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PERFORMING SOVEREIGNTY

War documentaries and documentary wars in Syria

This article explores the images emerging from the Syrian conflict through the genre of war documentaries by focusing on the performance of sovereignty. Drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality and Butler's performative theory, I look at states as performative agents that stage power in front of the camera as a form of self-legitimation. War documentaries are part of a documentary war in which image, information and emotional involvement have become weaponised. I assess a few examples of religious and secular sovereignty performed for journalists who are embedded with various militias. This genre is brought about through cooperation between the embedded reporters (i.e. working inside an army or militia) and the fighters assigned to protect and show them around the territory they control. This results in a symbiotic relationship in which both sides co-produce a heavily mediated image of the war from the inside, one that satisfies the journalist desire for 'exclusive access' and the fighter's desire for recognition. Such a representational pact contributes a unique feature to the war documentary genre in which the films that show the raw reality of war as much they offer an opportunity to perform the state before the camera. From this perspective, the fighters do not only appear as destroyers but as builders of a new order, thus complicating the image of the jihadi as an irrational, nihilistic and violent subject.

Keywords governmentality, Syrian Civil War, war documentaries, sovereignty, performance, Vice News, gonzo journalism

Introduction

As the Syrian revolution became militarised in 2012, the Syrian government started losing ground in different parts of the country. From the early days, 'liberated areas' became experimental spaces of difference where new forms of governance were implemented. In disparate ways, the opposition militias sought to prefigure the post-revolution, post-Assad era. However, as early as Spring 2013 there were numerous cases of corruption, power-abuses and brutality in the areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, 2016: 127), which seemed to mimic the methods and means of the Assad regime. As a reaction, many fighters and civilians turned towards Islamist principles as a guarantee of order and as an alternative to both the perceived lawlessness of the secular opposition and the re-

lentless brutality of the government. Although a significant number of Islamist militias operated under the umbrella of the FSA but others, like the Al-Qaeda offshoots Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), were clearly in opposition to the allegedly secular or ‘moderate’ Islamist character of the FSA. By late 2013 infighting between opposition militias, and their conflicting visions of sovereignty, had become rampant. This chaotic scenario became a breeding ground for a new type of stately jihadism, which openly engaged in the post-9/11 imagery geopolitics of the external actors and attracted much journalistic attention.

Focusing on documentary journalism, the aim of this essay is to analyse three non-fiction documentary films about life under the rule of different, religious and secular, militias as performances of sovereignty. These documentaries are crafted as lengthy, narrative news items aiming to show life within rebel-held territories. Significantly, the films at once replicate and challenge some of the representational trends of the post-9/11 oriental Gothic.¹ The ambiguous and often contradictory representations of the war and its fighters lie as much with the subjects’ desired self-presentation in front of the camera, as with the agendas of filmmakers behind the camera. This representational pact between the filmmakers and their subjects also includes a unique feature: these documentaries are not only raw accounts of the daily reality of war, but also opportunities to perform the state for the camera. From this perspective, the fighters do not only appear as destroyers but as builders of a new order. This complicates the image of the jihadi as an irrational, nihilistic and wild subject.

The breadth of documentaries about the Syrian war is remarkable and an exhaustive discussion of the genre would be an encyclopaedic endeavour. Since this is an ongoing conflict which has attracted a great deal of attention and involvement from global players, the propagandistic nature of many of these documentaries is overt, and their proliferation can be seen as a filmic avatar of the war itself. These war documentaries are part of a documentary war in which image, information and emotional involvement have become weaponised in a heavily media-mediated war. As a critical prelude to the genre, this essay examines three war documentaries, consisting of two religious examples— Aris Roussinos’ *Rojava: Syria’s Unknown War* (2013) and *Ghosts of Aleppo* (2014) — and one of secular sovereignty — Medyan Dairieh’s *The Islamic State* (2014) — captured by, or rather performed for, the journalists working or collaborating with Vice News, the western media outlet that has followed the war more closely from within rebel territory. By being authorised and invited to film inside different militias, Vice News journalists have arguably crafted a new form of war documen-

tary, which is now being reproduced by media outlets such as Al Jazeera, BBC, Russia Today or the ISIS-run Al-Hayat Media centre.²

The spectacle of sovereignty in the post-9/11 world

Flowing from Michel Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' and Judith Butler's performative theory, contemporary analyses of sovereignty and state power focus on the contingent, spectacular and practice-based texture of governmental practices. Thus, I use the terms sovereignty and state-power synonymously, since the state is nothing other than a collection of practices that 'reproduce and/or subvert discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and their performances' (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 433). From this angle, although the multiple sovereignties that coexist and compete in Syria might not qualify as states in the conceptual language of international relations, they certainly act, speak and operate like states. As Jeffrey notes, '[t]heatricity is at the heart of the state' (2013: 20) and as far as the performance goes, these non-state actors are playing their sovereign part. Consequently, it makes sense to describe Syria as a collection of sovereignties, rather than as a 'divided sovereignty' (Pavel, 2015: xiv) or 'fragmented sovereignty' (Barker, 2014).

Moreover, the texture of post-9/11 sovereignty has become even further porous, protean and spectacle-based. As Bushbridge observes,

[i]n the context of taken-for-granted globalisation, nation-states are rendered increasingly porous by global forces that undermine both their claims of national homogeneity and assertions of absolute dominance of state. If sovereignty is always incomplete, a necessary fiction in our state-centric modern order, then its claims are always performed.
(2013: 659)

The 'War on Terror' is a good example of this porous sovereignty being both stretched and undermined across the globe. Whereas the 9/11 attacks might be regarded simultaneously as a breach of American sovereignty and as the birth of global American-led sovereign power, they certainly did not entail the construction of an alternative order. However, in the context of the Syrian war, we find not only the sovereignty of the Syrian government, or the global governmentality of the 'War on Terror', subverted; rather, we also encounter alternative sovereignties emerging from the interstices of internationally recognised states.

Such sovereign spaces of difference cannot be deemed 'terrorist' in the traditional sense of the term, for they hold territory and defend and expand their borders, they collect

tax,³ provide food and other necessities for the populations they rule, which they also educate in their own schools and discipline, however coercively or consensually, through an organized network of police, courts and prisons.⁴ Though perhaps the best known and more obvious example is ISIS, which explicitly regards itself as a state, or in its own words ‘the state’ (*al-dawla*), the same practices that signal sovereignty can be found across rebel-held territory in Syria.

None of these alternative, emerging sovereignties have enjoyed official state-recognition and yet there are hints of recognition in political discourse and practice. For instance, François Hollande’s proclamation after the November 2015 attacks in Paris that ‘France is at war’ and that the shootings constituted ‘an act of war’ confers implicit statehood to the organization claiming responsibility for the action. Hollande’s rhetoric, however, falls in line with the paradigm-shift instantiated by the ‘War on Terror’ and the ambiguous negotiation of ‘the principle of sovereign equality’ in the context of ‘wars with non-state actors’ (Noorda, 2013: 337). Nonetheless, the emergence of alternative sovereignties in Syria has not only challenged established notions in the field of international relations, but also representational and discursive trends.

The 9/11 attacks marked the beginning of a new era signalled by the advent of “‘new” or “categorical terrorism” [which] refers to the nonconventional, non-political, and, even “irrational” violence that primarily targets Western civilians’ (Malreddy, 2015: xx). Analogously, it also marks the ‘adscription of abnormality to the terrorist (and, by extension, to Arabo-Islamist masculinity)’ which subsequently becomes a ‘human monster’ (Bosch-Vilarrubias, 2016: 26). The many sovereign entities coexisting in Syria challenge some of these representation trends of the post-9/11 era. On the one hand, the conception of an ‘irrational’, nonconventional and nonpolitical violence associated with ‘categorical terrorism’ (Goodwin, 2006) is challenged by a violence that is in every sense stately: highly rational(ized), organized, goal-orientated, and largely aimed at locally ruled, non-western subjects. On the other hand, the ‘abnormality’ and monstrosity of the oriental jihadi is replaced by the ambiguous signifier of the Syrian opposition fighter, which the west, both at the institutional and the popular level, cannot decide whether to regard as an Islamist threat or as a victim worthy of solidarity and support.

Consequently, the militias’ performance of their aspiring and newly established sovereignty needs not only to be enacted before their subjects but also be displayed to global audiences as a way of obtaining international backing and recognition. This global staging is done largely through visual media that featured not only the militias’ own propaganda, but the care-

ful and strategic collaboration with journalists willing to embed with them⁵. Unlike more traditional war documentaries, many of the films about the Syrian war contain lengthy scenes of life inside the militia-ruled territories, providing a perfect opportunity for the fighters to appear as competent governing agents.

War & peace on camera

Many of the war documentaries produced about the Syrian conflict, including the ones discussed in the essay, strike a careful balance between footage of war and peace, between life at the frontlines and in the hinterlands. In so doing they provide a fairly comprehensive visual account of sovereign practices. Yet, the ideological narrative behind the act of filming, beyond specific agendas or loyalties, needs to be interrogated. These new documentaries, which more often than not feature the reporter as a protagonist, seem to be marked by what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘an irresistible urge to “return to the Real”, to regain firm ground in some “real reality”’ as a way of escaping ‘the virtualisation of our lives, the experience that we are living [...] in an artificially constructed universe’ (Žižek in Hammond, 2007: 2). They offer ‘unprecedented [rare] access’ (Dairieh, 2014a), ‘real life scenes’ (Alfarra, 2016) or claim to have gained ‘exclusive access’ (Dairieh, 2014b & 2015) to a war which has arguably been dominated by contradictory and misleading accounts. Furthermore, they often feature subjective camera shots, clearly obtained from a hand held camera that allows the reporter (who at times does the filming himself) to run away in situations of danger.

It is also worth noting that most reporters covering war stories are male, and their filming projects are often framed as a personal adventure. Though there are significant exceptions to the rule, quite a few documentaries feature the reporter as a quasi-protagonist and convey information through a highly subjective lens that focuses on his personal, dangerous experiences. This emphasis on experiencing war through the reporter seems to seek a ‘return to the real’, as opposed to more impersonal, ‘objective’ and perhaps ‘virtual’ accounts. It is as if by identifying with the endangered reporter that the viewers could get a peek into the actual reality of the war. The pervasive narrative of adventure also enshrines Syria as a ‘heart of darkness’, an uncivilized and mysterious land about to be penetrated by an apprehensive and somewhat more civilized outsider. In the case of Western journalists, like British Vice reporter Aris Roussinos, who also glorifies war as ‘dangerous’ and ‘sexy’ (2014: 4), this could be construed as a neo-colonial approach. However, other Arab, and even Syrian, reporters en-

gage in very similar narratives by presenting the realities of war through their own stories of adventure (e.g. Radwan 2014, Alfarra 2016).

The peculiar dynamics of the Syrian war, with a government that harshly limits and controls journalistic activities, hundreds of different militias which are often fighting different and shifting enemies and some factions, like ISIS, kidnapping and executing journalists, makes the act of reporting incredibly risky. In the context of the Syrian War, the practise of **embedding**, that is, obtaining the explicit permission and protection of a given militia to report/film within the group, is essential for the reporter's survival. By embedding with an armed group, the journalist is meant to be guarded from the possibility of being attacked or kidnapped by rival groups. On the other hand, the journalist, who entirely depends on the militia for his safety, is likely to be shown only what the militia wants him to see. However necessary, it should not be forgotten that embedding has been compared to 'watching a war through a straw' (Davis in Altheide, 2009: 7) and that it has the potential for making 'embedded journalists [...] part of a massive propaganda campaign [...] by letting them see "first hand" what the troops [are] going through' (Altheide, 2009: 7).

Though Altheide focuses on the embedding of American journalists with US troops during the 2003 Iraq War, his insights are also valid for journalists of any nationality embedding with Syrian militias. While the militias might not have 'the press sworn to maintain military secrets' (Altheide, 2009: 7), they certainly exercise some agency in regards to what is captured by the camera. Given that the safety of the reporter is dependent on the militia's protection, it is hard to imagine that their work is in no way conditioned by the militia's agenda. The symbiotic relationship between journalist and fighters allows the former to obtain his 'exclusive access' while being protected in return for accepting the militia's restrictions and agenda. On the other hand, it allows the fighters to reach a wider audience and to spread their message and version of the story through an 'objective', 'non-propagandistic' medium. What both sides seek is the authority of objectivity that only the other can provide: the fighter finds validation for his story in the journalist's 'impartial', 'independent' reporting; the reporter finds his 'true' story by letting the fighter speak and, metaphorically, take control over the camera.

This relationship is not only symbiotic, but also deeply performative. If power and identity are always performative, when enacted in front of a camera they acquire a further theatrical quality. As discussed above, the aim of most militias in the Syrian war has not only been to defeat the Syrian government, or their other enemies, but to build and impose a new order. Consequently, in the documentaries they have allowed journalists to make about them, the fighters are not only invested in 'staging, exposing and exhibiting' (Mortensen, 2009: 49)

their war feats for the camera but also in showing their state-building achievements. In this regard, these documentaries constitute a new hybrid genre, one that represents war as much as alternative sovereignty. Further, sovereignty is performed from a marginal position of non-state actors and groups, some even considered terrorist organizations, which do not have access to the media and propaganda resources recognized states do. For all its shortcomings and at times misleading grand claims about portraying ‘the truth’, these documentaries certainly achieve one thing: to give a voice, however edited, to subjects which were previously regarded as unrepresentable. What follows is a more detailed discussion of three representative documentaries, their portrayal of sovereignty and their complex interaction with the tropes of the post-9/11 orientalist Gothic.

Behind the frontlines: Visions of a new order

The three documentaries under discussion, *Rojava: Syria's Unknown War*, *The Islamic State* and *Ghosts of Aleppo* span from late 2013 to mid-2014, a time that coincides with the decline of the FSA, the rise of ISIS and other jihadi groups, the fascination of the international left with the Kurdish struggle and the upsurge of the conflict through the use of chemical weapons. These films focus on three different militias that cover the spectrum of religious to non-religious sovereignties being implemented in Syria. At one end of the spectrum is the secular and left-libertarian Kurdish PYD, at the other end is the singularly harsh Islamist rule of ISIS, and between them, the self-confessed ‘moderate Islamist’ Islamic Front, which at the time of filming was part of the FSA. Within the confines of this essay, I can only concentrate on one particular aspect of sovereign performance, i.e. discrete practices of power and statecraft displayed for the camera in each documentary. The three state rituals thus discussed are a military funeral, a police patrol and a visit to a Sharia court.

All three films were broadcast online by Vice News and are the work of Aris Roussinos (*Rojava* and *Ghosts*) and Medyan Dairieh (*The Islamic*). These two journalists were embedded with a representative collection of different militias from ISIS and al-Nusra (Dairieh) to the PYD and different factions of the FSA (Roussinos). It must be noted that whereas both reporters work for Vice and show a significant interest in daily life behind the frontlines, their journalistic style could not be more different. Roussinos often appears as a protagonist in his own films, with plenty of camera exposure which allows him to narrate the documentary through a personal account of danger and adventure. Dairieh rarely appears on camera, though

as an Arabic speaker, he is very active in conversation with his subjects. Furthermore, Dairieh rarely interrupts the film with personal narrative, thus making his invisibility an incisive part of his interviewing style. It is important to note the different performances elicited by the white British Roussinos, who relies on fixers or English-speaking locals to conduct his interviews, and the British-Palestinian Dairieh, who communicates with his subjects in an Arabic dialect which is very similar to their own.⁶

Rojava: Syria's Unknown War was shot in September 2013 and focused on an at the time underreported front of the Syrian war: the Kurdish areas of north-eastern Syria. This is roughly a year before anarchist academic David Graeber popularized the Syrian-Kurdish struggle among western leftists with his article 'Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria?' published by the *Guardian* during the momentous siege of Kobane. Roussinos' documentary, which begins with nocturnal and shaky footage of his illegal and perilous crossing of the Turkish-Syrian border around the Hasakah area, constitutes one of the first performances of PYD-YPG/J sovereignty for a western media outlet. In fact, in typical Vice News style, the film's cold opening⁷ features a short teaser with footage of a funeral. The sound of women ululating and shouting *Shehid Nemirin* (Kurdish: Martyrs do not die) is accompanied by the colourful display of flags and banners with the YPG/J colours, pictures of the martyrs and Öcalan. The scene, which is shown in full towards the end of the film, contains Roussinos' fixer, Kovan Direj, explaining the logic of the ritual: 'Today's funeral is a shahid funeral for a YPG soldier. He was killed by ISIS and al-Nusra. The people who bring him here they make a celebration like a wedding. [...] His bride is Kurdistan, our land.' This poignant, heavily ideologized and performative opening foreshadows the tour of sovereign practices that Roussinos is later taken to.

However different ISIS' and al-Nusra's narratives of martyrdom might be from the YPG/J's, they certainly share a strong preoccupation with the ritualization of death. Nowhere is this rendered more clear than in the burial that Roussinos attends in Qamishli, shown in a long five-minute scene. The mood is at once celebratory, sad and cathartic. The funeral is preceded by a large armed parade heavily adorned with flags and photos of the martyrs. Significantly, the camera shows a mother grieving over her son's coffin in the funeral vehicle itself. A voice behind the camera addresses her: 'Auntie let us take him [the body] so the others can see.' The funeral is a cathartic ritual for the families but also a display of the YPG/J's sovereign power. Women ululate and shouts of *Shehid Nemerin* can be heard all over, as people throw rice and flowers over the flag-wrapped coffins. The scene is shot through a number

of close-ups of people's rice dotted, crying faces kissing the coffins and pictures of the deceased.

The wedding symbolism is overt, and as the coffins are finally covered with soil, Kurdish electronic music can be heard in the background, echoed by cheerful clapping. As Martin-Baron points out, 'military funerals illustrate the complicated dance between biopolitics and necropolitics', because they perform a symbolic 'act of surrogation' which, in the case of YPG/J's funeral, could be read as the symbolic marriage of the fallen soldier to the nation. Here, the ritual can be said to 'dramatize [...] surrogation, and in so doing lay bare the real stakes of war: not the tragedy of the individual lives lost [...] but the process through which those bodies are ultimately interchangeable and perpetually replaceable' (2014: 52) *Queer Necropolitics*.

The necropolitical features prominently in documentaries about the YPG/J, especially in later films from 2015, in which its fighters proudly display for the camera the charred corpses of ISIS enemies (Roussinos, 2015). This is a way of counteracting ISIS propaganda, which enshrines the fallen soldiers as martyrs gone to paradise. By abusing and exhibiting the disfigured bodies, the YPG/J fighters are not only highlighting the gap between ISIS ideology and reality, but also performing their sovereign power over the defeated bodies of their enemies. Although ISIS' own propaganda videos are heavily necropolitical, its image in *The Islamic State* remains largely concerned with biopolitics.

Medyan Dairieh embedded with ISIS in Raqqa, at the same time the Caliphate was declared (June 29th 2014). Dairieh's is perhaps the documentary that best captures different aspects of sovereign life under ISIS' rule. As an organization with a large and proficient media presence, ISIS does not need western media to get its message across; it is clearly not seeking western support either. Instead, ISIS fighters and officials speak defiantly in front of the camera, cultivating an image of fearlessness.

This becomes clear when Dairieh is taken on tour with a very important branch of ISIS' state apparatus: the Hisbah or religious police. Abu Obida is the patrol leader who shows the reporter around; he proudly talks about his job and the Hisbah's achievements while constantly nursing his Kalashnikov rifle. The patrol, unlike most patrols depicted in war documentaries, is not carried out during the night, but in broad daylight. Abu Obida's actions are not in any way connected to the war and do not target looters, marauders or enemy fighters. Given that the footage was obtained during Ramadan, Abu Obida's primary task was to check that people do not eat, drink or smoke during the day. He also makes sure that women are dressed appropriately and that trade is conducted in a fair manner.

This sequence is not only a performance of ISIS sovereign control over the daily life of its subjects but also a display of normality, showing that in spite of the war life in Raqqa is business as usual. Only Abu Obida's omnipresent Kalashnikov, a non-human agent that can be said to perform sovereignty by its very presence, seems to be a reminder that this is an unusual patrol. Abu Obida is very proud of the Hisbah's work and brags in front of the camera about the fact that alcohol or people under its influence cannot be found in Raqqa any longer. He seems to be in a cheerful mood and walks around street vendors cracking jokes about observing the fast and playfully asking merchants if they are trading fairly. These scenes highlight the combination of coercion and consensus that are the foundation of the Islamic State's and, in fact, of any state's successful rule. Its openly displayed ferocity should not obscure the fact that 'the Islamic State wishes to establish consensus by any possible means. [...] Unlike other armed groups, for example, it is using the revenues from strategic resources [...] to rebuild key socio-economic infrastructure' (Napoleoni, 2014: 107).

Many of the encounters with the Hisbah demonstrate the theatrically playful line between coercion and consensus: the policed subjects smile at the camera, explain how they have not done anything wrong and therefore are not afraid of the police. Abu Obida's humourousness performs ISIS sovereignty as much as his omnipresent weapon; whereas his jokes represent the allegedly friendly and approachable mask of the state, the Kalashnikov stands for its naked face. His jokes are veiled threats that actualize Abu Obida's personal power as much as that of the state. Furthermore, the policeman presents the Hisbah's work as a moral crusade through the lexicon of jihad. Consequently, ISIS members are not only 'fighting infidels with [their] machine guns, but [they] have to face these vices as well', as Abu Obida explains. The fight against 'vices' is implicitly construed as a war against the infidel within, providing also a legitimating narrative for ISIS rule behind the frontlines.

Towards the end of the patrol a few neighbours gather around Abu Obida and plead with him for the release of a street vendor that has been kept in jail for a week. The crowd's spokesman is wearing a *qafiyah* that only reveals his eyes. It is difficult to know whether this scene, the only one that obliquely hints at conflict, was staged or not. However, it offers Abu Obida the perfect opportunity to explain how the justice system works. The claimant seems to be operating on the assumption that befriending a powerful person would 'get his voice heard', and perhaps this is the way things worked before the revolution. Abu Obida refuses to act on behalf of the man and in turn explains how: 'You can go to the office and make a claim'. Not only does this explanation function to demonstrate the transparency of ISIS rule but it also entails a promise: 'Your voices are heard and you can meet him [the councillor]'.

Everything in the scene speaks of functional bureaucracy, state authority and legality, resulting in an atmosphere of sovereignty performed for the camera.

This incident becomes the cue for taking the journalist to the prison and courts of Raqqa. In the prison, a number of men accused of alcohol and drug offences become the ventriloquist dummies of the state. They all express their compunction in similarly scripted ways and thank ISIS for ‘showing them the way back to their religion’. Unlike other prison scenes from the Syrian war, the jailors do not scold or even talk to the prisoners, but let the prisoners talk directly to the camera in full confidence that they will not say anything inappropriate. The sincerity of the prisoner’s repentance is in many ways irrelevant, though the voice over narration brings it into question. Whether the prisoners actually repent or not, ISIS’ power over its subjects is such that it does not even need to show it in front of the camera; its prisoners become the embodiment and voice of the state’s power and ideology. Of course, if their repentance is sincere, ISIS’ sovereignty can be said to have penetrated deeper into its subjects’ psyche, rendering coercion almost unnecessary. But even if the prisoners have been coerced into expressing repentance, the symbolic implication of letting their prisoners speak on their behalf is that ISIS’ power is altogether uncontested. In this last case, ISIS sovereignty has succeeded to the point that its policed and punished bodies do the performance for the camera, without the explicit prompting of their policing and punishing captors.

While Dairieh was embedding with ISIS in Raqqa in July 2014, Roussinos embedded with the Islamic Front in Aleppo; the result was *Ghosts of Aleppo*. This was a time when the militia had stopped receiving funding from Qatar and was fighting on two fronts: on one side the regime, on the other ISIS. The fighters featuring in the documentary openly call for western support and are eager to demonstrate how, in war and peace, they are different from both ISIS and Assadist ‘terrorists’. While showing Roussinos a Palace of Justice conquered from the regime a fighter explains how: ‘the regime burned up all the contents of the building. Cars, files, things that are important for the people [...] This is Assad’s regime. It’s a terrorist regime in all aspects’. Analogously they often make the point of being different from ‘ISIS terrorists’ and deserving of western support through peculiar statements such as this one by Abu Amr: ‘I love Angelina Jolie, I love her. I’m a moderate. This is moderate Islam. Nicole Kidman is also magnificent’. The strategic performance of ‘moderate Islam’ is sometimes coupled with an oblique threat. In the words of an unnamed fighter: ‘The most important point is, if IS[IS] and the terrorists continue on like this, they will get stronger *and reach Europe*, if we don’t get support’ [my emphasis]. Such statements further confirm that ‘[l]ike the “bad Muslim” [extremist], the identity of “good Muslims” [moderates] is inextricably tied to

terrorism' (Beydoun, 2014), a logic that is very much present in *Ghosts of Aleppo*. A large percentage of the fighters' interaction with Roussinos is aimed at hammering in the point that the Islamic Front is a moderate Islamist militia, which deserves Western support. Their moderation is meant to stand against the 'terrorist' character of ISIS and the Assad regime, which, in turn, highlights their usefulness to the West as an ally against its purported enemies.

In response to the terrorist sovereignties of the Syrian government and ISIS, the Islamic Front claims 'to fight criminals, and establish security and safety'. In order to demonstrate the Islamic Front sovereign competence, Roussinos is taken on night patrol and to the Sharia courts. The visit to the court does not seem to entail the resolution of any significant conflict, but it offers the sharia judges the chance to show how the institution works. In fact, Roussinos, in his voice-over narration, refers to the court as a prefiguration of Syria's post-revolutionary future: 'As well as fighting the regime, the Islamic Front is trying to build a state in areas of Syria under its control. Their Aleppo sharia court provides a glimpse of what a Syria after rebel victory might look like.' It is clear that whether the court actually works in the way portrayed in the film or not, the Islamic Front wanted to perform in front of Roussinos a specific model of Islamist sovereignty that aspires to be a blueprint for post-War Syria.

The court tries to get information about drug dealers from a young man and also sentences an FSA fighter accused of stealing to a harder punishment, the details of which are not discussed in front of the camera. The interrogations are conducted in a fairly routine fashion, the judges duly and tiredly doing their job. The accused do not seem to have any significant information to give and are allowed to leave. Religious elements feature in the whole process, especially in the case of the FSA soldier, who tries to impress the court by telling them 'I'm memorizing the Qur'an. Thanks to Allah, I have memorized two chapters already.' The judges, unimpressed, let him go.

The three judges convey a sense of moral seriousness but also a drained, dutiful leniency. Their performance is more discursive, future-oriented and concerned with what they deem legitimate and illegitimate sovereignties, rather than trying to show that they are successfully ruling at the time of film. In a short conversation with Roussinos they explain what their role would be in the new society: 'After the regime has fallen, we believe that the Muslim majority in Syria will ask for an Islamic state.' However, the judge also feels the need to specify how such an Islamic state would differ from the Islamic State, already in place in some parts of Syria. Interestingly, the judge is the only voice in *Ghosts of Aleppo* who does not perform the 'moderate Muslim' identity or adopts a pleading tone. Instead, the judge explains what

sets his court apart from ISIS entirely in terms of Islamic jurisprudence. He agrees with practices like mutilation or beheading but points out that this ‘only applies to criminals’. Practices like crucifixion or indiscriminate killing are completely unacceptable. Analogously, he states that ISIS has made the mistake of declaring a Caliphate ‘before the regime has fallen and before they’ve established what in Sharia is called Tamkeen’ or ‘a stable state of affairs’. By virtue of having declared the Caliphate, ISIS can demand obedience and severely punish disobedience.

Compared to ISIS or the PYD, the Islamic Front’s performance comes across as a much less stately, still engaging in the practices of sovereignty but in a much less spectacular and self-conscious way. The provisionality and contingency of the court signal that the new society is not being established within the shell of the old; it is merely being rehearsed, performed. Arguably due to the fact that, unlike ISIS and the PYD, the Islamic Front was in a precarious retreat at the time of filming, the militia had to focus much more on fighting than on state-building.

The different sovereign performances of ISIS, the PYD and the Islamic Front are animated by very different ideological and strategic concerns. However, they tend to share many structural similarities when it comes staging and performing power for their journalistic guests and, by extension, for a global, English-speaking audience. Although the attitude towards this real or imaginary audience might be threatening or pleading, or, in fact, a complex combination of the two, the practices of sovereign power displayed by the three groups are uncannily similar. Whether through military funerals, police patrols or prison/court scenes the militias seem to have a clear purpose when performing the daily workings of their regimes: to act, sound and look like sovereign and legitimate states.

Conclusion

To conclude, the three examples analysed here show the importance attached by the different militias to their governmental practices and to their being perceived as competent sovereign agents. Although this brief discussion can only account for a small fraction of the performances featured in the three documentaries, let alone in the whole genre, it highlights the structural similarities between the militias with competing political agendas. Narratives of martyrdom and a concern with order, security and justice dominate these documentaries and help shape the image of the relevant militia as states. The urgency with which they perform

their particular sovereignty in front of the camera also represents an important common feature, which enshrines the three militias as potential rulers of a future Syria in the eyes of a global, though mostly western, audience. This might take the form of an implicit or explicit demand for support, as in the case of the PYD or the Islamic Front, or a defiant threat, in the case of ISIS; however, the performative aspiration to be seen as a functioning state is always present.

By allowing the fighters to perform sovereignty in their own terms, thus lending them control over their own image, these documentaries partially complicate post-9/11 representations of Middle Eastern, Arab and Islamist subjectivities. First, they challenge a Muslim and Arab bias in western reporting of the Middle East. By giving a voice to a Kurdish multi-ethnic and multi-faith militia through a colourful, and largely secular, burial ritual. Second, they complicate the image of jihadi terrorism by depicting ISIS as a highly rational, organized and efficient state agent. Furthermore, Islamist fighters often appear with their faces uncovered, in a humanising, ordinary and amicable fashion; at times, expressing emotions in ways that challenges their characterisation as monsters. Third, they show the strategic and ultimately meaningless character of the moderate-extreme Islam dichotomy, by depicting how these terms are clearly deployed to obtain western support. To this end, the documentaries analysed in this essay show how the difference between various Islamist factions could be best understood as diverging interpretations of Sharia, as opposed to moderate-extreme dichotomy.

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¹ For a discussion of how post-9/11 neo-orientalist narratives have developed an imaginary of the macabre and mysterious that can rightfully be called Gothic, see Gentry 2016.

² For examples of later documentaries that reproduce the traits of the three films discussed in this paper, see Bazargan, 2014; Radwan, 2014; Al-Hayat, 2015; Alfarra, 2016.

³ The collection of tax appears as a salient feature in ISIS definition of what constitutes a state. In the proclamation of the Caliphate in 2014 the emerging sovereignty was described as '[a] state where sharia law is implemented, zakat [mandatory alms giving for Muslims] is levied, jizya ['protection tax' for non-Muslim] is imposed on the Christians and the honor of Muslims is protected' (Alazreg, 2016: 38). ISIS has not only systematically collected levied the relevant taxes from its subjects but has also used this procedure as a way of displaying and exerting its sovereign power.

⁴ Significantly, Hosken describes how ISIS established his rule in Raqqa, and other Syrian cities, not through direct military conquest but 'by first opening a 'Dawah' office, *dawah* meaning 'invitation' or 'summons'. [...] It took control of vital public services and transportation, as well as the production of bread. It added to its funds by demanding *zakat*, or taxes from people. As well as running protection rackets to extort money from business in the city, it imposed strict dress on women, and segregated girls from boys in Raqqa's schools and colleges'. (2015: 168-169)

⁵ An example of how the militias share their own propaganda are outlets like ARA News, linked to the YPG, or Al-Hayat Media Centre, linked to ISIS. Their videos and articles are then shared through many Twitter and Facebook accounts belonging to militia members or sympathisers all over the world. An example of how the militias broadcast their achievements through a non-partisan medium are the documentaries analysed in this paper, which are the crystallisation of the implicit pact between fighters and journalists.

⁶ For a thorough discussion of the cultural dimension of reporting about 'the Islamic Peril' see Karim (2001).

⁷ Cold opening refers to starting the film with an unintroduced and short excerpt that will be shown later in context and at length.