythical figures and topoi of the Islamic tradition are referred to, and with what ideological slant? iii) What are the deep values evoked by the messages, and in contraposition with what other values? iv) How do narratives in messages construct the relation between heroes and anti-heroes, helpers and opponents, positive and negative missions? v) Most centrally, how does the rhetorical structure of messages, through their verbal, visual, and audio contents, predispose the cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic point of view of readers/observers? vi) How is the reader/observer posited as target of conversion, radicalization, and recruitment? vii) What are the temporal and spatial coordinates in which messages set their narratives? viii) What is the interpretive and pragmatic response that messages are meant to elicit in their audience?

Generative semiotics has developed specific frameworks of textual analysis in order to answer the abovementioned questions. In particular, question i) can be addressed through cultural semiotics, both in its Greimassian version (analysis of forms of life) and in the version elaborated by Russian semiotician Jurij M. Lotman and the School of Moscow/Tartu;[18] question ii) can be addressed with reference to

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18 Lotman's method consists in tracing the movement of cultural forms in a certain society as though they were part of a biosphere. (Lotman [1984, 1990; Lotman et al. 1985] calls "semiosphere" the virtual space in which cultural forms circulate in a society.)

the Greimassian model (in particular, the analysis of "mythical discourse, as well as the analysis of religious discourse developed by the Groupe d'Entrevernes and other scholars who applied generative semiotics to religious discourse)[19] and to the US school of semiotic anthropology (which particularly insists on the concept of "semiotic ideology")[20]; question iii) can be addressed with reference to the analysis of axiologies developed by Greimas and his school;[21] question iv) can be addressed in the framework of Greimas's "narrative grammar," which models the main elements and dynamics of narrative patterns; question v) can be addressed with reference to Greimas's theory of enunciation, as well as in relation to Umberto Eco's model of "interpretive semiotics" (Eco 1979); question vi) can be addressed in relation to visual semiotics and its theory of enunciation, as well as with reference to the semiotic analysis of religious conversion (Leone 2014a); question vii) can be addressed in the framework of Greimas's analysis of discourse, as well as with reference to Émile Benveniste's (1966, 1971) theory of enunciation; question viii) can be addressed by the whole of semiotic strategies put forward above.

The analysis must compare and contrast results obtained by applying a common methodology on the various messages. Propaganda materials taken into consideration must include digital magazines, videos, web forums, chants, gadgets, and other items of jihadist merchandising available for sale on the web, social media, apps, videogames, and also new media or social media. Given this abundance of materials, comprehensive analysis must resort to two further analytical strategies: a) sampling of materials according to the principle of non-redundancy: redundant materials are archived, but only new communicative or persuasive features become object of classification; at the same time, statistic occurrence of communicative features is accounted for; b) tailoring of the general methodology to the specific media and genres; generative semiotics is a method of semantic analysis that can be applied to any message; however, specificity of medium, genre, and format must be taken into account, especially as regards the new ways of circulation of meaning in social media.

The multidisciplinary approach described thus far must aim at systematic survey of literature and assessment of the state of the art; succinct description of geopolitical and sociocultural contexts of terrorist jihadist propaganda; classification of its media

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19 For a survey, Leone (forthcoming).

20 For a survey, Leone (2010a).

21 The so-called "semiotic square," a visual diagram used to articulate semantic structures in texts.

sources, with indication of their actual and potential impact; typology of messages, with in-depth analysis of their (verbal, visual, and audio) grammar, semantic patterns, and pragmatic efficacy; sampled messages must be dissected along the layers of analysis set by the essay methodology so as to single out lines of evolution and tendencies in terrorist jihadist propaganda.

7 An experimental reading

The most experimental and riskiest stage of analysis must consist in a cross-cultural, trans-historical, and comparative reading of violent religious propaganda materials: how can their communicative patterns and persuasive strategies be compared and contrasted with those of similar materials produced in other historical and confessional contexts, for instance, with medieval sermons and paintings inciting enrolment in crusades or with early modern appeals to missionary martyrdom? On the opposite, what are the specific features of these messages, and the impact of new communication technology on their efficacy?

Terrorist jihadism emerges from a complex geopolitical and sociocultural context, as well as from a multiplicity of causes. Online propaganda stimulates the conversion, radicalization, and recruitment of jihadist terrorists, but no direct link can be determined between the creation and circulation of online propaganda and the recruitment of new jihadists. Yet, although jihadist propaganda does not play a determinant role in recruitment, it definitely plays an extremely significant role in it. National and international security agencies have two options: a) seeking to block this propaganda, for instance, by trying to control media sources such as social media; b) seeking to understand, and possibly to deconstruct, violent religious propaganda. The first option might be effective, but entails several risks, such as i) potentially reducing the freedom of communication in society; ii) eliminating an important source of information and control by security agencies;[22] iii) facilitating the self-victimization of jihadist groups and their self-representation as communication mavericks and underdogs (Kamolnick 2014). In-depth cross-cultural and trans-historical knowledge of violent religious propaganda can be used so to circumscribe the key persuasive drivers of web jihadist communication. Invocation of the authority of

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22 Strategically, it is better to control a jihadist web forum than to abolish it, forcing jihadist communication to re-emerge through another medium or platform, unknown to security agencies.

a supposedly sacred text, construction of the religious community as victim of sacrilegious oppression, evocation of scenarios of revenge and redemption through subjugation of the enemy, etc.: terrorist jihadist online propaganda shares these narrative topoi with other instances of violent confessional persuasion; yet, new technology of communication gives novel force to the rhetoric of jihadists. The ultimate goal of semiotic analysis must be coming up with an interpretive framework able to capture the intertwining of such lines of persistence and novelty.

There is no predetermined methodology for the cross-cultural and trans-historical reading of violent religious propaganda. Aby Warburg and his interpreters provide interesting insights on the persistence of emotional formulae (*Pathosformeln*) across ages and cultures (Leone 2014b).[23] A representational atlas of the topoi of violent confessional persuasion across epochs and faiths is, indeed, what this last, most experimental section is about.[24]

8 Conclusion: Toward an interdisciplinary understanding

An example of case study will elucidate the methodological approach described thus far. The tragic videos of the beheadings of IS hostages, produced and diffused by IS media agency Al-Furqan, have widely circulated through all visual media and ignited abhorred indignation in the West. At the same time, the same videos have been received with elation and pride by IS sympathizers around the world, and even triggered episodes of media contagion and simulation. Such radical disparity of responses, denoting a dramatic severance of the global audience, should itself be object of interdisciplinary investigation. Recent research on empathy in cognitive neurosciences indicates that motor, somato-sensory, and viscero-motor representations of these videos should lead most viewers to empathize with the victims even at a sub-cognitive level;[25] yet, two puzzling phenomena arise in the reception of these videos: on the one hand, a

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23 For an introduction, See Cieri Via (2011); on Warburg and moving images, Michaud (1998); and Warburg and neurosciences, Gallese (2012).

24 Cf. Flach et al. (2005).

25 Freedberg and Gallese (2007) and Gallese and Guerra (2013). Also see recent research on the response of mirror neurons to the representation of cuts in images (Gallese 2014). On moving images and embodied empathy, see also D'Aloia (2013).

sort of cognitive shock, or saturation effect, prevents the western audience from fully identifying with victims (Montani 2014); on the other hand, sympathizers of IS are induced by propaganda to actually empathize with killers, despite the fact that their faces are veiled, whereas the faces of victims, and their physiognomic expressions[26] are clearly visible. Should one conclude that terrorist jihadist propaganda leads to a dramatic resetting of even the most basic mechanisms of cognitive, emotional, and somatic reactions? To a sort of in-depth cognitive reprogramming? The only way to gauge the persuasive efficacy of terrorist jihadist propaganda is to analyze it in an interdisciplinary framework, as instance of a more general category of "violent religious propaganda."

On the one hand, these videos must be analyzed in their specificity, through placing them in relation with precise spatial, temporal, and cultural coordinates. Hence, the historian of religion will comment on the history of sacrifice in Islam, and the resort to beheading as demonstrative capital punishment (Finn 2012; Pelizzari and Sylla 2014), while the anthropologist of religion will investigate the symbolical results of retrieving this ritual framework, meant at divesting victims of their humanity and connoting them as sacrificial animals. At the same time, the anthropologist of religion will also reflect on the meaning of re-appropriating such ritual frame by killers who turn out to be western citizens with a second- or third-generation migration background.

However, understanding the persuasive potential of these videos will mean also dissecting them from a technical point of view. The expert in media studies must therefore analyze video shots, with their specific angles, transitions, and cuts; quality of resolution; color, sound, visual editing and special effects; as well as the other codes that compose the communicative patterns of these videos (Donghi 2012). The same media scholar, moreover, must suggest intertextual relations between the media *imaginaire* evoked by IS videos and that which characterizes the "media diet" of young western citizens, especially in migrant communities. How do these videos adopt typically western visual and sound formats in order to convey radically anti-western values? Furthermore, what is the pragmatic impact of social media in the diffusion and reception of these materials? Is the exponential replication of these messages in social networks creating a sort of "atmospheric propaganda" (see Hansen 2006) that immerses viewers in a kind of "virtual orality"?

The expert of rhetoric, in his/her turn, contributes to answering these questions through in-depth analysis of the videos' verbal and visual communication patterns,

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26 According to abundant literature, one of the main sources of inter-personal empathy, see Brilliant (2000, 2007); see also Gombrich (1982).

starting from what the killer says when addresses his audience. What kind of subject is posited by this discourse, and what sort of addressee? What rhetorical topoi and figures are adopted in order to terrify, intimidate, and threaten, but also in order to entice potential sympathizers? How is this rhetorical strategy conveyed by gestures and other non-verbal codes, such as the tone and modulation of the voice, the accent, the setting, etc.? Security studies must help in contextualizing the persuasive force of these videos by providing information on their production, circulation, and potential diffusion. In what conditions was it possible to make these videos, and how can they circulate without obstacles throughout the global network? What measures can be taken to block or at least to trace their labyrinthine paths throughout the web? From this point of view, image and international law must offer precious insights on legal limits and possibilities that such materials encounter in their international meandering. How does governmental action against terrorist jihadist propaganda affect freedom of communication in the various legal contexts?

On the other hand, the persuasive efficacy of these videos can be gauged not only through contextualization with reference to their specific coordinates, but also through comparison and contrast with other historical, sociocultural, and confessional contexts. Indeed, cross-culturally and trans-historically, "displaying an enemy's head is one of the most widely distributed signs of victory" (Janes 1991). How do IS videos compare with heads that seventh-century BC Ashurbanipal's Assyrians sculpted in piles on the palace walls? Or to those that eighteenth-century AD Afghan warriors fixed to their tents? Or to those that one finds in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japanese epic *Heike monogatari* (Spierenburg 1984)? And what about the beheadings that marked the French Revolution (Arasse 1987),[27] or the recent well-known beheadings in Burma (in September 1988)? What are the semiotic and anthropological commonalities among these tragic uses of the enemy's bodies to build the discourse of propaganda (Gopnik 2014)? And, on the opposite, what historical, political, and religious specificities characterize IS tragic videos?

Only the joint effort of an inter-disciplinary approach is able to answer these questions and contribute an in-depth understanding of violent religious propaganda beyond what is available in grey literature. Semiotic competences are urgently required not only to give fresh answers to the anxious social demand of knowledge concerning the phenomenon of terrorist jihadism and its web propaganda, but also and foremost for the advancement of fundamental research about the nature of violent confessional persuasion.

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27 Including those of statues, see Dupeux et al. (2001). Cf. Dectot (2007), Weyl Carr (2007), Varner (2004, 2005).

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