Central European Journal of International and Security Studies
Ahead of Print

DOI: 10.51870/SQAC7837
Research article

The Terrorist Spectacle Revisited: Assemblages of Terror from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to the Islamic State

Jakub Zahora
University of New York in Prague, Czech Republic, ORCiD: 0000-0002-6463-0007, corresponding address: jzahora@unyp.cz

Abstract

This article employs the assemblage thinking to further the debates on the nature of terrorist spectacle. The spectacular nature of terrorism – inducing shock on the wide part of the public – is widely regarded as one of the defining traits which distinguish it from other forms of political violence. So far, most studies have focused on the role of modern media in enacting the terrorist spectacle, showing how violent actions are conveyed via media straightforwardly to audiences who react to the (spectacular) acts with the feeling of terror. To nuance these works, I suggest adopting the prism of assemblage which highlights how various human and non-human elements co-constitute the social and political world(s). The 'assemblage thinking' makes it possible to discern two features crucial for studies of terrorist spectacle. First, it highlights how it emerges from the interplay of particular objects that carry within them wider meanings, various historically situated modes of transmitting information and images, and broader civilisational fears related to the perpetrators' identities. Second and relatedly, I show that rather than a wilful strategy pursued by human actors, the terrorist spectacle is a contingent phenomenon produced by the interplay between various elements and practices. I illustrate these points by juxtaposing Palestinian groups' plane hijackings in the 1960s and 1970s and the recent ISIS attacks.

Keywords: *terrorism, spectacle, assemblage thinking, PFLP, ISIS*

First published online on 25 August 2025

Introduction

On 23 July 1968, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked a plane of EL AL, the Israeli national airline, heading from London to Tel Aviv via Rome. Throughout the decade following the first hijacking, the Palestinian groups conducted a series of similarly high-profile operations, the most notable of which was the so-called Dawson's Field hijacking in September 1970 when four planes belonging to different companies were successfully hijacked by Palestinian operatives, and three of them landed at the airfield in Jordan. These events were heavily discussed at the time, and just like subsequent operations conducted by the PFLP and other Palestinian factions, they were viewed by millions of people worldwide. Almost half a century later, on 19 December 2016, Anis Amri, a Tunisian national who had failed to receive asylum in Germany, drove a lorry into a crowd of people attending a Christmas market in Breitscheidplatz in Berlin, killing twelve people including the driver of the vehicle. Following the attack, the Islamic State (ISIS) released a video in which Amri pledged allegiance to its leader, and investigations revealed that he was instructed by the organisation. Clips of the events were instantly circulated by global media outlets and shared with viral speed, as were many other ISIS-affiliated attacks.

Discussions of the two (sets of) events bear similarities in terms of the extraordinary qualities assigned to these actions: While the Palestinians' tactics of hijacking planes were thought to present origins of 'modern, international terrorism' (Hoffman 2006: 63), the ISIS-inspired attacks were said to pose an 'unprecedented threat' to Europe (Rotella, Edge & Pollack 2016). At the same time, their modus operandi was completely different, with largely bloodless plane hijackings on the one hand, and a murder spree on the other. But what connects them is the spectacular nature of these actions, a quality that, as a rich literature now demonstrates, is one of the key features distinguishing terrorism from others kinds of political violence.

This article juxtaposes the actions of the Palestinian militant groups in the 1960s and the 1970s with ISIS attacks in order to interrogate what constitutes the 'terrorist spectacle' and how it comes into political existence. There is a wide agreement in the literature that terrorism obtains its political and societal salience via this 'unusual or unexpected' quality 'that attracts attention, interest, or disapproval' (Cambridge Dictionary 2024) of large segments of the public, and that modern media are crucial for the emergence of modern terrorism, with its goal to instil fear in the population by connecting violent events with mass audiences (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Kellner 2015; 2004; Kraidy 2017; Livingston 2019; Matusitz 2015). However, the existing literature does not really deal with the

exact process of enacting certain acts of (political) violence as instances of terrorist spectacle, and they approach these dynamics in a somewhat straightforward fashion: In these accounts, certain actions are captured by media and conveyed to the audience, and this leads to affective reactions defined by 'terror' on a wide scale. In this article, I problematise this understanding of how spectacle comes into being by building on the works which attend to the interplay of human and non-human elements in construing the phenomenon of terrorism: Rather than treating technologies, material artefacts and physical space 'as merely incidental or instrumental objects, vehicles for violently carrying out pre-existing political aims' (Larabee 2015: 442), I follow scholars who have foregrounded the importance of more-than-human agency in the emergence of terrorism (see de Goede 2012; de Goede & Sullivan 2016; Amoore & de Goede 2008).

In particular, taking cues from the existing literature which has employed this prism to investigate the politics of terrorism (Puar 2007; Sharma & Nijjar 2018; Telford 2020), I draw on the concept of assemblage to demonstrate how (particular constellations of) objects, perpetrators, civilisational anxieties and media technologies create a terrorist spectacle. As I discuss more extensively below, the assemblage thinking, first laid out by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), adopts a perspective that takes into account how 'humans and their constructions' as well as 'some very active and powerful nonhumans' (Bennet 2005: 446) form contingent networks that act in and upon the world. It is this 'mode of ordering heterogeneous entities so that they work together for a certain time' (Müller 2015: 28) that enable these various entities to come together and produce differentiated versions of the spectacle. In what follows, I argue that the assemblage thinking enables us to discern the politics of the terrorist spectacle in a more nuanced manner. Specifically, I pursue two interrelated arguments that further the existing debates by interrogating the foundational elements of these phenomena.

First, while I acknowledge that modern mass media – in their various modalities – are indeed crucial in the process of enacting a spectacle, and thus establishing certain acts of political violence as 'terrorism' (see for example Boggs & Pollard 2006; Livingston 2019; Kraidy 2017), I extend the analytical breadth by arguing that this process needs to be considered with regard to additional key nodes of the assemblage in a more complex manner. I show that the wide resonance of certain acts of violence is a product of interplay between three key elements: various available media technologies that are able to capture and transmit only certain kinds of social reality, thus engendering historically differentiated forms of spectacle; specific types of objects employed by the human actors which are embedded in much wider networks of meaning and thus carry specific political salience; and the civilisational anxieties related to the perpetrators' identities these acts tap into. What I thus argue is that the quality of spectacle and its political salience are

related to registers that involve but also exceed the modern communication realm and their role in conveying the violent actions, and that the notion of 'modern media' effectively blackboxes the various modalities of these means.

Second, and relatedly, I depart from the existing works on the terrorist spectacle which posit it as a wilful strategy pursued by certain actors-cum-terrorists who utilise the modern media milieu to use violence to produce spectacular events to be consumed by large segments of the society (see for example Matusitz 2015; Spencer 2018; Kellner 2015; 2004). By drawing on the assemblage-oriented perspective, in the article I show that while human perpetrators are an integral part of the network of agents, objects and discourses that together generate the spectacular qualities, their intentions do not determine the network's particular forms, nor its societal and political effects. In line with the larger propositions of the assemblage approach, I thus demonstrate that rather than a calculated scheme, the spectacular effect that (co-)defines certain actions as terrorism should be conceived as a contingent phenomenon whose exact articulation is a product of interplay between human as well as non-human elements.

In what follows, I utilise the assemblage thinking to demonstrate these arguments via discussion of Palestinian operations and ISIS attacks. These sets of events have been chosen since, as noted above, they have been described as 'unprecedented' and spectacular instances of terror in spite of vast differences between them: They are not only temporally distant from each other by some four decades, but they are also defined by divergent characteristics, such as existing technologies, adopted methods, objects used in the attacks and the wider (geo)political context in which they took place. Their comparison thus enables us to better discern how spectacles come into being via different means and with divergent qualities. Importantly, use of this empirical material does not seek to be exhaustive and comprehensive in terms of exact reconstruction of the respective assemblages producing 'attention-grabbing occurrences' (Kellner 2002: 2) on the part of large segments of society. Rather, it draws attention to the various elements which constitute these phenomena, how they work together and how they undergo historical change. As such, this article poses as an exploration seeking to provide a novel prism regarding how we can think through the notion of the terrorist spectacle in a more nuanced way.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section starts by noting the common human-centred bias of much of the scholarship on terrorism, and briefly discusses the recent academic efforts to address it. It then introduces the assemblage perspective that guides this paper. After that, I turn to works that deal with the notion of spectacle and its terror-related instances: I show how they mostly underappreciate the various modalities and components of how the spectacle comes into being, and how these shortcomings can be addressed by the assemblage perspective that makes it possible to capture both different modalities of modern mass media and

how these modalities relate to other processes, objects, practices and rationalities. The Palestinian plane hijackings and ISIS attacks are then discussed in the next section, illustrating my claims regarding the differentiated qualities of terrorist spectacle that defined them. The conclusion briefly discusses the political stakes of the article's arguments.

Modern-then-Human Studies of Terrorism and Assemblage Thinking

Terrorism has been infamously hard to define (see e.g. Stampnitzky 2017). The conventional approach usually hinges on several key characteristics: terrorists have political goals; they are non-state groups; they target civilians; and terrorism uses fear to achieve its goals (Hoffman 2006; Richards 2015). This mainstream understanding of terrorism largely subscribes to state definitions, something that has been subjected to extensive critique (Blakeley 2007; Jackson, Murphy & Poynting 2009). By contrast, critical scholars emphasise the arbitrariness and political situatedness of these definitions (Bhatia 2005; Ditrych 2014; Khan 2023; Stampnitzky 2013; Zulaika 2018) and point out the power-laden effects of such selective designations which facilitate employment of measures which would be otherwise impermissible (Bartolucci 2010, 2012; Jackson 2007). But much of this literature is still tied to the understanding of terrorism as a result of human agency, even if authors recognise the salience of technologies within these efforts, such as relying on mass media to amplify a perpetrator's message (cf. Hoffman 2006; Laqueur 1977) or utilising novel technologies for inflicting large-scale harm (see e.g. Kurtulus 2011).

But as already mentioned, more recently scholars have set out to challenge the human-centrism of much of the existing scholarship (see Larabee 2015). This paper is particularly engaged with scholarship which traces how 'terrorism' emerges through material-semiotic practices as 'a specific social problem' (Stampnitzky 2013: 17; see further de Goede 2012; de Goede & Simon 2013; de Goede & Sullivan 2016; Sullivan 2020; Amoore & de Goede 2008). These works show that constructing terrorism is not simply a matter of language, as exploring 'the (discursive) problematisation' of terrorism is accompanied by 'analysis of the ways in which the problem is rendered technical, how alliances are forged in its name [and] how it acts in local setting' (de Goede & Simon 2013: 317). Approached this way, terrorism is a phenomenon which emerges from the work of heterogenous networks that consist not only of human actors such as 'government officials, security experts, risk analysts' but also 'the technological constructs articulated and deployed by these experts, including transactions data algorithmic risk models, network charts and risk indicators' (Amoore & de Goede 2008: 178). It is through these emergent forms that terrorism is rendered an 'object of knowledge' (Stampnitzky 2013: 5) which then 'enable[s] practices of intervention' (de Goede & Simon 2013: 325). While this paper works in the same direction as paying attention to various ele-

ments going into establishing terrorism, its focus is not on how this phenomenon is constructed as a knowable and (ideally) governable reality. I rather contribute to the critical studies of terrorism by investigating how particular acts of violence are enacted as instances of terrorism by focusing specifically on how this understanding is tied to the quality of spectacle. To do so, I utilise insights from the literature on the social and political lives of assemblages.

Assemblage Thinking

Having originated in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work and developed extensively by DeLanda and others (DeLanda 2006, 2016; Nail 2017), the notion of assemblages has entered social theory and has been utilised in various fields and disciplines, including international politics and security (Abrahamsen & Williams 2011; Acuto & Curtis 2014; Collier 2006; Sassen 2008). Understood broadly as 'an approach that is capable of accommodating the various hybrids of material, biological, social and technological components that populate our world' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 2), assemblage thinking makes it possible to go beyond the commonly reified categories of social and political analysis. I do not strive to offer here a full overview of the scholarship on assemblages and a comprehensive exploration of its genealogies and possibilities, a task that far exceeds the scope of this paper. What rather guides this section is the proposition that assemblage thinking enables consideration of the politics of terrorist spectacle in a way that departs from the dominant focus on the role of modern media technologies. Accordingly, I utilise several points salient to utilise the notion of assemblages 'as a way of thinking analytically' (Bleiker 2014: 77) about how these dynamics constitute subjects and objects of social life.

First, the prism of an assemblage draws our attention to the multiplicity of various elements which go into establishing entities and phenomena that constitute the fabric of the social and the political. Deleuze's often quoted definition talks about an assemblage as 'a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms' (Deleuze & Parnet 2007: 69). Building on this broad proposition, Bennet argues that elements of assemblage include a wide spectrum of agents, from human actors to 'animals, vegetables, and minerals; nature, culture, and technology' (Bennet 2005: 445). It is this quality, the ability to capture various types of actors and objects within one frame to better understand how they operate in the world, that is appealing to many students of the social. Since the notion of assemblage enables 'eschewing the nature–culture divide' (Müller 2015: 29), it allows us to make better sense of how seemingly disparate elements can work together and form new realities.

What is crucial for comprehending the assemblage dynamics is that various elements that compose them are related to each other in a strategic manner – there is heterogeneity but also relationality at play. Deleuze continues his definition by noting there are not only heterogenous elements that constitute an assemblage

but also 'liaisons, relations between them'; assemblages exist thanks to 'a symbiosis, a "sympathy"' as well as 'alliances, alloys' (Deleuze & Parnet 2007: 69). DeLanda (2006: 11) proposes that 'the properties of the component parts can never explain the relations which constitute a whole', showing that it is the coming together of the distinct parts that make assemblages distinct and salient. In doing so, they are also generative as they do not merely exist as entities composed of various parts linked to each other, they also 'produce new territorial organisations, new behaviours, new expressions, new actors and new realities' (Müller 2015: 29). Indeed, it is this quality that has made them such a worthwhile object of study across disciplinary fields: Foregrounding assemblages enables us to revisit political processes and dynamics, and study novel forms of agency and action. At the same time, this does not mean that there is some kind of key actor or strategising rationale which dictates actions and movements of the individual parts, or an assemblage as a whole. Bennet (2005: 445) expresses a wide understanding when she argues that an assemblage is 'not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage'. While assemblages give rise to new social forms and political realities, they are not 'directed' by an articulated goal.

Assemblages are further inherently non-stable, ever undergoing changes and shifts. Even though they can 'become relatively stabilised in their co-functioning' (Bourne 2019: 148) in particular periods, this stabilisation is never indefinite as all assemblages are 'historically contingent entities' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 4) whose compositions are in flux and unable to be clearly delineated. Even entities foundational to the social and political world we inhabit are undergoing transformations in their precise articulations and manifestations derived from organisation of composing elements: Acuto and Curtis (2014: 7) note that 'something like "the state" can only be talked about in terms of the heterogeneous elements that comprise specific historically situated states, and the processes and mechanisms that provide it with the emergent properties and capacities of statehood'. Assemblage thinking demonstrates that there is no transcendence of phenomena, but rather that we need to attend to their particular contextual forms.

This also means it is impossible to establish boundaries between different assemblages. While scholars do limit their inquiries to specific formations – such as a power grid (Bennet 2005), or a state (Sassen 2008) – these are pragmatic, necessary and heuristic analytical decisions. Since elements that are engaged in one assemblage can become a part of a different one, adopting this prism means that we cannot conceive of specific entities as isolated from other ones. Some assemblages are further subsets of others that populate this world as they 'are born into a pre-existing configuration of other assemblages' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 8), while different ones overlap (DeLanda 2016). The existing empirical investigations have demonstrated that we simply cannot think of social reality in terms

of clearly delineated and self-contained entities (Abrahamsen & Williams 2011; Sassen 2008). I employ these assemblage-centred insights in the rest of the article to provide a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of terrorist spectacle.

Terror Assemblages: Between Spectacle and (Modern) Media

While the quest for the definition of terrorism remains elusive (Stampnitzky 2017), much of the literature converges on the proposition that one of the crucial components of a 'terrorist' attack is its spectacular and affective nature. In 1975, Jenkins already argued that 'terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theatre' (quoted in Matusitz 2015: 163). While the definitions of terrorism are rather diverse and emphasise different aspects, they largely agree that the key element of what becomes known as an instance of terrorist violence is not primarily the physical, 'objective' damage the particular action inflicts. Schmid (Schmid 2013: 80) echoes much of the existing literature (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Kellner 2004, 2015; Mirgani 2017) when he argues that in terrorist action 'direct victims are generally only passive tools for the realization of terrorist goals' since they are 'mere props for the staging of a violent spectacle meant to influence the perception and behaviour of one or several other audiences – the ultimate targets in the macabre spectacle of terror'. It is thus the psychological impact on those who come witness the act of violence – via different means, as I discuss below – which is then translated into a larger societal and political effect within the given polity that makes terrorism a particular political phenomenon.

This is why I focus on the spectacle as one of the most clearly distinguishable qualities of terrorism when compared to other forms of organised violence that operates via this psychological-cum-political effect on the public. Relying on Debord's (1995) work on the society of the spectacle, many authors (Boggs & Pollard 2006; Giroux 2007; Kellner 2004, 2015; Livingston 2019; Mirgani 2017; Weber 2002) have gone beyond Jenkins's observations by proposing that what establishes actions as terrorism is not the nature of the act itself but rather the images and notions of threat and indiscriminate violence that these actions evoke. In Debord's classic work, the spectacle is both a product and a defining feature of the capitalist era 'in which representation dominates social life and images mediate human relations' (Kraidy 2018: 41). Commodification and fetishisation of the visual on a global scale mean that the spectacle should be 'viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force' (Debord 1995: 13). Debord's ideas have been taken up by scholars to account for the specific qualities of terrorism, with most conceding that it is the quality of spectacle which endows terrorist actions with such political and societal resonance. As noted above, conceived in terms of 'violence-based communication' (Schmid 2005: 140), experts argue that the audience of terrorist actions is much more important than its victims.

Thus, what is at stake in terrorist acts is not their damage and the casualties themselves but their visibility and the affective reactions they evoke in the onlooker (Kraidy 2017). Relatedly, authors in most cases focus on modern media as facilitating the spectacle which, in this understanding, 'is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1995: 12). Accordingly, this literature highlights 'the centrality of the new visual media' (Giroux 2007: 17) in enacting the terrorist spectacle (Kellner 2015; 2004). In a nutshell, it is the theatrical and performative quality of the given act (rather than the actual physical damage), and its imprint on the audience(s), mediated by modern communication technologies, that distinguishes terrorism from other forms of political violence (see for example Hoffman 2006; Laqueur 1977; Schmid 2005).

While it would indeed be misleading to downplay the importance of modern media technologies in constructing terrorism as a public event, what is problematic about these accounts is that they effectively treat spectacle in a straightforward and somewhat deterministic way. They posit media as conveyors and amplifiers of the given acts and the audience as a site where the spectacular nature of the terrorist incidents becomes intersubjectively felt after consuming images of violence. In other words, these accounts do not engage the questions of what images become conveyed, how exactly they reach the audience, under what conditions, what other elements (such as spaces and objects) are involved, how these relate to existing pertinent discourses and imaginaries, and so on. For example, Spencer (2018: 279–80) argues that 'the use of more spectacular coordinated violent tactics is one way of gaining greater media coverage' by perpetrators and that their logic is that 'the larger, more coordinated, and more dramatic the attack, the bigger the audience will be'. Similarly, in the quoted remark above, Jenkins talks specifically about hostage-taking as drawing the watchers' attention without elaborating on why this particular practice poses as 'a theatre'. These accounts thus effectively blackbox what goes into rendering something a (terrorist) spectacle, focusing instead solely on how media capture and convey the given acts of violence to the audiences who react in affective ways, feeling 'terror' when exposed to these images. They thus effectively circumvent the question of what constellations make these reactions possible. The matter is not just that the 'symbolic significance' of terrorist attacks is 'multifaceted' as they 'mean different things to different observers' (Juergensmeyer 2017: 73). Without dismissing that it is indeed the case that social identities do impact viewers' understandings of events, it is simplistic to assume that only audience matters in constructing an event as a spectacle in a straightforward manner in which exposure to violence, amplified by mass media, establishes the given act as an instance of terrorism on the part of the public.

This paper argues that the assemblage prism makes it possible to account for these shortcomings by adopting of a much wider analytical perspective – one that

considers various elements and agents as I demonstrate below. But what is crucial here is that the assemblage perspective further enables the problematisation of 'modern media' by differentiating between their various modalities and the effects of these modalities. The popular media from the late 19th century onwards are clearly important for coming to terms with how the terrorist spectacle comes into being – that is, the speed with which they can connect the audiences with the captured events, and the mass nature of this audience are indeed crucial for generating widely spread effects of awe and terror throughout the social body (Kellner 2015). But the assemblage thinking helps address how the notion of 'modern media' often works to blackbox the different articulations of communication means in the 20th and 21st centuries: The treatment of 'modern media' in the literature glosses over different modalities and forms that the means of communication and representation take, which has a crucial impact on the nature of spectacle (co-) engendered by specific technologies. By adopting the assemblage perspective and approaching not only the terrorist spectacle but also modern media themselves as ever-changing networks of devices, human actors, captured realities, distribution technologies and the affects they generate, we can better discern how different forms of modern communication generate divergent enactments of the spectacle.

The visual mass media – such as TV and still images circulated via newspapers that I briefly discuss – were crucial in setting up the conditions for the emergence of the terrorist spectacle as they quickly connected the object of reporting with broad audiences (Mirgani 2017).[1] The visual component was indeed crucial in these dynamics as TV footage and photographs could convey the nature of the concerned attack (and thus co-generate its spectacular nature) in a more visceral – and hence efficient – way than could written accounts. At the same time, to visually capture the given events required specific technical means and professional expertise (such as a trained TV crew with adequate equipment), and hence only certain kinds of events could be captured. For most of the modern period, moving images in particular were usually consumed in particular settings, such as living rooms equipped with TV sets (cf., Schulz 1997). The mass media, even as they reached a mass audience, were thus limited in terms of what kind of (visual) content they could convey, and often in terms of in what kinds of spaces they would be consumed.

By contrast, social media, a crucial part of the current media landscape, still operate via both mass and visual registers as they provide immediate information to millions of users, but they are defined by several novel features. Through their reliance on sharing and reposting, they eschew the traditional hierarchies and

1 A thorough discussion of modern media in their various modalities are outside of the scope of this paper. Here, I focus only on the aspects most important for the paper's arguments.

authority, and circumvent gatekeeping practices (Bro & Wallberg 2014). Effectively, they then enable a viral and immediate spread of information pertaining to the concerned events which can be generated and distributed by myriads of accounts, thus very quickly oversaturating the public space and people's news intake with images and data, and their various interpretations, which form the terror spectacle. Furthermore, they present a more embodied experience of consuming the news and information as they can be accessed essentially everywhere on mobile phones and other devices: from a family gathering in living rooms, the venue of consuming 'traditional' visual TV media, to jogging in a park or commuting on a train (Munster 2011). Due to their pervasive presence across different registers, they thus construe much closer and ubiquitous engagements with the events-cum-spectacles.

It is thus not just the speed and mass reach that matter, but also the situated, sensual and material properties of media, and their interaction with the consumer and her surroundings and wider conditions, that impact the process of enacting meaning and generating affect. As a result, the various media forms (re)assemble the news, human actors (both producers and consumers), technologies and objects in widely different ways – and with divergent affective responses. What this means for the topic at hand is that the assemblage thinking reveals that enacting a terror spectacle is multifaceted not only in terms of actors, technologies, objects and discourses that participate in it. It also helps discern how media – usually treated in a somewhat uniform fashion – can contribute to this process in differentiated ways. As I will show below with reference to the Palestinian and ISIS actions, it is the (im)possibilities to capture the terrorist events-in-becoming and the modes of spreading and consuming news and information that should be taken into account when discerning the process of enacting the spectacle.

Terrorist Spectacular Assemblages in History

This section utilises the conceptual framework of the paper to discuss construing terrorist spectacles via various assemblages with regard to the Palestinian hijackings in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the more recent ISIS-affiliated attacks. These two cases share some similarities: The perpetrators in question were members of non-white communities and were posited as a racialised Other (Bhattacharyya 2013; Jannack 2021) – a framing which facilitates establishing them as terrorists in the mainstream Western discourse (Cainkar & Selod 2018; Selod 2018) – and they could not achieve the same status of a shocking threat if it was not for cutting-edge media in the respective periods. However, as I demonstrate in what follows, the specific nature of spectacle which posited Palestinians and ISIS-affiliated individuals as terrorists engaging in 'unprecedented' violence was vastly different, derived from quite divergent sources and had rather disparate effects.

I discuss how the spectacular quality is more than simply 'a social relation' emerging from circulation of mediated violence per Debord: how it is derived not only from the site of the audience but also the attackers' identities, which tie specific acts to larger geopolitical and civilisational constellations, framing these actions as politically significant and concerning; how there are different ways in which media actually connect the audiences with events that are then rendered terrorism; and how different objects contribute in divergent ways towards the spectacular nature of a given attack. In making these points, the paper nuances our understanding of how a spectacle comes to be and, more generally, how particular actions can become understood as terrorism. I thus show that it is contingent and contextual 'sympathies' between the communication means through which these actions are conveyed worldwide, the objects employed, and the fears pertaining to the perpetrators' identities and their positioning within larger civilisational frames that allow these events to 'gain significance' as 'actual configurations' with a global imprint (Collier 2006: 400) in the form of terrorist spectacles.

First International Terrorism

Arguably the most stunning operation of all the Palestinian plane hijackings was carried out in September of 1970: In the span of four days between 6 and 9 September, PFLP operatives and their sympathisers sought to hijack five planes of different airlines. While not totally successful, the Palestinians and their allies managed to gather three planes at Dawson's Fields, a former RAF base in Jordan, an accomplishment that captured global attention. Although the so-called Dawson's Fields hijackings led to Black September, a de-facto civil war between the Palestinian factions and the Jordanian governmental forces which proved to be highly detrimental for the Palestinian cause (Sayigh 2004: 262–281), this does not diminish the world-wide resonance of the hijackings which was immediate and massive. In total, various Palestinian groups hijacked 16 planes between 1968 and 1976 (Byman 2011: 40).

As suggested above, a number of authors (Jackson 2005; Zulaika 2018; Bartolucci 2012; Bhatia 2005) have demonstrated that there is a glaring discrepancy between the material costs of terrorism and the perceptions and imaginaries it generates. In this regard, terrorist actions against aerial targets in the 1970s are very illustrative. Even Hoffman, who was quoted in the introduction to underscore the literature's contention with regard to establishing Palestinian actions as the commencement of international terrorism, notes the following regarding aviation security:

> Serious and considerable though the above trends are, their implications for — much less direct effect on — commercial aviation are by no means clear. Despite media impressions to the contrary and the popular misper-

> ception fostered by those impressions, terrorist attacks on civil aviation — particularly inflight bombings or attempted bombings — are in fact relatively rare. Indeed, they account for only 15 of the 2,537 international terrorist incidents recorded between 1970 and 1979 (or .006 per cent) and just 12 of 3,943 recorded between 1980 and 1989 (an even lower .003 percent). (Hoffman 1997: 10)

Rather than the material costs imposed by these actions, it is the peculiar quality – the spectacle – that grants terrorism its prominent position in political discourse and public consciousness. In the case of the Palestinian groups' plane hijackings, this effect is intimately linked to the emergence of the aerial business as marker of the global at the time. As argued by Adey (Adey 2004: 1368),

> The growth of air transport is a relatively recent phenomenon. The airports we know today have become necessary only since the development of mass air transportation in the late 1960s. Before the introduction of wide-body jets, airports and planes were filled by upper-class and business passengers. Air travel was still heroic and romantic.

It is important to note here that the hijackings were largely bloodless operations (which contrasts with the ISIS's actions discussed in the next section) as in most cases, passengers were either released right after landing or later exchanged for apprehended terrorists. Rather than violence against civilians, 'the hijackings would transfix the world' (Byman 2011: 40) by targeting and disrupting practices that stood for progress and novelty. The increasing availability of commercial flights meant that this form of travel came to mark the process of internationalisation and interconnectedness of the world, a development enjoyed and witnessed by an increasingly growing segment of the population (at least in the West) which could then better relate to Palestinian actions and be impacted by them, even if only in a mediated form. In one sense, it was the new qualities of this form of mobility that significantly facilitated Palestinian action. Due to this novelty, 'there seemed to be no coherent defence against such attacks as the world aviation industry was not equipped to deal with the gigantic task of checking individually the millions of passengers who travelled each year' (Choi 1994: 14). Palestinian actions could thus become successful (indeed, become spectacular) thanks to these particular material and organisational arrangements.

In order to better comprehend this process, we need to point out the several crucial nodes of the given assemblage. First, it was the airplanes, the objects that were both the embodiment and the conductor of dynamics of internationalisation, that played a key role in establishing Palestinian actions as instances of terrorism via their prominent position within these developments: The assemblage of the

spectacle was related to, and intersecting with, those networks that constituted 'the international'. The Palestinian operations took place during a period in which airplanes, although specific material artefacts, effectively became crucial sites for performing the global interconnectedness and diminishing of distances. In this context, plane hijackings did not only target individual travellers and companies as they rather related to the very fabric of the emerging notion of the international space. Stampnitzky (2013: 26–27) shows how, in the US context, policy-makers and experts were especially concerned with the transnational quality of violence across national borders, and it was these concerns which gradually posited terrorism as one of the leading threats in the 1970s. The plane hijackings were then seen as especially serious as they were threatening 'aeromobility's centrality to American global power' (Hazbun 2021: 226). In this regard, the planes were crucial nodes as they carried these international qualities inherently within them, surpassing the immediate act of seizing control of particular physical objects by human perpetrators.

The spectacular and supposedly novel nature of the Palestinian groups' actions must thus be situated vis-à-vis these larger developments as it was derived from being situated within much wider popular imaginaries, going beyond, but also feeding into, the symbolism and the materiality of the aircrafts. In other words, the shocking nature of the hijackings was co-generated by the sake of also being a part of other assemblages related to the air travel as the 'international' phenomenon that was imbued with extraordinary social and political status during this period. Tapping into wider socio-technical networks further enabled the Palestinian groups' actions to be enacted as international and hence spectacular actions. These actions had 'alarming implications for an increasingly interconnected international system' as the 'the PFLP moved its regional struggle into the international sphere not just in the ideological dimension . . . but in a physical sense' (Chamberlin 2012: 72). Put differently, the international element of Palestinian actions, and their resulting imprint on the global public's attitudes, did not rely solely on their agents crossing state boundaries in pursuit of their actions but in tapping into the very channels that established the international. It was via utilisation of the planes – embedded in much wider networks of discourses, materialities and practices – that facilitated 'the internationalization of the Palestinian question' by 'targeting global networks of transportation' (Chamberlin 2012: 72), and enacted the Palestinian actions as *unprecedented and international terrorism*: They would become spectacular because they revolved around objects that were embedded in other sets of practices and realities which made the Palestinian operations recognisable as terrorism (rather than a 'mere' crime) and granted them such salience and resonance. Furthermore, by posing a threat to the 'increasingly interconnected and diverse global economy' (Hazbun 2021: 234), the Palestinian actions had the potential to disrupt the flow of international capital

that is, per Debord, crucial for the emergence of the spectacle – a constellation which further intensified the political salience of these acts.

At the same time, the role of the planes as objects granting the spectacular quality to the actions of the PFLP and other Palestinian groups was related to the aforementioned spread of modern media. During the 1950s and 1960s, television became commonplace in the Western countries as 'small black-and-white television sets had become an affordable and increasingly essential item of domestic furniture in even the most modest household'; by 1970, there was on average of one television set per four people in Western Europe (Judt 2005: 345). Obviously, these developments transformed how politics and public reactions to political events unravelled, which concerned acts of terrorism as well. Chamberlin acutely observes that Palestinian hijackings and other violent actions 'exploited recent communications technology and the growing interconnectedness of the late Cold War world' (Chamberlin 2012: 72), highlighting the importance of the medial landscape for the emergence of 'international' terrorism.

As has been discussed above, modern media are often posited as a crucial element in the 'becoming' of terrorism as they enable vast audiences to connect with the particular act of violence, and the technological developments that took place in the 1950s and 1960s did indeed facilitate the Palestinian actions' wide circulation and global attention (Porat 2022: 1075–1077). However, to simply point out the role of the media in establishing a public spectacle negates the other elements which go into this process. It also simplifies the relationship between particular media constellations and specific actions captured by them, and how this interplay engenders enactments of various types of spectacles. In the case of the Palestinian operations, it was not only the spread of TV per se which facilitated hijackings as an international phenomenon. Given the state of technology at the time, camera crews would not have been able to follow fast-paced movements and actions (such as individual bodily attacks conducted by ISIS, as discussed later). However, the hijacked planes, especially once landed and steady, lent themselves as satisfactory objects whose images could be captured by cameras and transmitted globally by television networks (see archival footage in British Pathé 2014) and then as still images further distributed by major newspapers across different international contexts (Porat 2022: 1075–1077). The massive objects could also be spectacularly blown up in the presence of journalists and their devices, and subsequently could be conveyed to the viewers in their homes, theatres and offices.

What the assemblage perspective reveals is that the terrorist spectacle was not merely brought on by the presence of modern communication means in the late 1960s and the 1970s that had been utilised by the Palestinian militant groups. Rather than being merely a function of the media's reach that drew 'unprecedented global attention to the terror organization' (Porat 2022: 1076), it was the physical properties of planes which made the media coverage and circulation of the

Palestinian actions possible given the state of the media technology. At the same time, these actions were so attention-worthy because of their (abovementioned) 'international' symbolic salience, thus highlighting how the material and the sign blend into each other within assemblages (cf. Nail 2017). Furthermore, the relative lack of existing footage (which had to be captured by media professionals and with the use of expensive devices), and the prominent position of established media meant that much of the global audiences were exposed to the same visual material. The resulting terrorist spectacle thus emerged through a particular assemblage constituted by the Palestinians' actions, materiality and symbolism of the planes, and media technologies available at the time. This illustrates not only that the relationship between media, audiences and the emergence of spectacle is far from straightforward, but also how the perpetrators' actions are translated into awe-inspiring political effects via an interaction of numerous agents, objects and practices that compose the given assemblage, a result exceeding the strategic consideration of human attackers.

Lastly, the reasons for establishing Palestinian actions as such a striking case of political violence relates to the wider milieu and histories in which they were embedded, and the civilisational fears they tapped into. Palestinian actions in the late 1960s and the 1970s claim a prominent position in the historical accounts of terrorism as the Palestinian groups were said to 'revolutionize terrorism by making it global' (High Level Military Group 2016: 23) by forming close alliances with aligned violent groups from other countries, from the Red Army Faction in Germany to the Japanese Red Army, while also conducting operations that defied established borders (Hughes 2015: 460–462). More importantly, the actions of the PFLP and other Palestinian armed factions were significant due to the fact that they were a prominent part of the growing discontent within the global distribution of power (Chamberlin 2012). The Palestinians' actions fed into the Third World movements that challenged the Global North's dominance in international politics and over the power of labelling different forms of political violence. Relatedly, this resulted in contestations over the very definition of terrorism in international forums (Ditrych 2014: 55–75). The actions of the PFLP were thus related to global struggles over the current order and Western superiority along with disrupting the global interconnectedness.

The Palestinian terrorist spectacle assemblage at the time was thus also closely related to assemblages of anticolonial resistance, and it was these interlinkages which endowed them with even more resonance and allowed Palestinian terrorism to acquire such a prominent position on the international stage. It was not just the acts of violently taking control of the planes themselves and their media representation which granted these actions the status of the spectacle. As noted by Stampnitzky (2013: 1–3), in the early 1960s plane hijackings were still considered 'only' a criminal endeavour, an understanding which changed dramati-

cally over the course of the next decade. Among other reasons this was because of their international dimension, an aspect especially important in the case of the Palestinian actions that effectively negated state borders. These practices were further rendered as politically significant because they were embedded in a particular historical moment, a connection that amplified the significance and resonance of the act itself. Altogether, then, enactment of this violence as terrorism was thus produced by webs of heterogeneous practices, objects and bodies of knowledge which involved not just the actions of the Palestinian human actors and the actual hijackings, but also the TV and newspaper networks that facilitated the global circulation of images of the hijacked planes, and connections with the anti-colonial transnational assemblages that were challenging the existing global distribution of power and notions of civilisational superiority. It was due to these connections that the Palestinian actions obtained their saliency as 'collectives in which power and actors emerge' (Bourne 2019: 148) and that generated the affective and societal resonance thanks to these particular synergies.

Embodied Horrors of ISIS

The perpetrator of the Berlin attack in 2016, Anis Amri, first murdered Łukasz Urban, the driver of the truck that Amri subsequently used to plow into crowds at a Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, killing eleven people. He then escaped and was shot in Italy several days later (BBC 2016). According to some commentators, the attack struck the German public with such force because the country had largely been spared from political violence in the era of 'Islamic terrorism'. For example, an article written on the first anniversary of the attack noted that 'the assault on the popular Christmas market brought home to Germans the reality that as part of Europe they, too, are a target for mass terrorist attacks' (The Local 2019), thus underscoring that the terrorist spectacle is linked to the novelty of its enactment. Furthermore, the site of the attack appears to have contributed to the shock that defined the German public's reaction. Breitscheidplatz Square is widely considered one of Berlin's central attractions, sought by tourists and locals alike, and its Christmas markets are renowned. Conducting an attack in Germany in general (a country largely spared from this particular type of political violence) and the square in particular (a space considered serene and peaceful) shows some degree of organisational strategy, thus highlighting the human agency in terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, in what follows, I show that the emergence of the Berlin attack as a major instance of terrorism was embedded in webs of realities that contain but also go beyond ISIS's intentions. Compared to guerrilla operations, establishment of governance structures, and public executions and torture – which the organisation had conducted in Syria and Iraq – ISIS-linked activities in Western Europe and the US were of a radically different nature. Crucially for this article, they were also distinct from the spectacular international operations

of the Palestinian groups discussed above and obtained their terrorist qualities because of vastly different features when compared to those that positioned the PFLP as terrorists four decades earlier.

For starters, the properties at the site of the attack pertained not only to the symbolic level but also to its physicality, which facilitated certain actions. Unlike in other parts of the world, which had to deal with similar acts of political violence, German public spaces in general, and Breitscheidplatz Square in particular, were largely unprotected from this modus operandi: Only following the attack did German authorities install wire and sand baskets, steel pedestals and mobile bollards at the square and other sites across Berlin, with costs totalling some 2.5 million euros (The Local 2019; Walsh 2018). In other words, space not only played a symbolic role but the physical objects became parts of the assemblage facilitating the spectacular nature of the terrorist act.

In a way that relates to but at the same time differs from the importance of planes as objects embedded in wider networks of materiality and meaning discussed above, the physical means and artefacts employed by the ISIS-affiliated attackers are key for establishing the sense of spectacle. Amri's use of a vehicle to conduct his attack subscribes to the dominant modus operandi of ISIS-affiliated attackers: Since 2015, ISIS-linked attacks in Europe and the US were conducted by persons who resorted to individual, so-called 'lone-wolf' attacks against civilians in urban settings. These attacks were mostly carried out with the use of common objects like kitchen knives or consisted of car-ramming attacks. Everyday objects thus became an integral part of the networks that established acts of terrorism by their appropriation by the attackers, which then meant that the terrorist threat became effectively omnipresent since anything could be weaponised. This was explicitly argued by a CNN article (Bergen 2016) which described trucks as 'killing machines', hinting at a world in which a mundane device can become a means of imposing harm. In contrast to the planes – themselves elements of the assemblage constituting 'the international' – hijacked by Palestinian groups some half a century before, in the case of the terrorist spectacle defining ISIS actions, it was mundane everyday objects that became integral to constellations which produced images of individual bodies exposed to physical harm. In this regard, the ISIS actions echo histories of car bombs utilised to 'terrorize populations' by weaponising widely available and inconspicuous vehicles (Davis 2007: 5).

While the tactics of using mundane objects to conduct what becomes rendered as a 'catastrophic event' is thus not novel – one can further point to the planned use of widely available chemicals in the purported 2006 liquid bomb plot to carry out 'catastrophic' attacks (Hoijtink 2017) – its entanglement with other practices and aspects of ISIS operations led to the emergence of an apparently 'unprecedented' spectacular threat with unique characteristics and resonance. The Berlin attack is exemplary in terms of how ISIS actions enacted a specific

kind of fear and the resulting terrorist spectacle by enacting the possibility of omnipresent violence in everyday life against individual bodies via use of otherwise 'non-political' objects. Knives, axes and cars, part and parcel of mundane and common use, can be instantly turned into tools imposing harm, thus installing uncertainty and fear among Western publics whose members are not in general used to this constant presence of danger. In this regard, it is noteworthy that a museum in Bonn has expressed interest in obtaining and displaying the truck used in the attack (Kroet 2017), explicitly, even if inadvertently, highlighting the political salience of everyday objects.

Importantly, in contrast to the ISIS attacks and violent rule in Iraq and Syria that have been described as 'medieval brutality' (Wyke 2015), the ISIS attacks in Western countries in general did not claim massive casualties, and they have been miniscule in comparison to the suffering imposed by ISIS and other armed groups in the Middle East (and beyond). And yet, the ISIS-affiliated individuals' actions in Europe did also enact a particular terrorist spectacle, though quite different from the performative brutality of the group's governance in the proclaimed Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. What went into rendering events such as the Berlin attack as spectacular in terms of their political impact and societal resonance was how the possibility of using everyday objects for political violence generated the highly individualised and embodied nature of the ISIS attacks. Amri's murder of Urban, the Polish driver, and hitting dozens of people with a truck constituted an attack against identifiable human victims, and many other ISIS-linked attacks resulted in the murders of individual victims rather than a massive death toll. As such, the spectacle established through these actions is strikingly different from the hijacking of planes or ISIS operations in the Middle East: Its dreadfulness is not derived from brazen disruptions to the flow of global exchanges nor mass casualties, but from harm imposed on individual bodies via mundane objects. The theatrical qualities are rooted in the images of gruesome damage whose sources are (at least potentially) omnipresent in daily life. These qualities were then enhanced by fears that such violence can always further proliferate, as again illustrated recently by the concerns that ISIS-affiliated individuals might adopt this modus operandi in the wake of the 2025 New Orleans attack that bore clear resemblance to the Berlin events (Guardian 2025).

This embodied quality intertwined with physical means of violence then relates to the particular mode of media technologies facilitating the viral spread of these images and fears. In this regard, there are indeed parallels with the Palestinian actions that became globally prominent (aside from other features) because of the introduction of new forms of media. Nonetheless, this comparison glosses over important differences between the mass use of TV in the 1960s and smartphones in the 2010s, as consuming the media content in the two cases is a vastly different experience. The availability of devices conveying information nowadays means

that nearly everybody can be constantly exposed to images, eye witnesses and descriptions of the attacks in a manner which is next to impossible to escape. For example, in the case of the Berlin attack, 51,000 tweets related to the incident were identified (Fischer-Preßler, Schwemmer & Fischbach 2019), manifesting the circulation of the attack in online spaces.

In contrast to the mass communication modalities discussed above, social media enable a multiplicity of actors to produce visual materials pertaining to the attack and its interpretations. Effectively, then, the spectacularity of the attacks is multiplied as its depictions and impressions virally spread throughout the online sphere and break into the shared social space. This also highlights how the agency in enacting the spectacularity of such incidents pertains to a number of various actors and material constellations, from the individual perpetrators to the social media users, communication companies, the apps' technical properties and so on (cf. Bennet 2005). As such, the impact of the ISIS attacks is derived from, but also exceeds, individuals' actions: While the Islamic State–affiliated perpetrators were aware of the existing media technologies, the spectacular nature of their actions resulted from these multi-agential assemblages connecting physical actions utilising specific objects to wide technological networks in which various elements partook, and which generated political effects which were not under the control of the specific attackers.

Importantly, the comparison with the Palestinian hijackings and their representation via communication means highlight how it is not just the *mass* quality of media but also the (im)possibilities of dissemination of these representations that are pertinent to the politics of generating the terrorist spectacles. The omnipresence and immediacy of social media's dissemination of news and images bring about a radically different experience in comparison to seeing TV footage or newspaper photographs of the plane hijackings. The constant and detailed exposure means that we all can rather vividly imagine ourselves in the place of victims and relive the attack. This is even enhanced by the possibility of consuming this content on a street, or when taking a bus – that is, sites at which the attacks took place, thus further narrowing the gap between the viewer and the victim in addition to the individualised nature of the attacks. In the case of the ISIS attacks, the '"spectacular theatre" of violence' (Juergensmeyer 2017: 73) is composed not only by the (human) act itself, but also by the (technologically facilitated) viral spread of its accounts and the embodied, even if still mediated, quality that enables media consumers to more closely relate to the acts of violence. In the case of ISIS spectacle, it was the linkages between everyday objects, human bodies and specific media technologies that co-constituted particular assemblages which gave rise to terror spectacle revolving around immediate and personalised bodily harm.

Nonetheless, it is not only the specificity and embodied nature of the terrorist attacks mediated by viral communication means which triggered grave concerns

on the part of many Western security professionals as well as the general public; the everyday weaponisation appears threatening because the current online technologies and social media enable potentially wide recruitment. The capabilities of ISIS in this domain – the sleekness of their recruitment videos, the appeal of the messages and efficient targeting of those who might be susceptible to the group's message – led to tangible fears that home-grown radicalisation would become a mass phenomenon. These worries were confined not only to academics (Awan 2017) but also think-tanks (Ward 2018), security agencies (Steinbach 2016) and citizens broadly (Koerner 2016). Thus, the issue is not only that anything can become a weapon. Because of these socio-technological developments, the possible scope of who might resort to violence is ever-increasing and potentially overwhelming. It is the combination of the weaponisation of mundane objects and (supposedly) wide recruitment which granted the ISIS violence such a resonance on the part of audiences consuming the media coverage of these events – due to these confluences, attacks against individual bodies could exponentially increase into boundless series of violent incursions.

Last, these fears cannot be disentangled from imaginaries of certain populations that posit them as prone to becoming terrorists: There is now a wide body of literature clearly demonstrating that terrorism has become highly racialised and construed in terms of Huntingtonian civilisational hierarchies in the Western discourse and counter-terrorist practice (Cainkar & Selod 2018; Selod 2018; Khan 2023). This effectively means that the actions by Amri and other ISIS-affiliated individuals are perceived in a much wider interpretative framework; these prejudices render actions pursued by members of certain ethnic groups more threatening as they cross from mere individual acts into the realm of a collective threat. This was further enhanced by the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015–16, which triggered civilisational anxieties, affective states that ISIS attacks on the European soil tied into as they seemed to validate fears surrounding Islamic fundamentalism (Kaplan 2015). Both the immediate political context and the long genealogies of civilisational Otherness further shifted the meaning attached to individual violent acts, positing them as a much larger threat and endowing them with resonance that enabled the actions to emerge as public spectacles, a product of assemblage comprising a wide variety of elements.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that it is analytically productive to rethink the notion and dynamics of the terrorist spectacle in terms of assemblage, and that this prism opens space for a more careful consideration of how this phenomenon comes into social and political being. Building on, but also departing from, the usual focus on (modern) media in construing this phenomenon, this article has argued that we should pay more attention to the various elements that constitute a spectacle,

and how exactly they come together to be posited as such a spectacular event. Importantly, recognising that this perspective presents 'less of a *theory* and more of a repository of methods and ontological stances towards the social' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 3), this paper does not seek to argue that it provides some kind of prescriptive, stable conceptualisation of how terrorist spectacle comes into being – a position which is very much at odds with the main tenants of the assemblage thinking. Rather, this is a tentative exploration which sought to demonstrate how the notion of spectacle is composed of various elements and intersects with other assemblages. In other words, it sought to demonstrate that we should investigate how the spectacular qualities of terrorism emerge in particular circumstances, via particular means, and with particular affective, societal and political effects.

At the same time, this perspective also speaks to the political stakes of critical research on terrorism sensitive to both positing certain actions as 'terrorism' and the power-laden effects of acceptance of this label with regard to particular groups and people. As noted above, this burgeoning body of scholarship has both historicised our understanding of 'terrorism' as a social and political phenomenon, and powerfully criticised the power-laden implications and underpinnings of using this label to categorise some groups and violences, dynamics which both reflect and reproduce the existing civilisational, racialised and gendered hierarchies. Nonetheless, less attention has been paid to how these registers intersect with (also historically contextual) means and networks which construe given actions as instances of 'spectacular' terrorism. This paper has argued that a more detailed investigation of these elements and their constellations should be seen as complementary to the focus on discursive formations, as they together construe terrorism as an object of societal concern.

By taking seriously the proposition that 'assemblages become the component parts of other assemblages' (Acuto & Curtis 2014: 8), this paper is thus also an invitation to further appreciate how the perpetrators' identities and the larger discourses that surround them – themselves embedded in various assemblages (Puar 2007; Sharma & Nijjar 2018; Telford 2020) – interact with the networks which produce specific acts as matters of public interest and, indeed, terror. The paper thus shows that more detailed investigations of how terrorist spectacle emerges via given assemblages can further enhance our understanding of how the situated nature of 'terrorism', and the exclusionary practices it entails, figures in collective life. By relating the elements of the given assemblages to larger historical discourses and power-laden formations, we can better comprehend the politics of terrorism and its construction in the public sphere – and, perhaps, also contribute to the contestations and struggles against its discriminatory and repressive usages.

Funding
No funding information.

Conflict of interest statement
No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement
No supplementary data associated with the article.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Ondřej Ditrych, Jan Daniel, Martin Švantner, Jakub Koláček and Miroslava Kuľková for their comments on the previous versions of this article. Suggestions and feedback by the anonymous reviewers and journal editors significantly improved the text, and I would like to extend my gratitude to them as well. All remaining errors are solely my own.

Jakub Zahora is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of International Relations and Media Studies at the University of New York in Prague. Previously, he was a postdoctoral researcher at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and a lecturer at Department of International Relations at Charles University. He also held visiting fellowships at Hebrew University, Copenhagen University and New York University. Zahora's research interests cover critical approaches to international politics, political ethnography, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

References

Abrahamsen, R. & Williams, M. C. (2011): *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Acuto, M. & Curtis, S. (eds.) (2014): *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Adey, P. (2004): Surveillance at the Airport: Surveilling Mobility/Mobilising Surveillance. *Environment and Planning A,* 36(8), 1365–1380.

Amoore, L. & de Goede, M. (2008): Transactions after 9/11: The Banal Face of the Preemptive Strike. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(2), 173–185.

Awan, I. (2017): Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media. *Society*, 54(2), 138–149.

Bartolucci, V. (2010): Analysing Elite Discourse on Terrorism and Its Implications: The Case of Morocco. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 3(1), 119–135.

Bartolucci, V. (2012): Terrorism Rhetoric under the Bush Administration: Discourses and Effects. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 11(4), 562–582.

BBC (2016): Berlin Truck Attack: Polish Driver "Shot Hours Before." *BBC News*, 27 December, <accessed online: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38442447>.
Bennet, J. (2005): The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout. *Public Culture*, 17(3), 445–465.
Bergen, P. (2016): Trucks as Killing Machines: A Frightening Form of Low-Tech Terror. *CNN*, 20 December, <accessed online: https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/20/opinions/berlin-truck-killing-machines-bergen/index.html>.
Bhatia, M. V. (2005): Fighting Words: Naming Terrorists, Bandits, Rebels and Other Violent Actors. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1), 5–22.
Bhattacharyya, G. (2013): Globalizing Racism and Myths of the Other in the "War on Terror." In: Lentin, R. (ed.): *Thinking Palestine* (1st edition.). London: Zed Books, 46–61.
Blakeley, R. (2007): Bringing the State Back into Terrorism Studies. *European Political Science*, 6(3), 228–235.
Bleiker, R. (2014): Visual Assemblages: From Causality to Conditions of Possibility. In: Acuto, M. & Curtis, S. (eds.): *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 75–81.
Boggs, C. & Pollard, T. (2006): Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism. *New Political Science*, 28(3), 335–351.
Bourne, M. (2019): Powers of the Gun: Process and Possibility in Global Small Arms Control. In: Hynek, N., Ditrych, O. & Stritecky, V. (eds.): *Regulating Global Security*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 143–168.
Bro, P. & and Wallberg, F. (2014): Digital Gatekeeping: News Media versus Social Media. *Digital Journalism*, 2(3), 446–454.
Byman, D. (2011): *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cainkar, L. & Selod, S. (2018): Review of Race Scholarship and the War on Terror. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(2), 165–177.
Cambridge Dictionary (2024): Spectacle, 15 May, <accessed online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/spectacle>.
Chamberlin, P. (2012): *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Choi, J.-T. (1994): *Aviation Terrorism: Historical Survey, Perspectives and Responses*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Collier, S. J. (2006): Global Assemblages. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2–3), 399–401.
Davis, M. (2007): *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb*. London: Verso.
de Goede, M. (2012): *Speculative Security: The Politics of Pursuing Terrorist Monies*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.
de Goede, M. & Simon, S. (2013): Governing Future Radicals in Europe. *Antipode*, 45(2), 315–335.

de Goede, M. & Sullivan, G. (2016): The Politics of Security Lists. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(1), 67–88.
Debord, G. (1995): *Society Of The Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.
DeLanda, M. (2006): *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (Annotated edition.). London; New York: Continuum.
DeLanda, M. (2016): *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987): *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.
Deleuze, G. & Parnet, C. (2007): *Dialogues II*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Ditrych, O. (2014): *Tracing the Discourses of Terrorism: Identity, Genealogy and State*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Fischer-Preßler, D., Schwemmer, C. & Fischbach, K. (2019): Collective Sense-Making in Times of Crisis: Connecting Terror Management Theory with Twitter User Reactions to the Berlin Terrorist Attack. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 100, 138–151.
Giroux, H. A. (2007): Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism: Rethinking Politics in the Society of the Image. *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination*, 2(1), 17–52.
Guardian (2025): FBI Warns of Potential 'Copycat or Retaliatory' New Orleans Attacks. *The Guardian*, 13 January, <accessed online: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/13/new-orleans-attack-potential-copycat>.
Hazbun, W. (2021): Aviation, Hijackings, and the Eclipse of the 'American Century' in the Middle East. In: Monk, D. B. & Sorkin, M. (eds.): *Catastrophe and Revolution: Essays in Honor of Mike Davis*. New York: Urban Research/OR Books, 223–247.
High Level Military Group (2016): *Fighting Terror Effectively: An Assessment of Israel's Experience on the Home Front*.
Hoffman, B. (2006): *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Hoijtink, M. (2017): Governing in the Space of the "Seam": Airport Security after the Liquid Bomb Plot. *International Political Sociology*, 11(3), 308–326.
Hughes, G. (2015): International Terrorism. In: Law, R. D. (ed.): *The Routledge History of Terrorism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 456–469.
Jackson, R. (2007): Language, Policy and the Construction of a Torture Culture in the War on Terrorism. *Review of International Studies*, 33(03), 353–371.
Jackson, R., Murphy, E. & Poynting, S. (eds.) (2009): *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
Jannack, P. (2021): *Twenty Years After 9/11: A Reckoning for Anti-Muslim Hostility in the United States*. Washington, DC: Arab Center Washington DC.
Judt, T. (2005): *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. New York: The Penguin Press.
Juergensmeyer, M. (2017): Killing before an Audience. Terrorism as Performance Violence. In: Stohl, M., Burchill, R. & Englund, S. H. (eds.): *Construc-*

tions of Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Research and Policy. Oakland: University of California Press, 67–78.
Kaplan, M. (2015): ISIS Exploiting Refugee Crisis? Europe's Islamic State Threat Requires Boosted Security, Not Fear-Mongering, Some Warn. *International Business Times*, <accessed online: https://www.ibtimes.com/isis-exploiting-refugee-crisis-europes-islamic-state-threat-requires-boosted-security-2087164>.
Kellner, D. (2002): *Media Spectacle*. London and New York: Routledge.
Kellner, D. (2004): 9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(1), 41–64.
Kellner, D. (2015): *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles* (1st edition.). London: Routledge.
Khan, R. M. (2023): The Coloniality of the Religious Terrorism Thesis. *Review of International Studies*, 1–20.
Koerner, B. I. (2016): Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War—And How to Fight Back. *Wired*, April.
Kraidy, M. M. (2017): The Projectilic Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(8), 1194–1209.
Kroet, C. (2017): Museum Interested in Displaying Berlin Christmas Attack Truck. *Politico*, 4 January, <accessed online: https://www.politico.eu/article/museum-interested-in-displaying-berlin-christmas-terror-attack-truck-bonn-museum-of-contemporary-history/>.
Kurtulus, E. N. (2011): The "New Terrorism" and Its Critics. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34(6), 476–500.
Laqueur, W. (1977): *Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown.
Larabee, A. (2015): Terrorism and Technology. In: Law, R. D. (ed.): *The Routledge History of Terrorism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 442–455.
Livingston, S. (2019): *The Terrorism Spectacle*. London: Routledge.
Matusitz, J. (2015): Terrorism as Spectacle: It's All for the Audience. *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 14(1–2), 161–173.
Mirgani, S. (2017): Spectacles of Terror: Media and the Cultural Production of Terrorism. In: Lenze, N., Schriwer, C. & Jalil, Z. A. (eds.): *Media in the Middle East: Activism, Politics, and Culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 107–142.
Müller, M. (2015): Assemblages and Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics and Space. *Geography Compass*, 9(1), 27–41.
Munster, A. (2011): *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (1st edition.). Dartmouth College Press.
Nail, T. (2017): What Is an Assemblage? *SubStance*, 46(1), 21–37.
Porat, D. (2022): The Hijacking of El Al Flight 426: The Advent of Air Terrorism. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 57(4), 1072–1088.
Puar, J. (2007): *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Richards, A. (2015): *Conceptualizing Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rotella, S., Edge, D. & Pollack, R. (2016): Terror in Europe - Transcript. *Public Broadcasting Service*, 18 October, <accessed online: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/terror-in-europe/transcript/>.
Sassen, S. (2008): *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Sayigh, Y. (2004): *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Schmid, A. (ed.) (2013): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London: Routledge.
Schulz, W. (1997): Changes of Mass Media and the Public Sphere. *Javnost - The Public*, 4(2), 57–69.
Selod, S. (2018): *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Sharma, S. & Nijjar, J. (2018): The Racialized Surveillant Assemblage: Islam and the Fear of Terrorism. *Popular Communication*, 16(1), 72–85.
Spencer, A. (2018): New versus Old Terrorism. In: Jackson, R. (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies*. London: Routledge, 269–290.
Stampnitzky, L. (2013): *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Stampnitzky, L. (2017): Can Terrorism Be Defined? In: Stohl, M., Burchill, R. & Englund, S. H. (eds.): *Constructions of Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Research and Policy*. Oakland: University of California Press, 11–20.
Steinbach, M. (2016): ISIL Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media. *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, 6 July, <accessed online: https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/isil-online-countering-terrorist-radicalization-and-recruitment-on-the-internet-and-social-media▸.
Sullivan, G. (2020): *The Law of the List: UN Counterterrorism Sanctions and the Politics of Global Security Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Telford, A. (2020): A Climate Terrorism Assemblage? Exploring the Politics of Climate Change-Terrorism-Radicalisation Relations. *Political Geography*, 79, 1–10.
The Local (2019): Berlin Remembers Victims of Christmas Market Terror Attack Three Years On. *The Local.De*, 19 December, <accessed online: https://www.thelocal.de/20191219/berlin-to-remember-victims-of-christmas-market-terror-attack-three-years-on>.
Walsh, A. (2018): New Fortified Security Measures at Berlin Christmas Market. *Deutsche Welle*, 23 November, <accessed online: https://www.dw.com/en/new-fortified-security-measures-at-berlin-christmas-market/a-46417552>.
Ward, A. (2018): *ISIS's Social Media Use Poses a Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Africa*. RAND Corporation, 11 December.
Weber, S. (2002): War, Terrorism, and Spectacle: On Towers and Caves. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(3), 449–458.

Wyke, T. (2015): Thrown from a Roof, Stoned to Death and Crucified: New ISIS Executions. *Mail Online*, 16 January, <accessed online: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2913733/Thrown-roof-stoned-death-crucified-world-reacts-horror-terror-Europe-new-ISIS-executions-medieval-brutality-jihadists-bring-West.html>.

Zulaika, J. (2018): The Real and the Bluff: On the Ontology of Terrorism. In: Jackson, R. (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of Critical Terrorism Studies*. London: Routledge, 39–48.