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Daniel Lincoln Stevens

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ISIS PROPAGANDA AND UNITED STATES COUNTERMEASURES

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Daniel Stevens

December 2015

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ISIS PROPAGANDA AND UNITED STATES COUNTERMEASURES

Defense and Strategic studies

Missouri State University, December 2015

Master of Science

Daniel Stevens

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is threefold: 1. Examine the use of propaganda by the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and how its propaganda enables ISIS to achieve its objectives; 2. Examine the United States Government (USG) response; 3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the USG response and how it can be improved. The goal of ISIS is to overturn the Middle East, attack westerners in the region and in the West, and create one all-encompassing Islamic State. ISIS' innovative use of propaganda has been central to its success. ISIS uses propaganda more effectively than previous terrorist groups. What is unique about ISIS propaganda is its success at luring disaffected Westerners to its side. The messages of ISIS propaganda are interpreted by studying the teachings of key jihadist theologians and by examining the content of ISIS propaganda. The approach in this thesis is to listen to what ISIS has to say about itself and its objectives. The struggles and short comings of the USG response are attested to by former directors of USG counter terror messaging. This paper reveals the USG's response to ISIS propaganda falls short in effectively addressing the full range of ISIS propaganda's diversity in messages, audiences, and platforms. For the government to effectively undermine the effectiveness of ISIS propaganda, it must accept the need for more creativity and diversity in its messaging, and find a role it can play in conjunction with a supportive private sector capable of engaging in diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms.

KEYWORDS: ISIS, terrorism, propaganda, western, counter measures

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic State (ISIS) threatens to overturn the entire Middle East and to attack westerners in the region and at home. The objective of ISIS is the creation of a unitary Islamic state or “Caliphate” encompassing all regions that have at any point in history been under Islamic control and, potentially, territories with significant Muslim populations. This includes the greater Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, South and Central Asia, and parts of Europe. This ISIS state directly challenges the US policy of creating and supporting a stable and representative government in Iraq, as well as US interests in promoting free, prosperous and liberal societies across the region. ISIS has also called for and inspired attacks against the West making ISIS a threat to the US and the rest of the Western world. The U.S. government now considers ISIS a greater threat than al Qaeda (AQ).

ISIS represents an old threat in a new way. It has developed because the instability and lack of authority in Syria and Iraq has created a geopolitical vacuum ripe for exploitation by terrorist groups with territorial ambitions. ISIS evolved from an al Qaeda affiliated terrorist group involved in the Iraq insurgency into an aspiring state actor. ISIS is creating a brutal police state after the mold of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The creation of the ISIS state is guided in part by Baathists who previously worked for Saddam Hussein’s regime. The Baath Party is a trans-border socialist Arab nationalist party. One of its objectives is the creation of a unified Arab state.¹ The Baathist mentioned in this paper are from the Iraqi Baath party. The former Baathists’ guile,

¹ Britannica, Encyclopedia. *Ba'ath Party*. n.d. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Bath-Party>. 9 October 2015.

insurgent network, and brutal efficiency helped ISIS garner early battlefield success. ISIS gained control over half of Syria and has maintained possession of key Iraqi cities like Mosul.

ISIS actions and goals today are based on their historical understanding of jihadist theology. A central tenet of jihadist beliefs is the need for the creation of one all-encompassing Islamic State. ISIS' Islamic State, based on ISIS' understanding of Sharia law and the teachings of Islam is supposed to be a type of utopia. However, this utopia only works if it is enacted by the authority of the truly devout. ISIS professes a belief that the present time mirrors the historical period in which the Prophet Muhammad lived, therefore they must replicate the four stages of Muhammad's creation of the Islamic State and follow all of the teachings from that time period in a literal manner. They believe that the original Islamic State failed because it was corrupted by leaders not following the Quran. ISIS believes it can reestablish the utopian Islamic State and preserve it by following the pure and uncorrupted teachings of Islam.

While many Jihadists embrace violence, ISIS theology of violence is broader than most terrorist groups. ISIS celebrates violence as the only means for the creation of the caliphate and relies on a concept of takfir and teachings dating back to the time of Mongol occupation of Islamic lands to justify killing those who oppose ISIS' creation of a state, even other Muslims. This is how ISIS justifies fighting against regional Islamic governments and societies. ISIS claims it is fighting against an overarching evil in a grand metanarrative of history and that these same forces are opposing its creation of a state. Like other Jihadists, ISIS claims to follow Salaf-the righteous predecessors, and arbitrarily picks and chooses which authorities count, interpreting texts for their own

convenience. Jihad is defined by radicals in terms of waging war and ISIS propagates its view that violent jihad, directed against ISIS' enemies, is a moral duty of all true Muslims.

ISIS' innovative use of propaganda has been central to its success. As a newly declared state with many enemies and with aspirations of leading all Muslims, it is imperative for ISIS to explain to the Muslim world what ISIS is, what it is doing, and why everyone in the world should join their cause or be destroyed. Violence features heavily in much of ISIS' propaganda because ISIS believes the use of force is the only means by which its state can be created and because violence, in its ability to horrify and fascinate, is ideal propaganda content. ISIS uses propaganda to spread fear and wages psychological warfare by displaying savage acts of brutality against those who oppose ISIS. It also uses depictions of such brutality to condition its followers into accepting ISIS' call for the use of absolute violence to subject everyone who opposes them. ISIS and its followers revel in their extreme violence, exalting their self-righteousness and superiority over others as they act with what they believe is the authority and judgment of God. ISIS' state requires new recruits and supporters who believe in the utopia of the Islamic State. Its propaganda is used to help explain its ideology, strategy, and actions and inspire people to join its cause.

ISIS uses propaganda more effectively than previous terrorist groups. ISIS does so by creating propaganda with diverse messages for diverse audiences across diverse platforms. It then uses a decentralized network of supporters to amplify its messages across the internet. ISIS has figured out how to use mobile apps and social media to amplify its message to a mass audience with a level of success no other terrorist group

has achieved. It uses videos in different styles ranging from dramatic documentaries, cinematic and well produced execution films, and interviews to video-game-like shorts. ISIS also produces its own online periodical, Dabiq. ISIS uses these different platforms in different ways with a variety of messages targeted at a variety of audiences. One of the key audiences is potential recruits. These recruits are from a variety of backgrounds; however, ISIS has found a way to reach out to and connect with them.

What is unique about ISIS propaganda is its success at luring disaffected Westerners to its side. At least 4,500 Westerners have joined ISIS. Among conservative estimates ISIS has recruited over 20,000 foreigners, surpassing the jihadist movement during the Soviet Afghan war. ISIS has proven that it can spread its message within the Western world despite Western opposition and attempts at censorship. Terrorists on the other side of the world are only one click away. Every day their message continues to spread and potential new recruits are exposed to their propaganda.

The United States Government (USG) is struggling to counter ISIS propaganda. Western views and ISIS views are standing on different sides of a chasm, yet it is possible for people to move from one side to the other. The chasm is the battle ground between ISIS propaganda and Western efforts to counter those messages. The stakes are high; the successes of ISIS propaganda contribute to the expansion of its oppressive state and threatens to raise the body count of ISIS-supported and inspired attacks against the West and the Middle East. ISIS has exploited a variety of mediums to reach a broad range of audiences with many different messages. ISIS' relentless propaganda efforts have garnered attention in the Western world, as well as new supporters. A network of decentralized supporters have catalyzed these efforts.

The USG's response to ISIS propaganda falls short in effectively addressing the full range of ISIS propaganda's diversity in messages, audiences, and platforms. Without a change to the government's approach ISIS will continue to exploit the West's growing vulnerability to domestic terrorists. This can be mitigated by embracing creativity and diversity within the USG's approach in conjunction with finding a role the private sector can play to make-up for the government's short comings.

This thesis examines what and who ISIS is, what its leaders believe, how they reach audiences and with what kind of messages. This is followed by an examination of what the USG's response to ISIS propaganda is and how well it is responding. The scope of this paper is focused on ISIS propaganda targeting Western audiences. The analysis of the responses to ISIS propaganda is limited to the DoS' Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) and English language based groups and organizations. The DoS response is critical because it has the authority to engage in public diplomacy, counter foreign messages, and release content that may influence domestic audiences. Other branches of government, such as the Defense Department (DoD) or agencies such as the CIA, are strictly prohibited from engaging in information operations that may affect or target domestic audiences.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The section below defines terms used throughout the paper. Some words are commonly used but may be used with different meanings. The explanations clarify what these terms mean within the context of this paper. The following list also contains words frequently used within Islam and/or by jihadists. The last section defines terms unique to online media.

- **ISIS**-There are many names and terms applied to this group, e.g. ISIS, IS, ISIL, Daesh. This paper uses the term ISIS. ISIS stands for Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham. ISIL stands for Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant a term used mostly by the United States Government. IS stands for Islamic State, this is what the group calls itself. The term Daesh comes from an acronym for al Dawla al Islamiya al Iraq al Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The term Daesh sounds similar to the verb 'daes', meaning "one who crushes something underfoot. It also sounds similar to Dahes, or "one who sows discord." The term Daesh is commonly used within the Arabic world by people who wish to speak derogatively of ISIS. All of the terms are used by various media outlets. The group's designation as a terrorist group by the State Department (DoS) dates back to Dec. 17th 2004.^{2 3}
- **Islamic state/Islamic State**-Whereas there are many nationalist Islamic states, such as Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia, or the Islamic state the Taliban seeks to reestablish in Afghanistan, "Islamic State" with State capitalized is used to denote an official all-encompassing State over all Muslim lands. The state first created by the Prophet Muhammad is referred to in this paper as the Islamic State. ISIS seeks to re-establish the Islamic State; however, its regional hegemonic control is qualified in this paper as an Islamic state in competition with other Islamic states.
- **Propaganda**- This term is used as an all-encompassing term to refer to communication designed to influence an audience's relation to an enterprise, idea or group. Such communication can include speeches, videos, magazines, social

² State Department Bureau of Counterterrorism. *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*. n.d. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>. 22 October 2015.

³ Frye, Patrick. "DAESH: The Meaning Behind The ISIS Or ISIL Nickname That The Islamic State Hates ." 17 January 2015. *Inquisitr.com*. <http://www.inquisitr.com/1762507/daesh-the-meaning-behind-the-isis-or-isil-nickname-that-the-islamic-state-hates/>. 16 September 2015.

media and any other media. The term is not used to connote bias or dishonesty. A synonym used in the paper is ‘messaging.’

Islamic and Jihadist Terms

- **Caliphate/Khilafah**-Variations of this term refer to the Islamic State. The ruler of the Caliphate is called a Caliph.
- **Dawah**-The preaching and teaching of Islam
- **Hanbali School**-This a school of Sunni jurisprudence based on the works of Ahmad ibn Hanbal 776-854 A.D. Hanbal's followers were reluctant to give personal opinion on matters of law, rejected analogy, were fanatically intolerant of views other than their own, excluded opponents from power and judicial office, and took the holy writings literally.⁴
- **Hijra**-Migration, often used to describe obligatory migration once an Islamic State is founded.
- **Jihad - 1.** The internal and non-violent struggle to follow God and do all that He has commanded. **2.** To engage in an external struggle (fighting) with others to bring the Truth (Islam) to mankind, a struggle generally understood to include violence.⁵
- **Kufr**-Something non-Islamic, a kufr individual is an infidel, a pagan.
- **Quran and Hadith**-Quran is the Islamic holy book written by Muhammad. The Hadith is a collection of the spoken words of Muhammad.
- **Shahada**-The Muslim profession of faith.
- **Sharia**- Islamic law.
- **Sunni**- As defined by the Oxford dictionary: A Sunni is a member of the largest branch of Islam. A Sunni is a Muslim who accepts the prophet Abu Bakr as the appropriate successor to Muhammad after his death. There are several different traditions within the Sunni branch of Islam, but Sunnis are often described as orthodox Muslims. Since the death of Muhammad in the year 632, there has been conflict between the Sunnis and the other main Muslim group, the Shiites,

⁴ 4 *Sunni schools of Fiqh -Sahfi , Hanbali , Maliki & Hanafi*. n.d. <http://islamic-laws.com/articles/sunnischools.htm>. 24 October 2015.

⁵ Habeck, Mary. *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. p.20

although both branches share a belief in the teachings of the Qur'an. In Arabic, the word Sunni means "lawful," and its root can be found in Sunna, "the traditional teachings of Muhammad," or "way, course, or teachings."⁶

- **Takfir**-Denouncing and condemning a person as a non- Muslim. This can also mean someone is declared to no longer be a Muslim after violating part of the Sharia or failing to obey Islam justifying sanctions to include murder. Similar to excommunication, but with the death penalty. This concept is accepted by some Salafi jihadist groups, but not by mainstream Muslims.
- **Ummah**-the world body of Muslims.

Online Media Terms

- **Hashtag**-The symbol # followed without a space by words. This serves as a reference on Twitter and other social media sites by which people can link, reference, and categorize their tweets by including the same hashtag. As an example: #ObamaSpeech.
- **Post**-The act of publishing content/material online.
- **Blog**- A regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group that is written in an informal or conversational style.⁷
- **Blogger**-One who writes a blog.
- **Vlogger**-Similar to a blogger, but talking in a video as opposed to writing.
- **Meme**-A picture with a short caption, usually humorous or satirical.

⁶ "Sunni." 2015. *vocabulary.com*. <http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/Sunni>. 20 November 2015.

⁷ Dictionaries, Oxford. *Oxforddictionaries.com*. n.d.
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/blog. 23 September 2015.

ISIS HISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND STRATEGY

ISIS Is A Threat To The Middle East And The West

The objective of ISIS is to create and control an Islamic State over all Muslims, imposing its version of Sharia law and establishing centralized governance. ISIS announced in June 2014 the formation of the Islamic State and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the caliph to whom all Muslims owe their loyalty. In the announcement they declared that, “The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.”⁸

Figure 1 is a map showing ISIS’ long term ambition for taking over the Muslim world.



⁸ Roggio, Bill. "ISIS announces formation of Caliphate, rebrands as 'Islamic State'." The Long War Journal. June 29, 2014. http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/06/isis_announces_formation_of_ca.php (accessed December 12, 2014).

Fig. 1: Map for projected Islamic State. DailyMail.co.uk. n.d.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html>. Also seen with Arabic names in video on <http://www.iraqinews.com/features/urgent-video-peter-kassig-beheaded-isis-16-syrians/>

An ISIS member in a video showing ISIS destroying an Iraqi police station explained that they do not see nationality; there are only Muslims belonging to one flag, one state, one caliph.⁹ The regions in the map above are all part of one all-encompassing state. To realize its goals ISIS needs to convince Muslims that the Islamic State and the establishment of the Caliphate is real and will last. ISIS needs to recruit enough people to sustain its operations and its battles. They also need to win battles and expand their territory.

ISIS Seeks To Overturn The Entire Middle-East And Attack Westerners.

The creation of a state by ISIS is a threat to the US policy of creating and supporting a stable and representative government in Iraq, as well as US interests in promoting free, prosperous and liberal societies across the region. The ISIS state is a challenge to US policy because the ISIS state is a police state. ISIS has far reaching ambitions for the expansion of its state. However, ambition in and of itself does not create a threat unless it is on a path to actualization. ISIS has successfully set up the foundation for its conquests and is successfully gathering supporters and controlling territory.

ISIS' success surpasses the achievements of any other terrorist group fighting in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere. The International Center for Studying Radicalization (ICSR) estimates there are more than 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and the number

⁹ Hall, John. "The ISIS map of the world: Militants outline chilling five-year plan for global domination as they declare formation of caliphate - and change their name to the Islamic State." Daily Mail. June 30, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html#v-3651590273001> (accessed December 13, 2014).

may even exceed the numbers who were involved in Afghanistan in the 1980's. In May of 2015 ISIS controlled half of the territory of Syria.¹⁰ Survey estimates ranging from October 2014-March 2015 put ISIS supporters in the Arab world at a minimum of 8.5 million. Counting people in the Arab world who view ISIS at least somewhat positively adds another 24.5 million sympathizers.¹¹ For more than a year now ISIS has been in control of the Iraqi city Mosul with a population of over one million.¹² ISIS also controlled major cities such as Tikrit and Ramadi for almost a year. Ramadi is only 63 miles away from Baghdad and remains a contested area. ISIS even manages to conduct attacks in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. Unlike most other terrorist organizations, ISIS controls cities, populations, and territory. There are other terrorist groups operating in Syria, but none have reached the level of success enjoyed by ISIS.

ISIS Recruitment Of Westerners Is A Direct Threat To The Homelands Of The West. The threat from ISIS extends beyond the Middle East region. The main concerns among Western governments are two –fold, first the possibility of ISIS trained individuals returning to the West to conduct terrorist attacks and second, domestic attacks inspired and aided by ISIS. ISIS' recruitment of Westerners provides assets and access to attack the West. Nicholas J. Rasmussen, the Director for the National Counterterrorism

¹⁰ Shaheen, Kareem. *ISIS 'controls 50% of Syria' after seizing historic city of Palmyra*. 21 May 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/isis-palmyra-syria-islamic-state>. 4 October 2015.

¹¹ The estimate is based on a March 2015 poll by the Iraq-based Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies; a November 2014 poll by Zogby Research Services; another November 2014 poll by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and an October 2014 poll by the Fikra Forum commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Mauro, Ryan. "ISIS Has Up To 42 Million Supporters in the Arab World." 28 June 2015 ClarionProject.org. <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/isis-has-least-42-million-supporters-arab-world> 8 November 2015

¹² Malas, Nour. "Iraqi City of Mosul Transformed a Year After Islamic State Capture." 9 June 2015. *Wall Street Journal*. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-city-of-mosul-transformed-a-year-after-islamic-state-capture-1433888626>. 4 October 2015.

Center said, “The battlefields in Iraq and Syria provide foreign fighters with combat experience, weapons and explosives training, and access to terrorist networks that may be planning attacks which target the West.”¹³ Other estimates go much higher; however, the exact number is unknown. The 2015 September 2015 report released by the House Committee on Homeland Security (HCHS) reported over 4,500 Westerners were estimated to have joined ISIS, 250 of them from America.¹⁴ One of the key findings of the report states, “The unprecedented speed at which Americans are being radicalized by violent extremists is straining federal law enforcement’s ability to monitor and intercept suspects.”

In the last two years there have been a number of successful and unsuccessful terrorist attacks sponsored or inspired by ISIS. In December 2014 a man took 17 hostages in a Sydney Australia café on behalf of ISIS. In March 2015, 22 European tourists were killed in an ISIS attack at a museum in Tunisia. ISIS inspired attacks include two Americans conducting an unsuccessful attack in Dallas TX in May 2015. These are just a few of the ISIS inspired or supported attacks against Westerners. The graphic below from the New York Times shows the number of ISIS related arrests and attacks between September 2014 and August 2015 (Figure 2).

¹³ Ferran, Lee and Rym Momtaz. *ISIS Trail of Terror*. 23 February 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/fullpage/isis-trail-terror-isis-threat-us-25053190>. 3 October 2015.

¹⁴ House Committee on Homeland Security. *Final Report of The Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. Congressional Committee Report. Washington DC: Homeland Security Committee, 2015. <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>.

Major ISIS Attacks and Arrests Since Last Summer

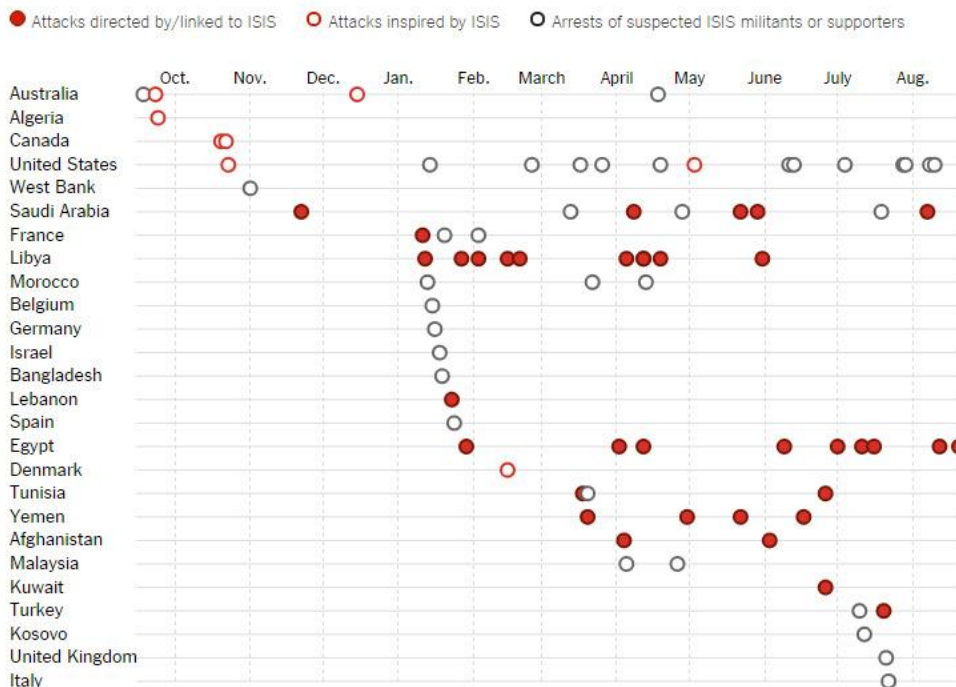


Figure 2: Major ISIS attacks and arrests since Sept. 2014-Aug. 2015, Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins and Tom Giratikanon. *Where ISIS Has Directed and Inspired Attacks Around the World*. 20 August 2015.

http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html?_r=0. 3 October 2015.

The HCHS report says there have been nearly 60 terrorist plots or attacks against Western countries. This has taken place despite airstrikes that have killed around 10,000 extremists in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵ ISIS continues to gain enough recruits to replace its losses and expand its operations. The committee report says ISIS has affiliates or groups pledging support in 18 countries. Of the 60 terrorist plots 15 of them were targeted against the US. ISIS is a threat to Western populations.

¹⁵ House Committee on Homeland Security. *Final Report of The Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. Congressional Committee Report. Washington DC: Homeland Security Committee, 2015. <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>.

ISIS Has Surpassed Al Qaeda As The Leader Of Global Jihad. ISIS

represents an old threat but in a new way. ISIS started out as an AQ affiliate; however, it abandoned AQ's strategy and goals and at present has found more success than AQ. ISIS believes in creating an Islamic state in the here and now. AQ believes the time is not yet right to create an Islamic state and believes the "far enemy," namely the US needs to be driven first from Muslim lands.. ISIS believes the "near enemy," the nation-states of the Islamic world, must be over turned first and replaced by the ISIS version of an Islamic state. Eventually ISIS will take on "far enemies" after consolidating territory and control. While AQ is struggling to recapture control of Afghanistan and replicate the defeat of the Soviet forces in the 1980's, ISIS has captured and held territory and out recruited AQ. ISIS is already heralding the accomplishment of its main goal: the creation of the Islamic State. The concepts of ISIS are not new, neither is its fight against the US supported Iraqi government; what is new is its success in controlling territory in the region and declaring an alternate government. ISIS' successful recruitment of foreigners, particularly thousands of Westerners, also signifies a new aspect of the threat. The most unique aspect is how ISIS has created an effective propaganda strategy that surpasses the efforts of other terrorists and challenges the West's capability to respond.

ISIS connects better with the new generation of jihadists than AQ. ISIS has grown quickly in the last two years and effectively uses the internet to spread its message and recruit new members. It is riding the trend of anti-Assad (Bashar al Assad, president of Syria) feeling throughout the world's Sunni population. Whereas AQ's leader Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri is seemingly far away and takes months to get his videos released to the public, ISIS and its followers instantly send out thousands of tweets on Twitter. The

Department of State, speaking on behalf of the US government, has declared that ISIS has superseded AQ as the world leader of jihadist causes.¹⁶

ISIS Represents A Persisting Threat. This shift in prominence represents a threat that will continue for some time for the same reason that it developed in the first place. ISIS is a threat because the situation and environment is right for it. Instability in Syria and Iraq and the collapse of government control has created a vacuum of authority, opening a void for ISIS to pursue the creation of its own state. During the four years of the Syrian civil war numerous groups have been vying for control. Kurdish, local/tribal forces, Salafist, and various Sunni militias are all fighting against Bashar al Assad's government which is mainly of the Alawite minority and Shiite. These groups are divided in their operations and loyalties, and sometimes fight against each other. Assad receives support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. The opposition groups receive support from a mix of Arab Sunni nations and groups, and to a certain degree, Western powers as well. Weak central authority from the Iraqi government as well as sectarian divisions amongst Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites in Iraq has created instability in Iraq. Militias and terrorist groups have been operating in Iraq since the collapse of Saddam Hussain's regime in 2003. ISIS is fighting against the majority of the actors in Syria and Iraq and is finding success because of the factionalism. Any group who can seize control of the area contested by these many groups and their supporters could claim ownership of enough landmass to be considered larger than most of the smaller states of the Middle East. The complexity of the situation and the numerous actors make it a difficult situation to

¹⁶ Labott, Elise. "State Department report: ISIS breaking new ground as new leader in terror groups." 20 June 2015. *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/politics/isis-report-state-department-terror/>. 4 October 2015.

resolve. ISIS will be able to operate in this environment and continue to be a threat until order and governance is restored.

ISIS' Ideology Informs ISIS' Objectives, Strategy, And Propaganda Messaging.

At this point ISIS ideology must be explained. Understanding ISIS ideology is important for understanding what ISIS is, what it is doing, and why. What ISIS is doing now and what it intends to do in the future define the threat that it poses. Understanding ISIS ideology and why and how it is a threat are key to understanding the messages, role, and significance of ISIS propaganda as well as how to effectively counter it.

Understanding ISIS requires looking at it within the context of its followers' own worldview. ISIS takes the deepest longings of the soul-the darkest to the noblest, and marries them to an all-consuming cause. Given the right assumptions or justifications, all forms of violence become acceptable-even praise worthy. ISIS channels basic human nature and desires through the mold of its ideology, resulting in fanaticism and the glorification of brutality and terrorism. Westerners looking at individuals before they joined ISIS and then looking at them on the other side of radicalization, no-longer recognize who these individuals are. From a Western viewpoint ISIS' extreme violence-torture, rape, executions, slavery, and above all its seeming glorification of violence, appears barbaric and monstrous. The ISIS worldview is so different from Western worldviews it is labeled as extreme, and radical and unfathomable. Religious devotion, even unto martyrdom and suicidal hate, does not fit Western secular rationalism. The worldview of ISIS is incomprehensible when viewed through a Western lens.

Comprehending ISIS ideology is an important step towards understanding ISIS propaganda and their successful recruitment of Westerners. Once individuals are exposed

to and begin to accept the basic assumptions and beliefs of ISIS, ISIS propaganda messages can be seen in the light of reason and righteousness. A hopeless cause becomes a divine cause. A warzone becomes the future site of a utopia. Delving into ISIS' worldview provides insight on what Westerners joining ISIS are accepting as truth. Also examining how this 'truth' is being propagated is an important tool in creating effective counter messages.

ISIS' actions and goals today are defined by their historical understanding of jihadist theologians. There are seven key parts of jihadist ideology that influence groups like ISIS: Islam requires the creation of an Islamic State. The original Islamic State set up by Muhammad was corrupted by leaders not following the Quran. People who identify as Muslims are not necessarily real Muslims and can be justifiably killed. There is a grand historical metanarrative of overarching evil in the world and jihadists must fight against it. Very particular interpretations and religious teachings are followed. Offensive jihad is required and has four basic justifications. Finally, the stages of the Prophet Muhammad's political movement are a timeless example and strategy that must be replicated to find success. These key parts are drawn from Mary Habeck's book called *Knowing the Enemy*. Her approach to understanding Jihadists is to listen to what they say about themselves. This section is based on the research of her book.¹⁷

The creation of an Islamic State is central to jihadist theology. An Islamic State is a theocracy in which a Caliph, a single religious leader, rules. Laws come from and are exclusively defined by Islamic scriptures. This system of laws is called Sharia. Sharia laws were written for every aspect of life, governance, war, and commerce. It is a

¹⁷ Habeck, Mary. *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

political philosophy. There was nothing wrong with the system or the teachings, rather the problems culminating in the loss of the Caliphate were the result of not following God's laws. The difference between jihadists and Islamists is the jihadists' commitment to the violent overthrow of the existing international system and its replacement by an all-encompassing Islamic state. Ataturk's abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate, according to some jihadists, ended the Islamic State. Islam requires an Islamic state in order to fulfil Gods commandments; therefore its creation is one of the goals of jihadists. Jihadists disagree on the timeline for the creation of the Islamic State and about offensive and defensive jihad. ISIS is a firm believer in setting up the Islamic State.

Jihadist justification for fighting against Muslim groups and governments relies on a school of thought that goes back to the time the Mongols conquered Muslim lands. Ibn Taymiyya a theologian of the Hanbali School lived during that period. Although Mongol rulers converted to Islam they did not adhere exclusively to Sharia, therefore Taymiyya taught that they were not true Muslims and should be killed. Takfir means denouncing someone as not a Muslim. This can also mean someone is declared to no longer be a Muslim after violating part of the Sharia or failing to obey Islam. It is similar to excommunication but with the death penalty. This concept is accepted by radical Sunni groups, not by mainstream Muslims. Building on the precedent of Taymiyya and the teachings of others ISIS willfully kills the Muslims it believes have failed to truly follow Islam, people it declares are Takfir.

Jihadists follow Salaf-the righteous predecessors, arbitrarily pick and choose which authorities count, and interpret texts for their own convenience. According to the practice of abrogation newer verses replace older ones, thus nullifying passages of peace.

Jihadis believe the Quran is infallible and is for all of humanity for all time, and so is their interpretation. Any ‘Muslims’ who do not agree with them are not true Muslims, thus Qutb justifies calling them takfir and waging war on them. Taymiyya and Qutb’s teachings are used by those who compare present day rulers of Muslim countries to the Mongols, calling for revolutions and coup d’états in the present day. Non-Muslims and moderate Muslims are the enemy, and must be fought. ISIS is especially brutal and determined in wiping out those they see as Takfir.¹⁸

Jihadists believe they have to fight against ignorance and unbelief, synonyms for overarching evil. The enemies of the past, Jews, Crusaders, and other unbelievers are all servants of evil and seek to destroy Islam. Every generation of Jews is by their nature the same. Any other ideologies or political systems with anything that is not in the Quran and hadith are considered false and evil. Any system that involves humans creating their own rules such as representative democracy, legislation, or international organizations is contrary to Islam. Every element of modern Western liberalism is flawed, wrong, and evil.¹⁹ Islam sets people free from man’s domination and sin, but there should be no freedom to do anything outside of what God commanded.²⁰ ISIS sees its fight against the forces opposing its creation of the Islamic State as part of a historical metanarrative of good vs. evil.

Violent jihad is central to jihadists’ worldview and defines the means they use to achieve their political objectives. How jihad is practiced is a controversial subject.

¹⁸ Habeck, Mary. *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. p.42

¹⁹ Habeck, Mary. *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. p.71

²⁰ Ibid., p.72

Extremists' definition and practice of it gives jihadists their distinguishing moniker. The modern viewpoint holds that internal jihad is the greater jihad, a struggle for deeper faith and control of one's desires while seeking God and righteousness. From this viewpoint fighting is from a historical period that has passed. Now, just war with a call to jihad as a greater external struggle, can only be defensive. Jihadists argue the hermeneutics of defensive war vs. offensive jihad. Either they outrightly embrace offensive jihad or redefine defense as offense. Jihadists' four basic justifications for offensive jihad are: to obey God's command; to make the word of God supreme; to open the nations for Islam; and to make certain that the Islamic community assumes its rightful position as leader of the world".²¹ Mawdudi taught Islam is opposing ideologies, therefore it is always on the offensive.²² Qutb taught defensive jihad is a war for the freedom of man from servility to other men, a war that allows people to become the slaves of God alone.²³ Jihadists believe that any effort on behalf of an ideology other than Islam is an attack on Islam. As an example, humanitarian intervention in Somalia 1992-93 was an "invasion" for crusader-colonialist purposes.

ISIS embraces a permanent state of offensive jihad. Any place that Islam conquered or where Islam was implemented or where the majority of people embraced Islam must be defended.²⁴ Therefore even without making recourse to justifications for offensive jihad, ISIS can declare it is defending Islam by fighting in any place that was ever conquered or Islamified at any point in history. The three main jihadist ideologues (Qutb, Mawdudi, al-Banna) made clear a central point of the ongoing war with falsehood:

²¹ Ibid., p.117

²² Ibid., p.111

²³ Ibid., p.112

²⁴ Ibid., p.113

that it will continue until Islam has “liberated” the entire world from darkness, tyranny, and servitude to mere men. Jihadists thus neither recognize national boundaries within the Islamic lands nor do they believe that the coming/present Islamic state, should have permanent borders with the unbelievers.²⁵

Jihadist groups concur that the Islamic movement must follow Muhammad’s example through stages that include a peaceful time of preparation, a migration, the creation of an Islamic state, and finally open warfare, although there is no accord over the timing or precise shape of these stages. Some argue Muslims must separate themselves from unbelievers to create a state, others argue that powerful people should be used to help create an Islamic state from within another state. Some argue warfare is necessary to create an Islamic State. Either way, once the state is created jihadists believe all Muslims must wage jihad to expand it.

All of these beliefs influence how ISIS operates. ISIS’ political objectives are determined by these concepts. They define the worldview from which ISIS tries to justify itself and explain itself to the Muslim world it hopes to lead. ISIS tries to indoctrinate its followers and potential recruits with this worldview. The operations of the group and its communications are steeped in this worldview.

ISIS’ Battle Field Success Comes From Its Assimilation Of Baathist Commanders And Intelligence Experts

The threat of ISIS stems from its combination of battlefield success and brutal terrorism. The battlefield success is due to the assimilation of former Baathist commanders and intelligence experts. Its brutality and affinity for extreme violence and

²⁵ Ibid., p.121

summarily dispatching those who reject its beliefs is due to the ISIS lineage from Abu Musab al Zarqawi and current leadership by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. How and why ISIS uses propaganda stems from the combination of its theology, the strategy it is implementing, and its leaders' belief in terrorism.

Osama bin Laden's 2003 declaration making it permissible for jihadists to fight alongside Baathist "socialist infidels" for the purpose of fighting the "far enemy", the US, helped set the ground work for ISIS.²⁶ Former officers from Saddam Hussein were in the best position to lead the insurgency. Not only were they trained and familiar with the social fabric and landscape of Iraq, they also had the resources and contacts to run an insurgency. Saddam created the groundwork for an insurgency by creating networks of smuggling houses and arms caches. These were intended to fight Shiite and Kurdish uprisings, not the Americans.²⁷

Although ISIS has always had international members and was started by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian, ISIS evolved into an Iraqi run organization. Not all Baathists became part of ISIS, but some who did are at the center of the group's power structure. Abu Hamza is a Syrian fighter who joined ISIS but fled from the group in the summer of 2014. He revealed that the core of ISIS leadership is in the hands of Iraqis, many of them former Baathists and officers for Saddam Hussein, they make-up ISIS' shadowy military and security committees, and are the majority of its emirs and princes.²⁸

²⁶ Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. p. 20

²⁷ Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. p.22

²⁸ Sly, Liz. "The hidden hand behind the Islamic State militants? Saddam Hussein's." 4 April 2015. *Washingtonpost.com*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html. 6 September 2015.

Hamza was arrested for disagreeing with fellow commanders after a meeting in which a masked Iraqi sat taking notes. In Syria commanders, “emirs”, are typically accompanied by an Iraqi deputy who makes the real decisions. Other defectors beside Hamza, have confirmed this heavy presence of Iraqis and former Saddamist officers. The Iraqis make the battle plans and strategies but stay in the back while sending out foreign fighters to the front lines. Liz Sly reports, “They have brought to the organization the military expertise and some of the agendas of the former Baathists, as well as the smuggling networks developed to avoid sanctions in the 1990s and which now facilitate the Islamic State’s illicit oil trading.”²⁹

The development from a terrorist group competing amidst numerous other factions to a Islamic police state and self-declared Caliphate was successful because of a former Baathist. Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi , known as Haji Bakr, was one of the key leaders who molded ISIS into a police state. He was a former colonel in the intelligence service for Saddam Hussein’s air defense force. Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime Bakr joined the insurgency in 2003. In 2010 he was the head of the military council of Jama’at al-Tawhidw’al-Jihad (JTJ) as it became the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Bakr became the chief strategist for the group, masterminding the rise of ISIS and laying out the foundation for a police state.

The capture of ISIS documents revealed a systematic plan created by Bakr for the infiltration, coercion, and subjugation of the populations’ of towns and cities.³⁰ The plan

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Christoph Reuter of the German news outlet SPIEGEL wrote an extensive article on ISIS strategic plan. The article is based on a 31 page blue-print that SPIEGEL says it gained exclusive access to from the al-Tawhid Brigade in Syria. Drawn from that article, the following describes how ISIS has developed and executed the strategy.

was a road map for capturing northern Syria and then using it as a launching pad into Iraq. Bakr's plan also laid out the creation of the Caliphate. Part of the plans included strategies for taking over towns and regions. They called for recruits and converts to become spies in their villages, building up information to use later as blackmail to gain the cooperation of leaders and elites or to identified opposition figures for assassination. They also used former intelligence personnel, youth, and paid spies to build a social and economic map of local populations, particularly focusing on what was being taught in the mosques and by whom. After securing a town ISIS 'brothers' would marry the daughters of influential families. Bakr planned for an emir in each provincial council to be in charge of murders, abductions, snipers, communication, and encryption. Another emir supervised the emirs "in case they don't do their jobs well." Bakr also laid out the plans for the organization of his spies into provincial commands reporting to deputies and commanders, essentially creating a Stasi like domestic intelligence department, perhaps something Bakr learned during his time working for Saddam Hussein. ISIS even infiltrated other rebel groups and knew who Assad's spies were within the rebel brigades.

By using tactics of coercion and espionage along with the efficient use of a small foreign army ISIS was able to rise above other competing groups and seize power. ISIS began a strategy of building up an army of foreign fighters in 2012. At first chaotic, ISIS managed to train the fighters with complete loyalty to central leadership. Living in a foreign land and staying separated from Syrian groups helped maintain cohesiveness among the foreigners. As foreigners they were more mobile in contrast to the Syrian

Reuter, Christoph. *The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State*. 15 April 2015. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html> . 13 September 2015.

fighters who stayed in their home towns and helped take in their family's crops. In fall 2013, ISIS books listed 2,650 foreign fighters in the Province of Aleppo alone. Tunisians represented a third of the total, followed by Saudi Arabians, Turks, Egyptians, and in smaller numbers, Chechens, Europeans and Indonesians. In early 2013 ISIS was relatively small compared to the numerous Syrian groups. However, by wearing black masks their identities and numbers were not exactly known. Several hundred soldiers making attacks in black masks in different locations could be the same army or could be individual parts of a larger army. The city of Raqqa was captured in March 2013 by murdering and intimidating leaders who had been identified by spies. Syrian rebel groups remained sidelined by division and secret negotiations with ISIS, each thinking that they had an exclusive deal with ISIS. Raqqa serves as the capital city for ISIS to this day. ISIS lost much of its territory and almost lost Raqqa; however, by using deception and exploiting the divisions between the different rebel Syrian brigades ISIS was able to bring in 1,300 Iraqi fighters and recover its hold on Raqqa. The guile, insurgent network, and brutal efficiency of Baathists helped ISIS garner early battlefield success. ISIS gained control over half of Syria and has maintained possession of key Iraqi cities such as Mosul.

Brutality Is Central To ISIS' Strategy Of Polarization And Recruitment

Abu Musab Al Zarqawi Was The Leader To The Precursor Of ISIS. ISIS inherited its proclivity for violence and the glorification thereof from Zarqawi the founder of its precursor organization Jama'at al-Tawhidw'al-Jihad (JTJ) (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad). Zarqawi's strategy is linked to concepts from a jihadist writing,

“The Management of Savagery” which calls for dividing society and forcing people to join the conflict and choose sides.³¹ This polarization and catalyzation for jihad happens through the use of extreme violence. In its online publications and throughout its films ISIS frequently cites Zarqawi saying, “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify-by Allah’s permission-until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.” Zarqawi believed using extreme brutality would create this spark, polarizing the ummah and inspiring true believers to fight. ISIS now proudly carries that spark as it spreads the ‘flames of war’.

Before becoming religious and a terrorist al Zarqawi was a common criminal with a record for drug possession and sexual assault.³² He joined AQ and operated a training camp in Afghanistan with the intention of sending men to fight for regime change in the Levant.³³ He led his own group, JTJ. Zarqawi refused to swear allegiance to Osama bin Laden and ally with AQ until 2004. At that point American analysts began referring to JTJ as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Zarqawi focused on using savagery and sparking conflict. Zarqawi had himself filmed personally decapitating a captured American in May 2004. His followers decapitated several other Westerners. Ransomed Lebanese kidnap victims said victims who could not pay were slowly killed with electric drills.³⁴ Under Zarqawi JTJ was

³¹ Wright, Lawrence. "ISIS's Savage Strategy in Iraq." 16 June 2014. *The New Yorker*. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/isiss-savage-strategy-in-iraq>. 5 November 2015.

³² Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. p.2

³³ Ibid., p.13

³⁴ Warrick, Joby. "Maniac who created ISIS: His medieval barbarity was too much even for Al Qaeda. Now a chilling new book charts the bloody rise and fall of the 'Slaughter Sheik' ." 26 September 2015. *DailyMail.co.uk*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3250181/Maniac-created-ISIS-medieval-barbarity-Al-Qaeda-chilling-new-book-charts-bloody-rise-fall-Slaughter-Sheik.html>. 9 October 2015.

responsible for the worst terrorist attacks in Jordan's history with over 100 dead. His group also targeted US soldiers and the Iraqi government while showing little regard for civilian casualties, sometimes even targeting them. Zarqawi and bin Laden were willing to make compromises, cooperate, and work within political situations to advance their cause. However, Zarqawi was not willing to work with Shiites. In fact he wanted to start a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, who were in the majority and controlled most of the Iraqi government. His group bombed the Golden Mosque at al Askia at the beginning of 2006. The mosque was an important site to the Shiite religion. The bombing sparked a wave of violence between Shiites and Sunnis with over 1,000 dead within a few days.³⁵ Today ISIS makes videos decapitating prisoners and continues to pursue a strategy of sectarian war.

Zarqawi started sectarian warfare with groups al Qaeda refused to engage. Since the time of Zarqawi (he was killed by US forces in 2006) his organization has continued along the path he laid out and has become more intolerant and just as brutal. Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi took over the organization and rebranded it the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). They were both killed in April 2010.³⁶ Abu Bakr al Baghdadi became its next leader. Under Baghdadi ISI evolved into ISIS and brought Zarqawi's spark of brutality and sectarian warfare into a global call for a Caliphate.

Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is the Caliph of ISIS' declared Islamic state. Baghdadi came to power through the help of Bakr and built on the legacy of Zarqawi. Baghdadi has

³⁵ Knickmeyer, Ellen. "Blood on Our Hands." 25 October 2010. *ForeignPolicy*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/25/blood-on-our-hands/>. 9 October 2015.

³⁶ National Counter Terrorism Center. *Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI)*. n.d. <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html>. 12 September 2015.

followed in the violent sectarian steps of Zarqawi and has expanded the agenda of ISIS. Under Baghdadi ISIS has become even more intolerant. He has brought to fruition the most ambitious goals of jihadism by declaring himself the Caliph and demanding the obedience and recognition of the entire Muslim world.

Under Baghdadi's leadership ISIS has expanded its field of enemies and sought to kill even more people deemed Takfir. Zarqawi declared all Shiites to be Takfir. Now even other Salafist groups are declared Takfir. Previously ISIS had nominally been under AQ; however, this connection was broken by ISIS' arbitrary declaration of being the Islamic State and requiring other groups swear loyalty to it. AQ leader Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri severed AQ's connection to ISIS.³⁷ ISIS has even begun fighting against other terrorist groups such as the al Qaeda affiliated group Jabhat al Nusra in Syria.³⁸

Baghdadi is an ambitious leader. His real name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai. The change of name was in favor of one more prestigious, easier to remember, and evocative of history. Abu Bakr was the name of the prophet Muhammed's father-in-law who also became a Caliph. 'Al-Baghdadi' links him to Baghdad which is more significant than his home town of Samarra. Unlike Zarqawi's violent and criminal past Baghdadi has the background of an intellectual. In Samarra, north of Baghdad, he was known for being studious, taciturn, and soft spoken. He came from a lower middle

³⁷ BBC. *Al-Qaeda disavows ISIS militants in Syria*. 3 February 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26016318>. 5 November 2015.

³⁸ Ali, Abdallah Suleiman. "Jabhat al-Nusra launches war against IS in Qalamoun." 12 May 2015. *al Monitor*. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/05/syira-qalamoun-jabhat-al-nusra-war-isis-kharijites.html>. 5 November 2015.

class background; however, two uncles worked for Saddam Hussein's security forces.³⁹ One neighbor says Baghdadi was supervised by two prominent clerics (now deceased): Sheikh Subhi al-Saarai and Sheikh Adnan al-Ameen.⁴⁰

Baghdadi has a different role than Zarqawi did. Baghdadi was drawn into the insurgency during the early years of the US involvement in Iraq. As a young Iraqi man Baghdadi would have completed mandatory military service; however, it does not seem Baghdadi played a direct military role in the insurgency. Baghdadi was arrested in 2004 or 2005 in Fallujah by US forces as a civilian associated with a terrorist group. Conflicting reports indicate he was held one to three years. Camp Bucca, where he was held, is now known for being a place of radicalization and networking for terrorists and future recruits. Baghdadi became the leader of ISI in May 2010 and in 2013 he broke with al-Qaeda and renamed the group Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The late Haji Bakr was the behind-the-scenes advisor who helped prepare and maneuver Baghdadi into the position of leadership as the group broke with other terrorist organizations and asserted itself.⁴¹ Baghdadi is a spiritual leader and a firm believer in the ideological cause. Bakr was a strategist who desired power and understood how to get it. After Bakr was killed in late 2013 his house was searched and the detailed plans of ISIS were found; however, a Quran was noticeably absent.⁴² 'Hussein,' a defector who spoke to Newsweek

³⁹ Giovanni, Janine Di. "Who is ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." 8 December 2013. *Newsweek.com*. 7 September 2015. <<http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/who-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-290081.html>>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Reuter, Christoph. *The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State*. 15 April 2015. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html> . 13 September 2015.

says that Baghdadi relied heavily on Bakr's advice and still depends on a loyal inner circle, many of whom he met at Camp Bucca.⁴³ Moving forward without Bakr but still following the plan, ISIS declared itself to be the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014.

ISIS' Innovative Propaganda Strategy Both Supports And Is Driven By Its Ideology, Battlefield Success, And Use Of Violence

Propaganda has played and continues to play a crucial role in ISIS' establishment of a state and its expansion. Zarqawi's practice of savagery included using the media to gain attention for his polarizing acts. He started the practice of putting prisoners in orange jumpsuits and beheading them on camera. The fire he wanted to spark depended on getting peoples' attention and galvanizing them. Bakr created a strategy that relied on using foreigners while suppressing and coercing local populations, thus increasing the need to recruit more fighters, particularly foreigners. The very nature of JTI and ISIS' objective, the Islamic State as prescribed by jihadist ideology, also requires the recruitment of women, doctors and skilled professionals. ISIS strategy and objective requires propaganda to facilitate recruiting more followers and expanding the call for its cause. Under Baghdadi ISIS has become more exclusive and assertive. Exclusive does not mean that ISIS does not want people to join it; rather it means it is violently turning against anyone who does not support it. ISIS must use its propaganda to effectively communicate its narrow and exclusive ideology and justify its actions against other

⁴³ Giovanni, Janine Di. "Who is ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi." 8 December 2013. *Newsweek.com*. 7 September 2015. <<http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/who-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-290081.html>>.

Muslim groups. ISIS uses propaganda to incite conflict, recruit followers, and explain its theology and actions.

The threats to the Middle East and the West from ISIS have been brought about in large part because of its use of propaganda. Countering the threat from ISIS involves countering its means for becoming a threat. ISIS is a multifaceted organization and there are numerous facets from which it can be confronted. This paper is specifically focused on the propaganda aspect.

There are a number of challenges that ISIS must deal with. There are numerous causes and motivations for recruits. There is no one single profile for the type of person who joins ISIS. There are a number of jihadist groups operating in Syria. ISIS is not the only organization for would-be terrorists to join; however it is the most receptive to foreigners. In the same way that everyone who considers them self a patriotic American may not join the US military, not everyone who is open to ISIS' messages and cause chooses to join them. ISIS faces the same challenges as any recruiter or politician trying to garner support and followers for a cause. The flow of foreigners joining ISIS demonstrates ISIS is finding success with its propaganda. Of the 58 Americans studied in the HCHS report released in September, almost 80 percent were downloading extremist propaganda, promoting it online, or engaging with other extremists on social media.⁴⁴ Whether communicating with individuals who have already decided to support jihad in Syria/Iraq or persuading the undecided, ISIS propagandists play an essential role in bringing new recruits into the folds of its ideology, community, and organization.

⁴⁴ House Committee on Homeland Security. *Final Report of The Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. Congressional Committee Report. Washington DC: Homeland Security Committee, 2015. <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>.

ISIS USES PROPAGANDA FOR DIVERSE MESSAGES TO DIVERSE AUDIENCES ACROSS DIVERSE PLATFORMS.

The ISIS approach to propaganda is to express diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms and rely on a dispersed network of grassroots level supporters to amplify and share its messages. The varied mediums, themes, and audiences of ISIS propaganda suggests that counter messages have to be just as diverse and discreetly targeted in order to have an effect. ISIS' messaging is directed at several target audiences. They are trying to communicate to the Muslim community at large, current followers and potential recruits, local enemies- in Iraq and Syria and the region, and far enemies –the US and Europe. ISIS uses all forms of media. They have gained attention particularly for their use of video and social media. Al Hayat Media is the official media outlet for ISIS propaganda geared toward Western audiences. They post numerous messages on Twitter, exploiting the site for mass communication. Propaganda is used for intimidation psychological operations (PSYOPS)-a military tactic, public relations-explaining the group to the public, and recruitment. ISIS produces carefully staged and edited videos alongside frontline battle footage. ISIS has many sympathizers who spread the messages and content of ISIS throughout the internet. ISIS also follows up propaganda with direct communication with potential recruits.

Themes that ISIS plays on are: Muslim victimization, devotion to God and answering his call, gaining paradise and absolution through sacrifice, an absolutist 'us versus them' dichotomy, a utopian state, community-sisterhood and brotherhood, a sense of adventure, a cause and purpose in life, a chance to be a part of history, right wrongs-do

good-and oppose evil, and spiritual fulfillment. These themes appeal to different people from a variety of backgrounds. Central to an individual's falling for ISIS messaging is a religious belief and openness to the worldview of ISIS, accepting part of it and accepting further indoctrination into it.

ISIS Uses Apps And Various Online Platforms For Mass Communication.

Twitter has played a public and prominent role in ISIS' social media efforts. ISIS use of Twitter is mainly to gain public prominence and spread information. Numerous followers and a handy app helped ISIS spread its tweets without losing traction from account closures. In August 2014 there were 27,000 Twitter accounts with positive mentions of ISIS with a total of 700,000 accounts discussing the terrorist group.⁴⁵ ISIS tweets range from informational announcements about leadership and policy to pictures of its members cuddling cats or killing prisoners.

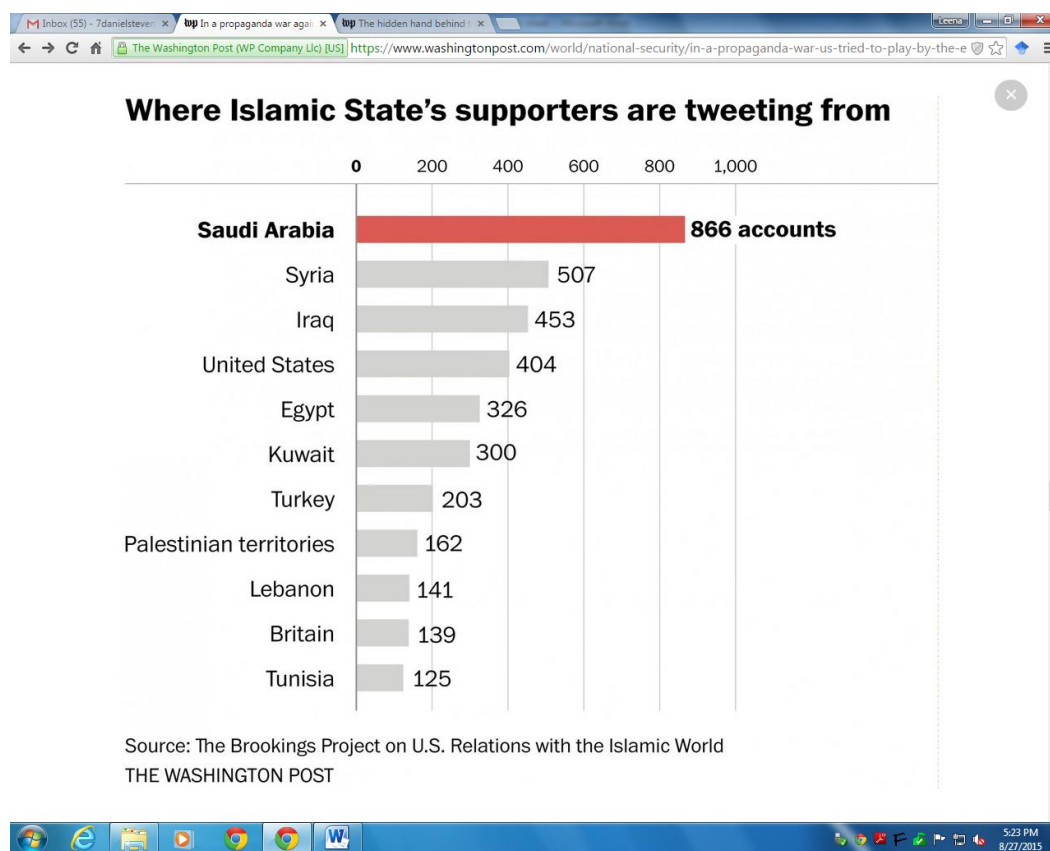
An ISIS' app, 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings,' or just, 'Dawn,' was used to spread its Twitter messages on the profiles of anyone who downloaded the app. The app was installed between 5,000 to 10,000 times.⁴⁶ Two days after J.M. Berger's article in the Atlantic calling attention to 'Dawn' was published, Google removed the app from Google Play store.⁴⁷ The account of everyone who downloaded the app was used to repost the same content as one centrally controlled ISIS account. The tweets included links, hashtags, and images, spread across users' accounts in delayed intervals to avoid

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *Isis official app available to download on Google Play*. 17 June 2014. 8 September 2015.
<<http://www.itv.com/news/2014-06-17/isiss-official-app-available-to-download-on-google-play/>>.

⁴⁷ *Google removes Isis official app from Play store*. 8 June 2014. 8 September 2015.
<<http://www.itv.com/news/story/2014-06-18/google-play-store-isis-app/>>.

Twitter's spam detectors.⁴⁸ The app allowed supporters to lend their accounts to whatever message ISIS wanted to put out. The app came out in April 2014. When ISIS took over Mosul in June they reached 40,000 tweets in one day. ISIS media managers took a photo of the ISIS flag flying over the city and were able to use their Dawn app to send thousands of tweets of the image with the caption "We are coming, Baghdad."⁴⁹ Any search for "Baghdad" on Twitter pulled up the image among the first results. ISIS effectively used Twitter for mass communication. Figure 3 shows where ISIS supporters tweet from.



⁴⁸ Berger, J.M. "How ISIS Games Twitter." 16 June 2014. *The Atlantic*. 27 August 2015. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Figure 3: Where Islamic State's supporters are tweeting from. Greg Miller, and Scott Higham. "In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy's rules." 8 May 2015. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html. 27 August 2015.

J.M. Berger explained how ISIS used Twitter to magnify its message by using organized hashtag campaigns:

The group enlists hundreds and sometimes thousands of activists to repetitively tweet hashtags at certain times of day so that they trend on the social network. This approach also skews the results of a popular Arabic Twitter account called @ActiveHashtags that tweets each day's top trending tags. When ISIS gets its hashtag into the @ActiveHashtags stream, it results in an average of 72 retweets per tweet, which only makes the hashtag trend more. As it gains traction, more users are exposed to ISIS's messaging. The group's supporters also run accounts similar to @ActiveHashtags that exclusively feature jihadi content and can produce hundreds of retweets per tweet. ISIS' success in social media is partly because it leverages decentralized volunteer supporters to spread and amplify its messaging on social media.

The manager of one of the most prolific and widely followed English-language Twitter profiles, @ShamiWitness, was revealed as an Indian executive from Bangalore named Mehdi.⁵⁰ Like many information operations, it is hard to quantify the impact that Mehdi's efforts had; evenso, he was in contact with British Muslims before they joined ISIS. Peter Neumann, the director of the International Center for the Study of Radicalization at King's College London, said, "He was justifying and explaining ISIS so that lots of people who were thinking of going to join ISIS could find the arguments and information to justify to themselves and legitimize that choice."⁵¹

Social media accounts for ISIS are closed by hosting sites on a regular basis, but censorship does not stop them. Twitter closes the accounts of terrorist groups; however,

⁵⁰ Hubbard, Ben. "Twitter Backer of ISIS Is a Clean-Cut Executive in India, British Channel Says." *New York Times*. December 12, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/13/world/middleeast/Twitter-backer-of-isis-is-identified-as-clean-cut-indian-executive.html> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁵¹ Ibid.

as soon as they close one account a new one is opened. Over 1,000 accounts with suspected terrorist links have been suspended by Twitter.⁵² The day after a man inspired by ISIS took 17 hostages and in Sydney, Australia, Facebook took down the 100th iteration of a popular ISIS page. ISIS immediately launched three new sites.⁵³

ISIS also uses a number of other exploits on the internet to spread their messages. ISIS avoids censorship by using sites and apps that enable anonymous communication. Sites like *justpaste.it* or at one point the Arabic version, *manbar.me* which create a unique link for material that is copied and pasted on to it. It is like creating a onetime information sharing website that can only be shared by those who have the link. *Ask.fm* is a chat app that allows people to communicate with each other online anonymously. These methods are more exclusive and involve smaller audiences but show how ISIS adapts to and exploits a range of outlets in its propaganda campaigns.

ISIS Causes Fear By Using Propaganda As A Tool For Psychological Warfare

ISIS uses fear as a tactic of psychological warfare to gain an advantage on the battlefield. They record their deeds with videos and pictures and post them online, making sure everyone knows what happens to those who oppose them. They execute prisoners, sometimes in dramatic videos using knives to cut off the heads of their victims.

⁵² Melchior, Jillian Kay. "ISIS Tactics Illustrate Social Media's New Place In Modern War." TechCrunch.com. October 15, 2014. <http://techcrunch.com/2014/10/15/isis-tactics-illustrate-social-medias-new-place-in-modern-war/> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁵³ Weyers, Jeff R. "Radicalization: There's an App for That." 2 January 2015. *counterjihadreport.com*. <https://ibrabo.wordpress.com/2014/12/16/radicalization-theres-an-app-for-that/>. 27 August 2018. <<http://counterjihadreport.com/tag/the-dawn-of-glad-tidings/>>.

They kidnap women and beat them, rape them, and use them as slaves.⁵⁴ An NPR report said thousands of women have been kidnapped; a number of them have committed suicide.⁵⁵ Conditions are so horrific some women have used their hidden cell phones to ask for US airstrikes targeting themselves.⁵⁶

The tactic of fear is working. Bahjat Majid, a Kurdish Peshmerga soldier admitted “Maybe the Peshmerga are strong, but they’re also afraid...The strong media that the [ISIS] uses affects people.”⁵⁷ As he was visiting his family in a refugee camp, Majid cited among a number of things the image of a decapitated girl disturbing his sleep at night. An influential Kurdish commander fighting against the Islamic State said ISIS terrorism is working. Before men go out to fight they have to take care of their families:

They started this almost one year ago, [using] all the media — social media, Facebook, the Internet — [to show] how they are killing the people, how they are taking their kids, how they are killing children, how they are taking the women, females, so it’s really psychological war, and I can say that they are succeeding. . . . Most of the Peshmerga, you know, they are from [this] same region, so when ISIS came, some of them [said they had to first] take their families and kids to the safe area [before they could join the fight]. . . . That’s a challenge for us.⁵⁸

In June 2014, 30,000 Iraqi soldiers fled from Mosul as a significantly smaller ISIS force, perhaps less than a 1,000, took the city.⁵⁹ Although numerous causes were cited and a

⁵⁴ Fadel, Leila. "ISIS Captives Tell Of Rapes And Beatings, Plead For Help." NPR. October 3, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/10/03/352815113/isis-captives-tell-of-rapes-and-beatings-plead-for-help> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Melchior, Jillian Kay. "ISIS Tactics Illustrate Social Media's New Place In Modern War." TechCrunch.com. October 15, 2014. <http://techcrunch.com/2014/10/15/isis-tactics-illustrate-social-medias-new-place-in-modern-war/> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Chulov, Martin, Fazel Hawramy, and Spencer Ackermn. "Iraq army capitulates to Isis militants in four cities." The Guardian. June 11, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states> (accessed December 12, 2014).

variety of people were blamed, the Iraqi soldiers were fleeing in terror, some of them without even seeing the enemy.⁶⁰ ISIS' campaign of terrorism is working.

ISIS uses the same tactic of fear to intimidate Americans and deter them from engaging ISIS. Before being executed by ISIS, American journalist Steven Joel Sotloff was used as a mouth piece of ISIS followed by a message from the executioner. They remind President Obama of the cost of the war in Iraq and that Obama was elected by promising to bring the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. They declare the American people do not want this fight and that Foley died because of Obama's interference. The executioner concludes, "We take this opportunity to warn those governments that enter this evil alliance of America against the Islamic State to back off and leave our people alone."⁶¹

The sensational beheadings of American journalists grabs attention and puts ISIS at the forefront of American media. Westerners are supposed to be intimidated and be reminded of the cost of past and future engagements in Iraq. ISIS hopes to intimidate and coerce American voters into opposing further intervention against ISIS. The video feeds off of general war weariness in America and tries to shock and horrify. It also sends a message to journalists. By intimidating and driving foreign journalists away it is easier for ISIS to control the narrative and shape the news. Terrorism is used as a tactic to give ISIS an advantage against the enemies it faces in the field and to deter more enemies from joining the fray.

⁶⁰ Beck, John. "Iraqi Soldiers Fleeing ISIS Claim They Were 'Abandoned' by Senior Officers." Vice News. June 15, 2014. <https://news.vice.com/article/iraqi-soldiers-fleeing-isis-claim-they-were-abandoned-by-senior-officers> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁶¹ "IS Behead Steven Joel Sotloff, Threatens to Execute Briton David Cawthorne Haines." Site Intel Group. September 2, 2014. <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/is-behead-steven-joel-sotloff-threatens-to-execute-briton-david-cawthorne-haines.html> (accessed December 13, 2014).

ISIS Uses Video To Effectively Communicate To Target Audiences.

ISIS has made significant efforts producing high quality video content. They post videos of combat footage, executions, decapitations, documentaries, and interviews. Some of the films show footage captured in a manner similar to news media. Other videos are focused on person of interest interviews. Some of the videos are created in a cinematic manner, captured with multiple takes from different angles with added sound effects and music. ISIS uses the video medium for multiple formats. These productions are geared toward a variety of audiences with a variety of messages. Below are representative examples of innumerable ISIS videos showing the variety of formats and a sampling of key messages and target audiences.

ISIS Film Nov. 16th 2014: ISIS Says It Is Mighty, To Be Feared, And Can Win. ISIS sought to demonstrate its power and fearsomeness in a video released on November 16th 2014. The video is an example of ISIS psychological warfare in deed and in communication.⁶² It is in Arabic with English subtitles and English text next to Arabic texts. The video shows sophisticated graphics, editing, sound effects, music, narration, and camera work throughout. The video starts by covering the events of the last decade telling the ISIS narrative. The evolution of ISIS' history is traced from the original fighters against the US under Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden to the group's fighting in Syria and Iraq and ultimately unifying under al Baghdadi and the Islamic State. After showing footage of its enemies, it switches to dramatic footage of explosions and gunfire and then executions and bodies. The next segment is a dramatic cinematic depiction of the decapitation of 16 Syrian soldiers. Multiple camera angles and sound effects are used

⁶² "URGENT Video: Peter Kassig beheaded by ISIS with 16 Syrians." Iraqi News. November 16, 2014. <http://www.iraqinews.com/features/urgent-video-peter-kassig-beheaded-isis-16-syrians/> (accessed December 12, 2014).

for a gripping visual display. The next segment shows a large crowd pledging allegiance to al Baghdadi as the Caliph of the Islamic State. The final segment shows the man known as “Jihad John” standing over the head of American Peter Kassig with a message directed at Americans and Obama. He accuses Obama of lying and not withdrawing all US troops from Iraq. He states that the US will return with even more soldiers and its proxies will be useless. He proclaims that they are eagerly awaiting US armies so that they can kill them as well.

To Muslim audiences they are presenting themselves as the continuation and leaders of the fight that has been waged by Al Qaeda and Iraqi insurgent groups. They are presenting the victorious establishment of the Islamic State. Many people are pledging allegiance to it and all Muslims are called to do so. ISIS creates the impression that their will is executed and their enemies defeated. They are the winning side. To those fighting against them they are a fearful enemy. The dramatic execution of the 16 Syrians lingers over the moment of death, using knives instead of an ax or sword makes the decapitation take longer, stretching out the moment. It inspires dread, fear, and demonstrates who is in control. To the west they are defiant. This defiance also speaks to their Muslim audience showing that they are not afraid of the US and believe they can win against all forces. In short the message of the video is: we are mighty, we are to be feared, we have power, and we can win. Numerous other videos and pictures and reports reinforce the brutality and successes of ISIS.

Flames Of War: ISIS Provides A Narrative For Its War. The film, *Flames of War*, establishes the narrative that ISIS wants to tell about the war it is engaging in. It is a 55 minute long video released on September 19, 2014, narrated in English with an Arabic

accent.⁶³ It has some Arabic singing in the background, at other times there are segments of just singing with subtitles. The opening shows the context of the Iraq war as an invasion by Crusaders and accuses Presidents Bush and Obama of being liars when they declared the war was over. Assad began a war against Muslims and subverted sharia. These steps were part of the growing 'Flames of War.' Next the video recounts the taking of a Syrian airbase, showing an artillery bombardment, followed by tank-hunters clearing the way for an infantry assault. Still facing resistance they send in a suicide bomber, the most effective weapon of war, because nothing can stop unshakeable faith. They show a dying mujahidin fighter with an audio clip from al Zarqawi declaring it is not an easy path. "What was on display for the world was that the mujahedeen would only accept victory or death." The camera lingers over the faces of two dead fighters. The narrator goes on to declare that [ISIS] has opened up new lands and has been embraced by the civilians.

Next the film calls out the media assault against them, flashing the logos of western news outlets and playing clips from imams denouncing them. The film labels January 3rd (2014) as a black day in which there was a united fight against them. Faces of several dead fighters are shown. But this victory for the enemy gave them false hope because God is with ISIS. The war was just beginning. Showing a map with cities in Syria and Iraq it shows the gains of ISIS. Next, part of a sermon delivered to a group of fighters is shown. The speaker is preaching that they do not value this life; instead they are eager to give up their lives for God. The next campaign narrated is against the PKK and the YPG. The Kurdish fighters are derided as weak and cowardly secularists who

⁶³ *Flames of War*. Dir. Al Hayat Media Center. 2014.
<https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/the-flames-of-war-the-fighting-has-just-begun/>.

fought for land. Numerous corpses are shown from the battlefield. Next the destruction of US supplied Iraqi army vehicles and tanks are shown along with footage of ISIS fighters driving captured vehicles and tanks. The film shows extensive combat footage with the Iraqi army. It shows its vaunted tank-hunters taking on US provided Abrams tanks. (According to a Jane's report the armor of five Abrams' were penetrated by anti-tank guided missiles (AGTM) with a total of 28 damaged January to May 2014.⁶⁴) The film shifts its focus to the destruction of the borders created by Sykes-Picot and the establishment of the Khilafa under Baghdadi. About 40 minutes into the video the first non-fighting violence is depicted, the execution of rows of prisoners laying on the ground.

The film returns to Syria showing a night battle near Raqqa against the 17th Military Division of the Syrian Army. The final scene of the film starts with a man in a mask speaking to the camera while men are digging in the background. He says they are at the 17th Military Division headquarters and behind him are captured soldiers digging their own graves. He declares the fate of everyone they capture will be the same. A man digging speaks to the camera cursing Bashar Al Assad, accusing him of abandoning them. He says the officers all fled leaving the men to dig their own graves. He encourages Syrians with sons in the army to get them out. The man then declares God has blessed the Islamic State and that they took the headquarters in a matter of seconds. He says they numbered 800 while the ISIS fighters only 20 or 30. (Despite being a voice for ISIS propaganda he is shown being executed with the rest of the prisoners). The masked man stands at the end of a line of men holding pistols. Kneeling before them are the men who

⁶⁴ Binnie, Jeremy. "Iraqi Abrams losses revealed." 20 June 2014. *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*. <http://www.janes.com/article/39550/iraqi-abrams-losses-revealed>. 21 September 2015.

were digging. The masked man tells the camera the fighting has just begun and “The flames of war are only beginning to intensify.” He then turns and raises a pistol, the prisoners are executed in unison. The last seconds of the film are spoken in Arabic with highlighted English text declaring:

This is a message to America. Know, Oh defender of the cross, that a proxy war will not help you in Sham just as it did not help you in Iraq. As for the near future, you will be forced into a direct confrontation, with Allah’s permission, despite your reluctance. And the sons of Islam have prepared themselves for this day, so wait and see, for we too are also going to wait and see.⁶⁵

The target audience is supporters, enemies, and the undecided, a very wide audience.

The last part is addressed specifically to America-but the real message is for its supporters. This production communicates three main themes: 1. Who and what they are 2. A narrative of what the movement is doing now 3. Perspective on the big picture timeline of the war. The film explains to an English audience that despite what others teach and say they are the holy warriors fighting against the kufr. It constructs a narrative of victory and shows ISIS engaging and defeating the Syrian Army, the PKK and YPG, the Iraqi army, and once again the Syrian army. It is showing that it can defeat all enemies. They also draw attention to how the Iraqi army’s possession of US made equipment cannot stop ISIS. The film did acknowledge a defeat when unified forces attacked them, without specifying who. However, it qualified this defeat by pointing out their subsequent string of victories in Iraq. The end of the film reveals a desire to fight against the US, acknowledging a sentiment that true victory will not come until they engage and defeat US forces.

⁶⁵ *Flames of War*. Dir. Al Hayat Media Center. 2014.
<https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/the-flames-of-war-the-fighting-has-just-begun/>.

The repetition of the title ‘Flames of War’ throughout the film emphasizes that the war is just beginning. The narrator says this at the beginning when discussing the initial invasion of Iraq and this is stressed again in the very last scene. The fact that the masked man at the end mentioned the ‘flames of war’ the moment before he executes someone shows that ‘Flames of War’ spreading and intensifying is part of a thought out media slogan. The whole period from 2003 to 2014 is qualified as just the beginning. ISIS sees itself in a long fight. As they engage and defeat the proxies of the US they are preparing for a bigger fight. This piece of propaganda reveals that ISIS expects a showdown with US forces to be an inevitable part of their fight and a necessary step towards true victory. They are conditioning their followers for this.

There Is No Life Without Jihad: Calling The ‘Brothers’ Who Stayed Behind To Come To Jihad. The video *There is no Life without Jihad*, focuses on encouraging Muslims who are sympathetic to the call for jihad but are undecided about making a commitment. The video, released around June 2014, features the following individuals taking turns discussing the call to jihad: “Abu Muthanna al Yemeni”- Nasser Muthana, 20 from Britain who had been accepted at four different medical schools,⁶⁶ “Abu Bara al Hindi”-from Britain, “Abu Yahya ash Shami”-from Australia, “Abu Nour al Iraqi”-from Australia, “Abu Dujana al Hindi”-Reyaad Khan from Britain.⁶⁷ At the end of the video it advertises another video featuring Abu Khaled al Cambodi, Neil Prakash from Australia. Prakash is shown sitting with the other five mentioned individuals in this video but does not say anything. The six men are shown sitting in a row on grass outside with a

⁶⁶ Whitehead, Tom, et al. "Iraq crisis: British student identified as recruiting Isis jihadists." 20 June 2014. *telegraph.co.uk*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10916124/Iraq-crisis-British-student-identified-as-recruiting-Isis-jihadists.html>. 21 September 2015.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

backdrop of vegetation. The video is intercut with scenes from ISIS rallies. The below is a sampling of excerpts from the thirteen minute long video:

Jihad gives you life. This is the best of lands and God has chosen the best of people to come here. We have people from all over the world. It is about fighting until God's law is implemented. We understand no borders. Read the Quran and everything will become clear to you. Forget everyone [the agreeing and disagreeing scholars] just read the Quran. [God does not need your sacrifice, it is a test for you. If you sacrifice for God] he will repay you 700 times more. When I used to live [in the West], in the heart you feel depressed. The cure for the depression is Jihad. The honor of the ummah is jihad. There are two types of people, those who will fight every single excuse not to come to jihad and those who will fight every single excuse to come to jihad. This is a message to the brothers who stayed behind. You need to ask your selves what prevents you from coming. Do you wish to be resurrected with the dust of kufr land still in your lungs or do you wish to be resurrected showing your wounds and what you sacrificed for God. [While brothers are on the front lines facing bombs and bullets do you want to be living in comfort?] If you fear death, death will reach you anyway. [When you are resurrected and stand before God he will show you the Muslims who were raped and murdered for their faith. God will then have the mujahedeen stand before you and God will ask you where were you on that day?]The more enmity is shown us we just get stronger and stronger. Look at where we started and where we are today. The kufr fear us. They cannot stop the Khilafa, they can only delay it. These people have been training their whole lives. They have all these new weapons and we are wiping them, day by day, inch by inch, we keep removing them. This is proof God is with us. Know that death is close and you will have to answer for staying behind. You can be here during these golden times or commenting on the sidelines.⁶⁸

The target audience of the video is Muslims still in the Western world, particularly Britain and Australia, who are listening to jihadists but are on the fence about joining.

The themes of the message are: Jihad is a special calling, the Quran justifies us, we are answering the highest authority, jihad is rewarding, jihad is an honor, you should feel guilty for not joining jihad, we are succeeding, death is not defeat, the ultimate goal is heaven, do not miss this opportunity.

⁶⁸ *There Is No Life Without Jihad*. Dir. al-Hayāt Media Center. 2014. <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/19/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-there-is-no-life-without-jihad/>.

The Story Of Abu Khaled Al-Cambodi From Australia: An Emphasis On Spiritual And Moral Motivations. ISIS shows how joining their cause is part of the path to finding spiritual and moral fulfilment. They documented a conversion story and personal journey to ISIS in *The story of Abu Khaled Al-Cambodi from Australia*.⁶⁹ (Real name Neil Prakash). This video is part of a series of videos created by ISIS featuring Westerner's stories of how they came to ISIS. The interview takes place in several different settings. The majority of it is filmed while sitting in a park in a city with two armed fighters sitting next to him-reinforcing the image of brotherhood. Some of the cutaways feature Abu walking with children playing in the background. Abu has a gun with him in most of the scenes.

Below are excerpts from the thirteen minute long video, it starts with Prakash's conversion from Buddhism, "I saw people praying to statues and giving money to statues. I did not understand the meaning of this religion. I was very sad and confused. I asked my uncle what we are doing in life, he said we work, we have a family, get a nice house, a car, and in the end we die and that's it. But that can't really be it."⁷⁰

Paraphrasing Prakash, "You work and work to give your money to the government and then they use it to wage war to take natural resources away from other countries." He found his answer in Islam, "I took shahada, it was one of the best feelings I ever felt in my life, the unity I had with the brothers." After a while he still felt like he had not found what he was looking for, paraphrasing Prakash, "Eventually I decided there had to be more to Islam than praying, making haj, being good. After reading the

⁶⁹ *The story of Abu Khaled Al-Cambodi from Australia*. Dir. Al Hayat Media Center. 2015.
http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=6b5_1429653638.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

surah I asked myself what am I doing, what sacrifice am I making? I have an easy life.”

After trying for over a year he finally was able to put aside everything that was holding him back. He encourages others struggling to make the journey: “If someone had told me three years ago that I would be living today under sharia among Muslims I would tell them they are crazy. Look at what [God] has planned for me. He can plan this for you too. All you have to do is put your trust in him. All you have to do is believe. God’s will is above all other plans.”

He shifts from his personal story to promoting the new land he has come to:

We came here to create a state...now you have children walking in the park, children going to school, we have hospitals, we have doctors, we have everything here that we need. We left everything behind like the Sahaba, who left Mecca, and went to Medina and they established a state, a land for Muslims, a land of honor. I invite the Muslims to come here. This is the land of life.

The media has portrayed that we come here, that we are social outcasts, that we had nobody, that we had to turn to Islam because we were just troublemakers in the past. But this is far from the reality. You see people from all walks of life here. You see different types of brothers.

The video ends with a specific call to the Muslim brothers in Australia. “You must start attacking before they attack you. Look at how much of your sisters have been violated. All I hear on the news of Australia is this sister was hurt, this sister’s hijab was ripped off. Kill the disbelievers.”

The specific target audience is Australian Muslims but also speaks to Westerners in general. It is a call to the devout and those who have sensed a spiritual emptiness that needs to be filled. Prakash’s story reveals a search for spiritual fulfillment. He emphasizes faith and provides encouragement. He cites aggression against Muslims and injustices by other governments. The utopian Islamic State is advertised as the only place

for Muslims to be. Muslim honor must be defended with preemptive violence. Joining ISIS is the only true path for those looking for spiritual fulfillment.

A secondary benefit for ISIS from its personalized stories is that they humanize ISIS fighters. Personal entreaties in *There is No Life without Jihad* and Prakash's story put a calm human face in front of the audience. It is harder to believe arguments about them being irrational blood thirsty killers after getting to know them. The series on people like Prakash also gives audiences an idea of who is part of the community they are being called to join. Prakash seems like a sincere and nice guy who likes his new brothers. Somebody in the audience might want to join him.

“Video Game” Style Video- War Is Cool. One ISIS video demonstrates how ISIS tries to stay on the cutting edge to reach a target audience. The video does not focus on ideology instead it relies on a theme of ‘war is cool’. The video is styled after a video game. It starts out with drone footage of a bird’s eye view of Kobane, Syria and then cuts to a street level view of fighters running through rubble and a variety of weapons being fired.⁷¹ Eliot Higgins, a Syria expert, points out that, “A lot of these jihadists are from Western countries. They all have an Xbox. This is how they view conflict.”⁷² The video appeals to a basic sense of adventure and desire for action.

These five videos deliver numerous messages to different audiences. Some of the videos are very specifically focused, some more broadly, some address multiple audiences. A narrative of power and victory in a long war is communicated to a broad audience. The call to jihad is made with personal entreaties to the undecided brothers. A

⁷¹ Sherlock, Ruth. "Islamic State release drone video of Kobane." The Telegraph. December 12, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11287145/Islamic-State-release-drone-video-of-Kobane.html> (accessed December 12, 2014).

⁷² Ibid.

humanized and personal story shows the path to spiritual and moral fulfilment. Young men's basic desires for adventure and action are appealed to with a message of war is cool. ISIS uses the medium of video to spread its messages, instilling fear in their enemies, garnering support, and appealing for new recruits.

Dabiq Is The Official ISIS Magazine

ISIS propaganda includes publishing its own periodical titled Dabiq. It has 11 issues starting from July 2014 with the latest publication in August 2015. New issues are released every few months, on some occasions two have been issued in a month. The name Dabiq comes from a small town in Syria named Dabiq where Islamic apocalyptic prophecies say Muslims will defeat a Roman army at Dabiq or al A'maq on their way to conquer Istanbul. Dabiq is distributed online but is in the format of a printed magazine. It is well laid out with articles, pictures, and professional graphic design. It features articles from a variety of authors addressing a variety of topics providing enough content to speak to a variety of readers' interests and concerns.

Dabiq discusses politics, strategy, and theology and provides news updates. The first page of every issue has a quote from Zarqawi, "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify-by Allah's permission-until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq." Each issue carries news about the advances of ISIS armies, heralding their victories. Theological differences with other groups are laid out in long articles. Personal stories and perspectives are shared.

The arguments and accusations of ISIS enemies are presented and criticized. Dabiq carried a four part series against Jabhat al Nusra, or as the titled series called them,

the allies of al Qaeda. ISIS makes a great deal of effort to tell its side of the disagreement between the two groups casting itself as in the right. In issue 6 the key article is written by Abu Jarir ash-Shamali who traveled throughout Taliban and AQ controlled areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He discredits both groups for not fully following Sharia, staying divided, and focusing too much on local affairs rather than supporting the Islamic State.⁷³ The arguments of Western governments are also addressed. Issue 9 titled “They plot and Allah plots” seeks to reassure ISIS supporters that the plans of the West will be defeated by God, in fact God is using the West’s own plans as device to destroy them. The Issue also includes a long argument about how the West’s interpretation of history is a conspiracy theory.⁷⁴

A large portion of Dabiq is dedicated to bringing in longtime members of the jihadist community who already have established ties to other organizations. Most of the articles are littered with Arabic Islamic jargon and speaks to an audience that is expected to be impressed by the extensive use of theology or is heavily immersed in this jargon already. At least half of each issue is dedicated to issues that concern jihadist insiders. This content is written as part of a dialogue meant to persuade professional jihadists to join ISIS.

Dabiq also covers domestic issues. A section is dedicated to “our sisters” speaks specifically to women, encouraging them to conduct hijra (migration). Issue 9 highlights

⁷³ ash-Shamali, Jarir. "Al Qa'idah of Waziristan A Testimony from Within." *Dabiq Issue 6 Al Qa'idah of Waziristan A Testimony from Within* 15 August 2014: 40-55. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-6-al-qaeda-of-waziristan.pdf>.

⁷⁴ *Dabiq Issue 9 They Plot and Allah Plots* May 2015. http://www.islamicfinder.org/dateConversion.php?mode=hijger&day=12&month=8&year=1436&date_result=1.

the healthcare services of ISIS. Issue 4 showed a picture of a doctor with a child and the caption “Cancer Treatment for Children in Ninawa.” The same issue also pictured before and after pictures of fixed up infrastructure.⁷⁵

Each issue has a section titled “In the words of the enemy”: Quoting Americans such as President Obama and Senator John McCain or members of American think tanks describing ISIS as a threat. ISIS uses the words of its enemies to boost its claims of significance. A great deal of legitimacy is gained by pointing out how presidents, politicians, academics and generals throughout the Western world are describing ISIS as a threat and are describing its successes.

Western audiences are directly engaged by articles written by John Cantlie, a British journalist taken captive by ISIS. It may be presumed that Cantlie’s writing on behalf of ISIS is merely to spare him from the fate of other journalists who have been decapitated. Nonetheless, Cantlie delivers valuable propaganda. Most of the articles written with heavy Arabic Islamic jargon may be difficult for Westerners new to Islam to fully understand. Those articles are also lacking in what would be considered academic rigor and journalistic professionalism. They make great leaps in logic and rely heavily on presumptions. Their authors seem to have little self-awareness of their enormous bias. Cantlie’s articles stand out for their high quality and solid argumentation. He supports his statements and uses quotes effectively. He paints a picture of the prominence of ISIS and the enormous difficulties facing Western powers in engaging and defeating it. These assessments are not inaccurate and in many ways reflect discussions within the Western

⁷⁵ *Dabiq Issue 4 The Failed Crusade* October 2014. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>.

press. Cantlie adds just enough doom saying about the Western coalition and boasting on the behalf of ISIS to pass muster for ISIS publication.^{76 77 78}

Dabiq is another example of how ISIS picks many issues, many audiences, and engages all of them. For those who are not happy with Western media outlets and the state controlled mouthpieces of Middle Eastern countries, Dabiq is an alternative news source and opinion page for those looking for the other side of the story.

ISIS Uses The Internet and Mobile Apps To Reach Out And Recruit New Members

ISIS uses a variety of ways to reach out and recruit members. Without more members they will not be able to sustain their fight, the creation of the Islamic State, or its expansion. They especially target young men to join as fighters. They also recruit women to serve as wives for the fighters. They reach out to young Muslims all over the world using the internet to make individual connections with them. This recruitment involves very deliberate uses of propaganda. There is no single profile for Westerners who join ISIS. Instead recruitment involves a number of messages built for a variety of audiences. Some of those messages and means were revealed within the examination of ISIS use of video. This section explores more of the messages and means and looks at

⁷⁶ Cantlie, John. "If Cantlie were the President Today." *Dabiq Issue 5 Remaining and Expanding* November 2014: 36-39. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Cantlie, John. "Meltdown." *Dabiq Issue 6 Al Qa'idah of Waziristan A Testimony from Within* January 2015: 58-62. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue-6-al-qaeda-of-waziristan.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Cantlie, John. "The Perfect Storm." *Dabiq Issue 9 They Plot and Allah Plots* May 2015: 74-77. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-issue%2B9-they-plot-and-allah-plots-sex-slavery.pdf>.

some personal stories of Westerners who joined ISIS. In order to create effective countermeasures to ISIS propaganda and its recruitment of Westerners it is important to gain a sense of the different type of people who respond to ISIS propaganda and which ISIS messages are resonating with them.

The Classical Literary Journey Of A ‘Hero’ Is The Most Basic Theme Of Terrorist Recruitment

The basic part of terrorist recruitment and propaganda is a dichotomy of the Muslim world and the West in which there is an ‘us vs. them’ and heroes who fight against ‘them.’ Suleiman Bakhit, a Jordanian comic book author and entrepreneur, conducted research around Amman and in Syrian refugee camps to understand how ISIS was trying to recruit the young. He uses his comic book work to try and counter terrorist propaganda and recruitment.⁷⁹ Bakhit explained they “preach terrorism as a heroic journey. The biggest threat in the Middle East is terrorism disguised as heroism.” They are copying the classic story line of a hero. Bakhit believes terrorists are actually copying the work of Joseph Campbell who defined the heroic journey as a part of “mythmaking”. A hero has to be called to action, overcome reluctance or doubt, and then leave home and be tested. Bakhit continues:

The greatest heroic journey in our culture is the journey of the Prophet Muhammad, who left his village to go meditate in a cave in the middle of the desert. He was meditating, and there the archangel came down and gave him the message of Islam. He came out of that cave transformed with a new vision of Islam and united all Arabs around that vision.

⁷⁹ Hakim, Danny. "A Jordanian Spins Comic Book Tales to Counter Terrorist Ideologies." New York Times. November 28, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/world/middleeast/a-jordanian-spins-comic-book-tales-to-counter-terrorist-ideologies.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=2 (accessed December 12, 2014).

Osama bin Laden emulated that journey:

Bin Laden left his life of wealth and aristocracy in Saudi Arabia, went to the caves in Afghanistan and emerged from these caves a new leader, with a new vision to cleanse the shame of the Muslim nation through violence. Similarly, this is the same message, the heroic message, that they push to all the terrorists in Western Europe who go join ISIS. And this has such a huge appeal for a lot of these youth, unfortunately.⁸⁰

When Bakhit went around asking kids ‘Who are your heroes?’ the kids said they did not have heroes, but they had heard a lot about bin Laden and Zarqawi and how, “they defended us against the West because the West is out there to kill us.” Bakhit called this “the terrorist narrative and Propaganda 101.” This same appeal is made to Westerners who have adopted Islam and begin to identify with the Muslim world more than their homeland in the West.

New Recruits Help Recruit Others Through Word Of Mouth

Those who join ISIS and similar jihadist groups in Syria offer some of the best recruitment material. They post on their social networking sites pictures and comments enticing others to join them. The media company Vice took a look at what young British jihadists were posting in 2013 (before ISIS declared itself as the Islamic State).⁸¹ The pictures show off their new weapons, the luxurious homes they have taken over, and hanging out with fellow jihadists. They also post pictures of pizza, and french-fries for those not keen on Middle Eastern cooking. Tributes are posted with pictures and words

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Roussinos, Aris. "Jihad Selfies: These British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media." Vice. December 5, 2013. http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/syrian-jihadist-selfies-tell-us-a-lot-about-their-war (accessed December 12, 2014).

praising the fighters who have fulfilled their calling and become martyrs. One jihadist posted:

To the brothers: What are you waiting for? There are plenty of weapons here waiting for you to come and play with them. Plenty of food as a sheep gets slaughtered regularly depending on how many brothers are around, there are plenty of women here waiting to get married ;) waiting to bare [sic] the offspring of the army of Imam Mehdi by the will of Allah and there is honor for the Muslims here.

To the sisters: What are you waiting for? Your husband's clothes need washing! (I'm joking) but seriously what are you waiting for? You may wear your veils without being harassed, no woman is harmed here and if she is there is a harsh penalty as the woman's honor is not to be tampered with whatsoever, there are plenty of mujahedeen desiring to get married who have some of the most loving and softest characters I have ever witnessed even though they are lions in the battlefield, there are orphans here waiting for mothers to love them the way their parents would have. Come to the land of honor. You are needed here.⁸²

Such posts may not be a part of official recruitment by ISIS propagandists, but it is like any effective advertising campaign. Word of mouth and user reviews are great sales pitches. Just like its social media campaign, ISIS puts its messages out and relies on others to spread it to others. Every time an unsympathetic media outlet reports on them part of their message gets out. Whether by friend or by foe or their own voice, ISIS keeps gaining attention.

ISIS Uses Social Media for Personal Messaging

ISIS also reaches out and connects individually with potential recruits through social media. NPR told the story of how two girls from Colorado tried to join ISIS.⁸³ The two girls are typical of youth throughout Europe and America who have left or tried to leave their families and travel to Syria. The two girls from Colorado used AskFM, an app

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Temple-Raston, Dina. "ISIS Used Predatory Tools And Tactics To Convince US Teens To Join." NPR. December 11, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/11/370022514/isis-used-predatory-tools-and-tactics-to-convince-u-s-teens-to-join> (accessed December 12, 2014).

that allows posts to be made anonymously on Facebook or Twitter, to ask questions about going to Syria, not to fight, but to live and to pray. NPR reported:

Over the course of six months, the girls exchanged 9,000 messages with suspected ISIS members in Europe, Syria and Iraq. Most of the exchanges were with two fighters. They developed a relationship, and the girls eventually agreed to come to Syria. Just before they left, an ISIS facilitator appeared online and operated as a virtual travel agent. He told them what they should say at passport control in Turkey, which bus to take to the Syrian border, and then provided a phone number to call so someone could pick them up.⁸⁴

Thanks to the vigilance of parents and cooperation by authorities the girls were stopped in Frankfurt before their final flight to Turkey. They were sent back home. However, many Western recruits are not stopped. As the HCHS report mentioned earlier, law enforcement ability to monitor and intercept radicalized Americans is strained.⁸⁵ ISIS can continue to use the internet to make these kinds of connections engaging in extensive dialogues with potential Western recruits.

ISIS Actively Recruits Women

ISIS recruits women because they are trying to build a state. A state does not consist of fighters alone. It seeks women to help create families and build society, particularly by becoming brides and bearing children, expanding the population of the Islamic state.

Dr. Erin Marie Saltman is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue overseeing research and project development on Women and Extremism (WaE). Melanie Smith is a Research Associate working on ISD's WaE programme. She

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ House Committee on Homeland Security. *Final Report of The Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel*. Congressional Committee Report. Washington DC: Homeland Security Committee, 2015. <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/TaskForceFinalReport.pdf>.

also serves as a Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR). Saltman and Smith wrote a report on ISIS recruitment of women, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part,' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, published in 2015.⁸⁶ At the time they estimated of the 4,000 Western foreign fighters who have joined ISIS, 550 of those were women.⁸⁷ They note, "It is not possible to create a broad profile of females at risk of radicalization based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background." However included in their study were a few case studies to help give context to their findings.

Saltman and Smith identify three major push factors that prime Western females to migrate to ISIS. They then identify three major pull factors that draw them to the decision point for migration (hijra). The push factors are similar for men and women:

1. Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, including questioning one's identity and uncertainty of belonging within a Western culture
2. Feeling that the international Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted
3. An anger, sadness and/or frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution.⁸⁸

Muslim women who choose to wear a headscarf or a veil stand out more in the western world and are more likely to experience discriminatory comments in public. The media's focus on terrorism and its association with Islam can contribute to prejudice and isolation for Muslim minority groups. The development of an 'us vs. them' view develops from reasons #2 and #3. This is aided by a perception that Muslims as an international community have been persecuted throughout history and more recently within the Israel-

⁸⁶ Saltman, Erin Marie and Melanie Smith. "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon."

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.4

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.10

Palestine issue, and the Assad regime's violence. A feeling of empathy for Muslim victims of violence and believing western powers' to be complicit in perpetuating conflicts "is a highly influential factor in their decision to leave the West and seek an alternative society."⁸⁹

The primary pull factors Saltman and Smith identify are the same for men and women; however, due to the different roles men and women play in ISIS territory, different narratives and propaganda are targeted at men and women.

1. Idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian 'Caliphate state'
2. Belonging and sisterhood
3. Romanticization of the experience⁹⁰

The migrants and recruits believe in the utopia of an Islamic State based on sharia and believe they have a religious duty to play a role in it. Unlike calls of jihad in the past to places like Afghanistan ISIS is calling for women to join them. Their primary role is as wives and mothers, building blocks for an Islamic society. Due to strict gender segregation women are needed to care for other women as teachers, nurses, and doctors. Fulfilling the call of hijra also guarantees a place in heaven.

Feelings of 'otherness' within their home culture make Muslim women desire a community and a sisterhood. The women studied for the report emphasized the camaraderie and sisterhood they experienced once in ISIS territory. They value their feeling of belonging, unity, and community. This is contrasted to the surface-level relationships they experienced in the West. Once in ISIS territory women tend to find comradery among women from their own nationality or language, especially if they do not speak Arabic. ISIS targets women by writing manifestos directly for them, writing

⁸⁹Ibid., p.13

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.13

sections of its online magazine ‘Dabiq’ to the ‘sisters of the Islamic State’, and by allowing them to play a role via social media in recruiting others.⁹¹

Profiles Of Western Women Who Joined ISIS

There are women involved in ISIS propaganda who demonstrate another aspect of the variety of means, messages, and audiences that ISIS reaches out to. Saltman and Smith related their findings from several case studies. This helps put observations, numbers, and analysis in the context of real women’s lives. Understanding who these women are and what they care about informs ISIS propaganda. Similarly Western messaging and counter messaging need to target these women and address the same topics. The women in the case studies play prominent roles in recruiting other women. Their personal experience gives them credibility. Their online efforts make their thoughts and experience accessible to future migrants. All of these things combined with their devotion to the ISIS cause make them potent propagandists and facilitators for new recruits.

Salma and Zahra Halane, twins, left Greater Manchester and immigrated to Syria via Turkey in July 2014.⁹² They were 16 years old. The year before their older brother had left to join ISIS. The girls were well integrated into their school communities and were excellent students. Their father taught intensive Quranic studies in the community. Soon after arriving in ISIS territory the two sisters became active on social media glorifying violent attacks and consistently speaking in terms of the ‘ummah’, a term for the Muslim community at large, and the kufr, non-believers. They also called out other

⁹¹ Ibid., p.18

⁹² Ibid., p.21

Muslims for not joining jihad and closely associate themselves with the ummah and jihadists by speaking in terms of brothers and sisters. They tweeted, “Do you not find it disgusting how brothers back at home proper slander the mujahideens.” “Jihad is the most excellent form of worship and by means of it the Muslim can reach the highest of ranks.”⁹³

Salma answered other girls’ questions about marriage on *Ask.fm*. She encouraged other girls to do what she did, ask someone to help set up a marriage before she arrived so that she would not have to wait and live in the bachelorette dorms. She also advised planning ahead gave more time to know who ones future husband will be. Salma and Zahra were married within a few weeks of arrival and then went to live in separate cities. Zahra was married to a nineteen year old, Ali Kalantar, of Afghan descent from Coventry, UK. He was killed in December 2014. Within a week Salma’s husband was also killed. Both girls celebrated on twitter the honor of being widows to martyrs and their pride in their husbands’ sacrifice. They also propagated a message of how loved, cared for, and respected they were as widows. Since the beginning of 2015 the sisters, now believed to be back together again, have put more emphasis on encouraging Western women to make ‘hijra’. Zahara provides logistical advice on how to make the trip, advising deleting all social media accounts prior to leaving as a security measure. They talk about their daily life, post pictures of doing self-defense training, and describe it as a fun day with the “sisters”-emphasizing the lure of camaraderie. While a woman may lose her family by making ‘hijra’ and even be widowed, the twins show that there is a support structure for them.⁹⁴ Saltman and Smith make the observation that through the lens of

⁹³ Ibid., p.22

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.23-26

social media, the Halane twins have radicalized more during their time in ISIS territory, particularly since the becoming widows.

Zaynab Sharrouf And Zehra Duman: The Australians. Some devotees to ISIS are defined more by familial connections than influence from propaganda. Zaynab Sharrouf was 13 years old when her family left Australia and migrated to ISIS territory and became active online within a few months of her arrival. She has a younger sister and three younger brothers. Before arriving in ISIS land, online she talked about ‘being addicted to her iPad’ and wanting a pink Lamborghini, but afterwards there were occasional posts of militant Islamic symbols and admiring comments about the September 11th attackers. ISIS propaganda is used to further indoctrination and radicalization.

At the age of 14 she was married to her father’s friend and fellow fighter, Mohammad Elomar. Elomar already had a wife and children who were not able to make it to Syria. Elomar, Zaynab’s father and brothers have posted pictures of themselves with decapitated heads.⁹⁵ Elomar also discussed his Yazidi slave girls on twitter, girls he and the Sharrouf family abused. Some of those Yazidi girls who reached freedom said Zaynab and some of the other Sharrouf children were begging to return to Australia, something not mentioned in the family’s social media accounts. However, Zaynab’s twitter continued to justify her role as a female in ISIS territory and glorify the ‘ISIS lifestyle’. In March 2015 she posted pictures of veiled females around a BMW holding guns. The pictures caught much attention in western media. Zaynab is aware of western views, she posted “I’m not an extremist I just follow the Deen.”⁹⁶ Since moving to Syria

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.28

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 30

Zaynab “has become heavily engaged with ISIS’ violent, extreme ideology, as well as actively partaking in friendships with other ISIS wives and a marriage to an ISIS fighter.” The role of family members and their views can have a strong effect. Children and young adults raised under ISIS are detached from Western influence and become immersed in the propaganda and ideology of ISIS.

Becoming a jihadist bride is an important role for women. Zehra Duman, 21, of Turkish descent but from Melbourne, travelled to Syria in December 2014. She is a friend of the Sharrouf women now. She was not open with her jihadist views, shocking her family when she left. The casualness of her explanations for leaving family and home to join ISIS are quite common. Zehra’s decision was established on a belief in jihad and hijra and a feeling of obligation to contribute to the establishment of the ‘Khilafah’. Soon after her arrival in Syria she was married to Mahmoud Abdullatif, 23, also from Melbourne. She was widowed within five weeks. Like other women she glorified his martyrdom on twitter, “Till we reunite in Jannatul Firdaws my dearest husband. You won the race! Heart of a green bird Insh’Allah habbi<3.”⁹⁷ After the traditional morning period of four months and ten days, ISIS widows may marry again. Women like Zehra also answer women’s questions on *Ask.fm* about marriage and widowhood. They reassure that they are not lonely and have loving sisters with them. They also offer to play matchmaker for potential migrants looking for a jihadist husband. Zehra and the Sharrouf family are part of an Australian community within ISIS. Zehra draws contrasts between life in Australia and ISIS encouraging hijra and condemns attempts to prevent ‘true Muslims’ from leaving Australia. She declared, “A Muslim will never be proud of a country who is at war with Islam! Who bombs your ummah!” Zehra takes it a step farther

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.32

calling for her twitter followers to kill the kufr, “Go to haram restaurants and poison the food in large quantities.” Women are not allowed on the frontlines by ISIS, but Zehra has expressed a desire to fight and even be a suicide bomber.⁹⁸

Zaynab and Zehra use their Australian identity (or are used by ISIS members) to reach Australian and Western women for ISIS. They glamorize the ‘ISIS lifestyle’, glorify violence, and normalize the expectation of marriage being a duty and contribution to the cause.

‘Shams’: The Doctor, A Unique Case. ISIS seeks to recruit individuals with professional skills. Shams (an online name), another Australian studied by Saltman and Smith, joined ISIS in early 2014. She maintains an online presence on Facebook and Twitter accounts, and journals on Tumblr.⁹⁹ She is originally from Malaysia, is 27 years old and is of both Indian and Pakistani heritage and spent time living in the UK. A friend of hers made the journey to ISIS before her and encouraged Shams throughout Shams hijra process. This kind of connection is common among female migrants from Western countries.

While most women fill traditional roles as mothers and housewives, Shams was given a job as a doctor for women and children, based on her previous occupation. On twitter Shams called for more professionals to come to ISIS and advertises an all-female staffed hospital in Tabqah. She also filled the expected role of a jihad bride and mother and also engages in online propaganda. She advertised the healthcare services for her pregnancy and birth as like any other developed country.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.34-36

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.37-49

Unlike some women she did not have arrangements for a husband before she arrived. In her blog she mentioned the difficulty of moving around without a guardian and decided to seek marriage. A friend and her husband found a man for Shams. They followed the traditional practice of meeting face to face before marriage and then the Moroccan asked to be married that same day. They had to use dictionary apps to communicate during their first days of marriage. She captioned her wedding photo with “Marriage in the land of jihad, till martyrdom do us part.” Surrounded by women becoming widows, Shams expressed her fears and apprehension along with a knowing foreboding of losing her husband. Marriage and widowhood go hand-in-hand in ISIS land.

Shams is different in that her messages of recruitment actually cautions would be migrants. She warns of the difficulties and warns against coming with the motivations of fun or marriage, rather women should come for the sake of devotion to God. Saltman and Smith evaluate Shams as more moderate, and more engaged theologically than politically. Shams plays a role in recruiting professionals for ISIS, but at the same time Shams reveals a weakness and a strength within ISIS propaganda. Over selling the Islamic state and painting a picture of utopia can be dispelled by Western propagandists. Other women engaged in online recruiting have created this opening. Shams more honest reflections will help support Western messaging. However, the truth is most convincing. Shams’ warning of challenges and difficulties has the merit of being true and may serve as a more sincere form of propaganda.

Amira Abase: The Bethnal Green Girl. Family and friends influence the choice to join ISIS. In February 2015, airport CCTV cameras captured Amira Abase, Shamima

Begum and Khadiza Sultana, leaving England for a flight to Turkey. The school girls left their families to join ISIS. Amira's father was discovered in a photograph at an Islamist extremist rally held in 2012. The rally had also been attended by jihadist Michael Adebowale., who murdered a British soldier in 2013.¹⁰⁰ A schoolmate of the girls, Sharmeena Begum is believed to have left to join ISIS three months before.

Several things are apparent within Saltman and Smith's research. Family and friends can be facilitators. Once in ISIS territory some women become even more radicalized and immersed in the ISIS culture. A woman who previously joined ISIS but now works to deradicalize girls said, "They live in this fantasy world where they think 'we're going take over, put a stop to American invasion of Muslim lands, stop them taking our oil, exploiting us, we're going to stand up for ourselves, we are the army of Allah, the army of Islam. We are the best people on this earth to give people that message.'"¹⁰¹ However, the researchers discerned from online postings that female migrants first hand perspectives show a world that does not match the romanticized propaganda. Themes include frustration over being barred from combat, emotional struggle with widowhood at a young age, and failing infrastructure and harsh environments.¹⁰² Women coming from the West have to deal with moving from a first world country to Syria-intermittent electricity, lack of clean or hot water, limited cell phone reception, and less than ideal health care. A fighter had to wait four days for treatment of a snake bite because the medicine had to come from Istanbul. A woman had a miscarriage due to the language barrier with the doctor. While some women emphasize the support widows receive, one British widow commented that some are left alone.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.44

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.56

¹⁰² Ibid., p.48

Those who receive attention may feel peer pressure to glorify and celebrate their husband's martyrdom.¹⁰³ The negatives may not receive as much attention or be publicized deliberately but they still make their way into the online reflections of migrants' lives. Fear from coalition airstrikes and the lack of security in a warzone, although mentioned as part of holy struggle, along with other difficulties can undermine utopian propaganda.

Converts And ISIS Recruits Come From Non-Muslim Backgrounds As Well.

For new converts ISIS provides spiritual meaning, life purpose, and community. More than 4,000 of those who have joined ISIS are from Europe. One in every 6.5 of those are converts, one in four of those come from France.¹⁰⁴ It happens in America as well. Elton Simpson from Illinois converted at a young age and at the age of 30 participated in an ISIS inspired shooting in Texas. Swedish convert Michael Nikolai Skramo, from Gothenburg, moved his family to Raqqa, Syria, September 2014. He encouraged others in a video in Swedish and Arabic to participate in jihad as, "the fastest way to paradise."¹⁰⁵ Among the executioners in some ISIS' gory films is Maxime Hauchard, a French convert to Islam from Normandy. Denis Cuspert, a German, formerly known by his rapper name Deso Dogg, converted to Islam in 2010 and later joined ISIS. He made a rap video about jihad, empowerment, spiritual fulfillment, vengeance and

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.49

¹⁰⁴ Faiola, Anthony and Souad Mekhennet. "From hip-hop to jihad, how the Islamic State became a magnet for converts." 6 May 2015. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/from-hip-hop-to-jihad-how-the-islamic-state-became-a-magnet-for-converts/2015/05/06/b1358758-d23f-11e4-8b1e-274d670aa9c9_story.html. 27 August 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

adventure.¹⁰⁶ ‘Betsy’, (her real name is protected by her family) was a 22 year old aspiring rapper from Holland who also joined ISIS. Converts are easy targets for radicalization. Hauchard, Cuspert, and Betsy all found a new faith that gave them a new purpose and direction in life.

The stories of these three individuals show that converts are easy targets for radicalization. They are another example of the variety of audiences ISIS is trying to reach with its propaganda. New converts are perhaps the most vulnerable target audience for propagandists from either side. They are still open minded and in the process of establishing new values and a new identity. They are not well established members of communities that might otherwise discourage their participation in radical groups.

Hauchard was radicalized in an isolated setting by coming in contact with jihadists via social media. Hauchard came from a Normandy village near Rouen, a small quiet place where the neighbors express shock that the “good kid” with exemplary parents could become an executioner for ISIS. He converted to Islam at the age of 17 by watching YouTube videos. He first travelled to Mauritania in 2012, finding the religious education was “not strict enough”, he moved on to Syria in 2013. Residents of Hauchard’s small town admit it had little to offer youth and could even be a difficult place for outsiders to make friends. According to French police, Hauchard was radicalized on Facebook by Islamist recruiters.¹⁰⁷ Hauchard was not connected to a community that could intervene. Online jihadists created a community for him to get in touch with and eventually physically join.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Penketh, Anne. "French neighbors puzzle over Maxime Hauchard, accused in beheadings." 29 November 2014. *LosAngelesTimes.com*. <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-french-jihadist-20141129-story.html>. 14 September 2015.

Cuspert, aka Deso Dogg, rapped about violence, drugs, and weapons, but he never managed to become a truly successful artist. He was in and out of prison for charges of violent assault. While he was in prison he found religion. It dramatically changed his life, how he spoke, and noticeably among his friends how he treated women, refusing to shake hands with them. Cuspert went to Syria in 2012. He became involved in ISIS propaganda efforts and appeared in a video holding a decapitated head. Inan, his friend since 1999 said he does not recognize the man Cuspert became.¹⁰⁸ Cuspert was on the wrong path in life. He was a criminal. His personal life was messy. He fathered three children by three different women while in Germany.¹⁰⁹ Islam provided a chance at spiritual renewal, a new life, and a feeling of righteousness.

Betsy had a broken life that led her to Islam and radicalization. Betsy's parents are divorced. She dropped out of school at the age of 14. She was arrested for shoplifting when she was 16 and has struggled with drug addiction. She got a tattoo on her middle finger — "C'est la vie" — to accentuate her point when flipping the bird. However, her father said he noticed a change around 2013. Betsy showed an interest in the Bible that was collecting dust on the shelf. Pete, her father, sensed she was looking for something, some kind of peace. Her family does not know exactly when she reached the turning point to join ISIS. In 2013 she started a relationship with a young Dutch Turkish man

¹⁰⁸ BILD. "Er hat schon immer." 23 April 2015. *Bild.de*. <http://www.bild.de/regional/berlin/isis-terroristen/so-wurde-deso-dogg-zum-isis-terroristen-40663090.bild.html> . 27 August 2015. <<http://www.bild.de/regional/berlin/isis-terroristen/so-wurde-deso-dogg-zum-isis-terroristen-40663090.bild.html>>.

¹⁰⁹ Crone, Jack. "German rapper-turned ISIS extremist who starred in sick beheading video 'was married to FBI agent' ." 16 February 2015. *Dailymail.com*. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2956077/German-rapper-turned-ISIS-extremist-starred-sick-beheading-video-spied-FBI-WIFE.html>. 10 October 2015.

who left for Syria and ISIS in 2014. That year a close friend who converted to Islam introduced Betsy to her new faith. Becky's parents believe she was radicalized by a small Muslim prayer group that was not sanctioned by the local mosque. She was married for a few days to a Syrian before leaving him for being "too soft" a Muslim. Following an argument with her parents in which she was defending an Islamist shooter in Paris, she left for Syria.¹¹⁰ Her parents say she is now married to a Dutch Moroccan ISIS fighter and is now learning Arabic and studying the Quran. Although her conversion seems to have done little for her hot-headedness, Betsy was searching for spiritual fulfilment and a different life. Her friends and associates introduced her to something she that was the answer. This case is not specific to propaganda but shows a type of Westerner who is vulnerable to ISIS recruitment.

Non-Muslims turned converts represent a distinct audience to propagandists. Jamal Ahjjaj an imam at As-Soennah Mosque in The Hague, where Betsy occasionally attended said converts "are the most vulnerable because they do not yet fully understand Islam." He adds, "When we have religious classes for converts, sometimes there are people — the wrong people — waiting outside the mosque to greet them."¹¹¹ While discussing Hauchard, Jean-Pierre Filiu, a professor and historian of Islam at Sciences Po University in Paris, points out "Somebody who knows nothing about Islam is much easier to attract."¹¹² "You find that a lot of the converts going to the Islamic State are girls, girls with problems, girls who have been prostitutes, girls with psychological and behavioral issues, sometimes borderline personalities," said Marion van San, a senior researcher on

¹¹⁰ Faiola, Anthony and Souad Mekhennet. "From hip-hop to jihad, how the Islamic State became a magnet for converts."

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Penketh, Anne. "French neighbors puzzle over Maxime Hauchard, accused in beheadings."

foreign fighters at an institute affiliated with Erasmus University in Rotterdam. “Then someone comes along and promises that Allah is going to give them a second chance.”¹¹³

A man who wished to remain anonymous explained part of the phenomenon. He himself had gone through a process of radicalization and then de-radicalization in the Netherlands. His parents divorced and he moved with his father to an immigrant neighborhood. He socialized with devout Muslims. “I noticed they had all the answers,” he said. “They offered me what I was looking for.” His interest in religion and the lives of martyrs increased. He joined a terrorist group in Pakistan, was arrested, and sent back to the Netherlands. He reconnected with extremists and threw a grenade when police came to arrest him. “I wanted to die in bullets and go to paradise,” he said. While in prison he turned towards secularism and abandoned Islam. Unfortunately, he says he converted his younger brother who also became radicalized. His brother joined ISIS at the beginning of 2015.¹¹⁴

The lack of a clearly defined worldview creates an opening for ISIS propaganda to insert its worldview. More than a dozen Dutch women have joined ISIS. In the Netherlands the majority of new converts to Islam are young women. 2013 saw the highest number of new converts, 97, since the mosque was opened in 1993. The majority of those converts are 19-21, and 70 percent women, many of whom were dealing with problems at home.¹¹⁵ The anonymous former radical explained the phenomenon, “Dutch parents tend to be very liberal. They aren’t giving clear answers to what’s right and wrong, so some of us go looking for answers elsewhere... You don’t understand what it’s

¹¹³ Faiola, Anthony and Souad Mekhennet. "From hip-hop to jihad, how the Islamic State became a magnet for converts."

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

like when you meet someone who can set aside all your doubts and has convincing arguments and tells you, ‘This is the way, brother, and all you have to do is follow it.’”¹¹⁶

Converts are easy targets for radicalization. Individuals without strong family connections pursuing a broken lifestyle at some point start looking for a new life and look for spiritual answers. When these individuals come in off the streets they are pulled into networks and communities of extremists. They are given a sense of belonging, structure, morals, forgiveness for their past, and a vision of how they can be part of something significant. There are many different routes that Westerners take to radicalization and they come from various backgrounds. Although it cannot be exactly proven but is consistently alluded to, a deep spiritual need and social need often go hand in hand and play significant factors. A lost soul searching for answers is a perfect target for ISIS recruiters. If you stand for nothing you can fall for anything.

A broad range of mediums, messages, and audiences were covered in this section, social media, various internet apps and websites, and videos. Each of these mediums is used in different ways. A broad range of supporters help spread the messages of these mediums across the internet and across the world. There are more people supporting ISIS than can be censored. Messages range from the political to religious, communal to personal, spiritual to non-spiritual. Audiences include Muslims, non-Muslims, people raised in Islam and new converts, those moved by deep personal conviction and those who are seeking adventure. ISIS uses propaganda to express diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms and rely on a dispersed network of grassroots level supporters to amplify and share its messages.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

ISIS Propaganda Is Vulnerable To Some Of Its Own Claims.

ISIS propaganda is not always successful nor is it impervious to its own short comings. ISIS propaganda has inherent vulnerabilities. It depends on having battlefield successes to brag about. Not living up to its own propaganda can discourage supporters and discredit ISIS propagandists. Successful uses of social media and apps are short-lived and constantly have to be renewed. Other jihadist groups are competing for the same radicalized recruits. Advertising its brutality worked against Shiites who were fighting in Sunni regions and had little motive to fight against a fearsome and brutal opponent. However, it motivated Kurds who were fighting for their homes and families to resist. Exclusivity and quickly judging and condemning all who disagree create many enemies. These vulnerabilities present varying levels of opportunity to Western propagandists.

Videos such as the one from Nov. 16 2014 or *Flames of War* suggests that a main vulnerability for ISIS propaganda is that it is a winner's message. The battlefield successes of ISIS are trumpeted as proof that God is on their side. If they start losing they will probably argue that it is a sign that more devotion and followers are needed or some other excuse will be made. But reverses on the battlefield are an inescapable weakness. Any propagandist can try to spin defeat into victory. This is a common tactic. Western media is consistently discredited in ISIS propaganda. Regardless they still must respond to what the West reports and challenge any reports that undermine their claims to success. Addressing claims of defeat puts ISIS propaganda on the defensive and opens up audiences' curiosity to the claim and subsequently to possible evidence of an ISIS defeat.

The idealization of ISIS' Islamic state is a vulnerability. Overselling a utopian vision can lead to disappointment and/or a loss of credibility whenever the reality of the

oppressive police state of Haji Bakr's creation is brought to public attention. The pro-ISIS efforts of female propagandists unintentionally undermine the glowing reports made in official productions like Prakash's testimonial. The emphasis on brotherhood and sisterhood can be challenged by the stories of defectors who saw ISIS first hand and decided it was a community not worth being a part of. The inevitability of widowhood may have a depressing effect on some women's desire to join ISIS. The harsh reality of living in a warzone will not always compare to the promised glamorous life of food, fellowship, and guns to 'play with.'

ISIS faces the challenge of having to replicate or replace all of its best ideas. ISIS may have had success with its Dawn app; however, as soon as its success gained attention from unsympathetic Westerners it was shut down. It cannot develop and rely on a single medium. In one sense this need to constantly adapt makes it harder to counter, but it also makes it harder for ISIS to maintain consistent contact with its supporters and potential supporters.

ISIS brutality and advertisement of its acts has inspired people to take up arms and fight back. ISIS may have gained some tactical success and may have had some strategic effect in deterring Western decision makers. ISIS almost lost everything it gained in Syria when the torture and murder of a doctor and popular rebel leader inspired rival factions to join together against ISIS.

ISIS faces numerous enemies. Besides Western powers and the Iraqi, Syrian, Russian, and Iranian governments ISIS also faces militia groups throughout Iraq and Syria from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. ISIS has made it very clear

whoever does not join them or runs away must die fighting or prevail over them. If they run away that is great for ISIS. If they are willing to fight to the death, that is less ideal.

An individual could go through the whole process of radicalization and then join a rival jihadist organization. ISIS declaration of Baghdadi as the Caliph brings it into conflict with numerous other Islamic groups. ISIS theology is not vulnerable to moderate scholars and state supported mullahs. It is vulnerable to disagreeing figures within the ranks of jihadists. ISIS must defend itself against theologians who support AQ and its affiliates as well as other jihadist groups that claim they do not owe Baghdadi loyalty. ISIS wrote a four part series in Dabiq in order to argue against Jabhat al Nusra. ISIS recognizes that other terrorist groups have the legitimacy within jihadism to undermine it. From a Western viewpoint all jihadist groups represent threats, for ISIS some of those other groups represent threats to them as well. Jihadist recruits for Jabhat al Nusra may end up on the battlefield fighting against ISIS. There are a limited number of radicalized jihadists who are qualified fighters or have potential and are ready to travel to Syria and Iraq. ISIS must use some of its propaganda efforts to compete with other jihadist groups.

Brig. Gen. Hassan Dulaimi, a former intelligence officer in the old Iraqi army was recruited back into service by US troops in 2006 as a police commander in Ramadi, the capital of the long restive province of Anbar.¹¹⁷ His close friend and former intelligence officer lost his job in 2003. Dulaimi said, "I last saw him in 2009. He complained that he was very poor. He is an old friend, so I gave him some money," he recalled. "He was fixable. If someone had given him a job and a salary, he wouldn't have joined the Islamic

¹¹⁷ Sly, Liz. "The hidden hand behind the Islamic State militants? Saddam Hussein's." 4 April 2015. *Washingtonpost.com*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hidden-hand-behind-the-islamic-state-militants-saddam-husseins/2015/04/04/aa97676c-cc32-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html. 6 September 2015.

State.” His friend now serves as an ISIS leader in the Anbar town of Hit. “There are hundreds, thousands like him,” he added. “The people in charge of military operations in the Islamic State were the best officers in the

The Baathist officers’ commitment is not necessarily based on ISIS ideology. Hamza observed the Baathists, “They pray and they fast and you can’t be an emir without praying, but inside I don’t think they believe it much. The Baathists are using Daesh. They don’t care about Baathism or even Saddam... They just want power. They are used to being in power, and they want it back.” Col. Joel Rayburn, a senior fellow at the National Defense University who served as an adviser to top generals in Iraq says, “You have fighters coming from across the globe to fight these local political battles that the global jihad can’t possibly have a stake in.”

Some of these vulnerabilities are readily exploitable. Others are dependent on the development of the situation on the front lines. The testimony of deserters and people who lived under ISIS and were able to escape it provide the most ready material to counter the ISIS narrative of what its Islamic state is like. Exploiting these vulnerabilities is not necessarily easy nor will that completely defeat ISIS propaganda. The steps that are being taken to counter ISIS messaging and the exploitation and missed opportunities are described in the following sections.

**THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TO ISIS PROPAGANDA
FALLS SHORT IN EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING THE FULL RANGE OF ISIS
PROPAGANDA’S DIVERSITY IN MESSAGES, AUDIENCES, AND
PLATFORMS.**

State Department’s Center For Strategic Counterterrorism Communications

The USG approach to countering ISIS propaganda is to consolidate messaging, connect interdepartmentally, and put everyone on the same page with a unified message. The messages of the USG are often lacking in creativity and diversity and are very broadly targeted. This stands in direct contrast to the ISIS approach of diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms, relying on a dispersed network of grassroots level supporters amplifying and sharing its messages.

The USG efforts to create a dedicated force to counter terrorist propaganda have been hampered by bureaucracy. The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) was created in 2011 to “coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism, particularly al-Qaida and its affiliates and adherents.”¹¹⁸ It is the US government’s main center for countering terrorist propaganda. This section is informed by Greg Miller and Scott Higham’s extensive article detailing the history of the CSCC and how it is fairing against the onslaught of ISIS propaganda.¹¹⁹ Compared to the vast

¹¹⁸ Department, U.S. State. *Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications*. 2011. <http://www.state.gov/r/csc/>. 14 September 2015.

¹¹⁹ This section is a synthesis of their work Miller, Greg and Scott Higham. "In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy’s rules." 8 May 2015. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a->

number of online adversaries, a relatively small budget, and the requirement to fix a US government label on everything it did, the CSCC faced a difficult battle from the start. Then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote that it should be modeled on a campaign “war room,” ready to detect and respond to every terrorist message. Miller and Highman quote an anonymous aide who was present when the idea for the CSCC was pitched to President Obama. According to the source, “There was irritation” in Obama’s voice as the president said, “This is what I’ve been asking for — why haven’t we been doing this already?” The former official continued, “Everybody on his counterterrorism team had a little bit of egg on their face at that point.” The aid thought McDonough, Brennan and others seemed angered at being upstaged. He said, “The whole thing got off on a bad foot bureaucratically.” It took over a year before Executive Order 13584 established the center.¹²⁰

The CSCC is not the first public relations attempt by the government targeted at the issue of terrorism. In 2002 former Madison Avenue advertising executive Charlotte Beers and new head of public diplomacy commissioned a \$15 million “Shared Values” campaign showing Muslims living in the US. Some officials labeled it the “Happy Muslim” campaign, it did not last long. Karen Hughes, a new head of public diplomacy in 2005 created the Digital Outreach Team to counter extremists in online chat rooms. She also worked with Disney to produce a feel-good “Portraits of America” film that was shown in airports and US embassies.¹²¹

propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html. 27 August 2015.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

The initial focus of the CSCC was al-Qaeda. AQ went through its own evolution. Previously it took months to smuggle low quality videos with simple sit and preach content to the media. They started using American converts like Adam Gadahn and Anwar al-Awlaki to spread their messages in English. They made dozens of films a year. Even after al-Awlaki's death his sermons are still watched online. The Yemeni affiliate of al-Qaeda launched an English-language online magazine called Inspire. It provided information on bomb-making and called for lone wolf attacks. AQ made all of these moves before the US started the CSCC.

Richard LeBaron was the CSCC's first director. He took a different tactic than the mass audience approaches of Beers' and Hughes' feel-good campaigns. LeBaron thought those campaigns sent the message that, "the United States perceived [Muslims] as a problem." He decided to narrow the focus of the CSCC's messaging. AQ's ideology appealed to a tiny fraction of the population. LeBaron's approach was to fight in, "a very, very narrow trench." During the Arab Spring the CSCC engaged AQ with the center's first videos, contrasting AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declaring only violence could bring about change with peaceful scenes of the Arab Spring's uprisings.

After a year LeBaron retired in 2012 and was replaced by Alberto Fernandez, another State Department official and a fluent Arabic speaker. Fernandez saw ISIS replace AQ as the main threat. He said, "Al-Qaeda is your parents' Internet, its AOL.com or MySpace." There was a lot of initial surprise by commentators and officials at how remarkably well produced and sophisticated ISIS propaganda was. LeBaron called that out as "borderline racist." "The notion behind that is how could these Arabs be so smart? How could these terrorists be so skilled?" he said. "Why wouldn't they be?"

They're growing up with the same exposure to social media.”¹²² Not only is ISIS creating quality videos they are making an impact.

Fernandez's approach used videos and banners trying to show ISIS as a menace to Muslims in Syria. However, their attempts on twitter were drowned out by the volume of ISIS tweets. They did manage to draw a response from ISIS showing at least that their efforts were perceived as a threat by the enemy. ISIS launched @Al-Bttar to specifically engage the State Departments messages. Showing that ISIS has the larger and more capable online army, they bombarded YouTube and Twitter with complaints accusing CSCC was violating terms of service resulting in the CSCC getting kicked off of the social media platforms. State Department officials had to call the companies to get their accounts put back up.¹²³

The CSCC small size was not its only problem. They were restricted from posting anything in English. The reasons were one, in order to avoid any legal issues related to exposing US citizens to government propaganda. And two, so that their efforts would not draw as much scrutiny in Washington where there already was a history of bureaucratic opposition. Even while al-Shabab's assault on a Nairobi shopping mall in 2013 was widely tweeted in English, the State Department could only reply in Somali and Arabic. A large number of the online users supporting ISIS do come from Arabic countries. But there are also the thousands of foreign fighters who come from Western countries who probably do understand English.

Finally in 2013 the CSCC started using English with what is now their most publicized campaign (at least for American audiences). “Think Again Turn Away” now

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

the title for Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube pages is aimed at potential ISIS recruits. The campaign focuses on sharing pictures and stories of pain and destruction along with the surety of death in Syria. A major theme of the campaign, especially in 2015, is highlighting the victims of ISIS brutality. ISIS responded with a Twitter hashtag #CalamityWillBefallUS which has since been taken over by anti-ISIS tweeters. It is worth noting the world of hashtags, viral videos, and memes can be fleeting. In one respect, once online, items may stay documented for years. However, anything on the internet can quickly become a trend or a parody, the internet is always changing, giving new meanings, or quickly forgetting old posts. The internet represents an ephemeral and ever changing battlespace.

The summer of 2014 saw a shift in CSCC tactics. ISIS also came out with a new propaganda offensive at the same time. CSCC created a video called “Welcome to Islamic State Land.” It featured the same gory and brutal content ISIS was depicting, beheadings, executions, crucifixion, dead bodies, a man being thrown off of a cliff. The pictures and videos are accompanied with captions calling attention to the destruction of mosques, killing of Muslims, and pointing out joining ISIS is a path to death. That summer ISIS released many videos in English glamorizing the jihad lifestyle showing the mansions, swimming pools, and SUVs they had captured. Fernandez says his approach of mocking ISIS drew inspiration from Monty Python spoofs of the Crusades.¹²⁴ The Arabic version received over thirty-thousand views, the English version close to 800 thousand. ISIS responded with “Run Do Not Walk to US Terrorist State.”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ This video is no longer readily found through google.

Creativity and experimentation by the CSCC is not supported. The CSCC met with a lot of negative blow back within Washington. Experts called the CSCC's efforts "embarrassing" and helpful to the enemy. Rita Katz's SITE Intelligence Group began cataloguing what they considered the most embarrassing pieces of the CSCC's campaign. Katz critiqued the relaying of ISIS' graphic images, saying it bolstered ISIS' reputation of brutality and expanded its audience. Marie Harf, a State Department spokeswoman voiced concerns to other officials saying she was "supremely uncomfortable" with the graphic images being shown having an association with the State Department label. Amidst all of the criticism Fernandez and his team had no concrete way to prove that any would-be terrorists were thinking again and turning away as a result of the CSCC's videos and tweets. Rep. Edward R. Royce (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee said, "The consensus has been that this has been ineffective." His committee has oversight of the State Department. "If we can't measure the impact of what we're doing, how do we prove that it's effective?" Fernandez felt this was an unfair expectation, "How do you prove a negative?" he asked. "Unless some guy comes out with his hands up and says, 'I was going to become a terrorist. I saw your video. I loved it. I changed my mind.' You're never going to get that."¹²⁶

Starting in February 2015 the center received a new head, Rashad Hussain, 36, a former White House adviser. He says the plan is to be "more factual and testimonial." Without recycling ISIS gore, and by using the new Information Coordination Cell (ICC), the CSCC is now trying to draw attention to ISIS hypocrisy, relay stories by defectors, and magnify ISIS losses on the battlefield.¹²⁷ The ICC tasks 30 people from a variety of

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

military and intelligence backgrounds. Their goal is to leverage a network of networks, unifying efforts and messaging across different agencies and allied governments along with engaging non-governmental groups (NGO). This approach is meant to fix what John D. Cohen, a former top counterterrorism official at the Department of Homeland Security described as the main short coming of the CSCC, “It operated too independently and rarely integrated its efforts with others in the federal government focused on countering violent extremism.” (CVE)¹²⁸

Most of the resources are held by other parts of the government. The CIA has spent more than \$250 million to monitor social media and open sources for intelligence. The Pentagon spends about \$150 million a year for “hearts and minds” efforts. The CSCC’s yearly budget is \$5-6 million.¹²⁹ Richard A. Stengel, the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, said the reality of the limited resources of the CSCC and the volume of content ISIS and its supporters produce made it necessary to enlist other departments and allies. The ICC now distributes a “talking points” memo to embassies and allies, helping them emphasize common themes or news items.¹³⁰

The reason why the work of the State Department run CSCC is so important is because it is the only program that can fully and legally engage Western, particularly American, audiences susceptible to ISIS propaganda. Legally, military information

¹²⁸ Schmitt, Eric. *U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS’ Message*. 16 February 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html?_r=0. 15 September 2015.

¹²⁹ Miller, Greg and Scott Higham. "In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy’s rules."

¹³⁰ Ibid.

operations are not allowed to, “target US citizens at any time, in any location globally, or under any circumstance.”¹³¹

Hussain has shifted away from the use of graphic images, but otherwise the USG approach has not changed dramatically. The CSCC falls under Stengel’s office, making him the boss of Hussain, and previously, Fernandez. Miller and Highman wrote:

Fernandez was convinced that the Islamic State’s appeal was largely emotional, casting itself as an antidote to feelings of victimhood and powerlessness among alienated Muslims. Undermining that appeal required using — and hopefully subverting — the graphic images and themes that resonated with the group’s recruits. Skeptical, Stengel cited what he said researchers have called “the backfire effect: when you try to disabuse somebody who has a strongly held belief, more often than not it makes their belief even stronger.”¹³²

While the use of graphic images proved controversial, overall Hussain sounds like he is reading from the same sheet as previous CSCC heads. At an *Australia Countering Violent Extremism Summit Ministerial* in Sydney, Australia June 12, 2015, Hussain gave the remarks:

Terrorists typically prey on political grievances, particularly their narrative of Western responsibility for Muslim suffering around the world. They also exploit a number of other grievances, including discrimination and alienation, repression of freedom of expression and freedom of religion, violations of human rights, restrictions on political expression and activity, and lack of economic opportunity. If terrorists are calling people to a path they call righteous and holy, we have to be clear that the terrorist path is prohibited. If they claim to be defending Islam and Muslims, we have to illustrate vividly how they are destroying Muslim communities. And if terrorists are trying to convince young people that they’ll be joining a winning team, we have to convince their targets that they will be joining a losing one.¹³³

¹³¹ Austin III, Lloyd, Joint Publication 3-13.2 Psychological Operations, 2010 I-13

¹³² Miller, Greg and Scott Higham. "In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy’s rules."

¹³³ Hussain, Rashad. "A Strategy for Countering Terrorist Propaganda in the Digital Age." 12 June 2015. *state.gov*. <http://www.state.gov/r/csc/leases/243877.htm>. 15 September 2015.

Hussain countered some of the arguments that have previously been directed at the CSCC. While it is hard to measure the effect of counter-messaging, Hussain qualified the scope of ISIS twitter campaigns. They may dominate in volume, but there is no real indication of how many tweets make real impressions. There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world the vast majority of whom, if they are even exposed to terrorist calls, ignore them. However, out of 1.6 billion even a fraction of a percent still amounts to thousands, making the need to counter ISIS messages important.

Despite the harsh criticism that Fernandez received, the “Think Again, Turn Away” campaign is still in progress. The CSCC has grown in bureaucracy and won a place for itself within the State Department and government as a whole. Each director brings new tactics and strategies. However, the group spent its first three years trying to figure out how to tackle a large scale problem. This year they started to focus more on unifying efforts with a broader government approach and merge with duplicate elements. The most significant feature is a larger push to contribute to the efforts of NGOs.

The decade long path to the CSCC’s creation, its small role and budget, its struggles to get off the ground, difficulty in proving its successes, and the harsh criticism that new approaches can generate shows how difficult it is for the government to respond to rapidly changing media environments and messages. “The fate of the CSCC just underscores the difficulty of experimentation in government — there is zero tolerance for risk and no willingness to let a program evolve,” said Daniel Benjamin, one of the CSCC’s progenitors and former State Department counterterrorism chief. “It’s easier to

do the same stuff over and over and wring your hands instead of investing resources and having patience.”¹³⁴

Non-Government Organizations Countering Isis Propaganda

At first glance the efforts of the State Department may seem effective, even if they were slow to start using social media. The propaganda efforts by the State Department identify key issues and create material to address those issues. While the government is adapting to now commonly used technology, the private sector is already moving ahead. At least the CSCC is aware of this and is trying to take advantage of it. One of the ways is by sponsoring private sector efforts through Content Creation Grants. Hussain remarked while in Australia:

Every country can offer grants that sponsor the creation of CVE [Countering Violent Extremism] social media and other content. Governments could offer attractive grants to individuals and groups – particularly in this region – to create campaigns, companies and organizations to disseminate CVE content. Such an initiative could be also designed as an initiative to further spur regional social entrepreneurship.

Affinis Labs: Apps to Counter ISIS. Affinis Labs is the kind of company that Hussain has in mind. Its founders and managers are Dr. Quintan Wiktorowicz and Shahed Amanullah. Dr. Wiktorowicz has extensive experience in academics and has worked with the intelligence community, Department of State, and the White House. Amanullah has experience as a CEO, State Department advisor, and working with the White House on matters of social media and entrepreneurship to combat online extremism. They both stepped out of government in order to create Affinis Labs.¹³⁵ The

¹³⁴ Miller, Greg and Scott Higham. "In a propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy's rules."

¹³⁵ "The Affinis Team." 2015. [affinislabs.com](http://www.affinislabs.com/). 15 September 2015.

company offers a range of apps for Islamic life, rating charities, crowd funding, and dating. It has also developed apps that can counter extremist propaganda and pre-empt steps of radicalization. As a company with a strictly Muslim market and management by Amanullah, a Muslim businessman, Affinis Labs is positioned to reach a large spectrum of extremist propaganda's target audience. If the company can popularize its apps it will have a countable number of people it is engaging and influencing. Mass communication efforts on Twitter and YouTube are not without their place, but more direct engagement and knowingly reaching a target audience is something the CSCC has struggled with.

Affinis Labs apps include QuickFiqh, Pentor, Marhubba, Champions of Islam, ComeBack2Us, and the Primary Narrative. The below are Affinis Labs' descriptions of their apps:

QuickFiqh—Mainstream Islamic scholars have valuable knowledge that can help reinforce themes of moderation, mercy, and compassion, but young people aren't in touch with this rich spiritual heritage. Enter QuickFiqh - a mobile video app that connects young people to authoritative religious scholars using a format and medium that is easy and familiar to millennials. Youth ask their most pressing questions in a 60-second clip, and scholars provide timely 60-second answers in a shareable video format. Users can rate and review the questions and answers, providing insights about the most pertinent questions for youth and which answers and scholars seem to resonate the most.

Pentor—Young Muslims need role models and mentors who can help them address some of the challenges of growing up. Pentor helps Muslim youth find and engage positive role models and mentors in their area or online, using a Tinder-style interface to facilitate connection based on shared interests. In the background, mentors are identified, trained, and supported so that they can provide safe and responsible online or in-person guidance to young people who may be struggling with their identity or other challenges.

Champions of Islam—Muslim male youth are struggling with shifting norms of modern masculinity and its relationship with Islamic ethics. Young men need models that teach them how to discipline and channel their energy while exemplifying positive Islamic values in their everyday actions. Champions of Islam is a game & community that helps Muslim youth ages 15-25 build identities based on the examples of the Prophet Mohammed and contemporary Muslim

male role models. Through a series of intellectual, physical, and spiritual challenges based on these role models and Islamic tradition, boys "compete with one another in good works" (Qur'an 2:148).

ComeBack2Us [website is underdevelopment]—Thousands of foreign fighters from the West have left their homes and families, frequently driven by a sense of alienation and lured by the illusion of a utopia and adventure by ISIS.

ComeBack2Us is a platform where friends and families of foreign fighters can use stories, imagery, and positive memories to underscore the meaningful life fighters left behind. The hope is that this triggers doubt and potentially leads some foreign fighters to leave the battlefield.¹³⁶

Affinis Labs does not provide data on how successful or how widely implemented these endeavors are. However, it does go a lot further than current government efforts. Importantly, it does not have the logo of the State Department affixed to it. This allows young Muslims to use these apps without having suspicions aroused about outside non-Muslim influence. It is easy to criticize the government for being slow to adapt, late to implement new technology, and hampered by restrictions. However, it may be fair to say that the people working in the CSCC and similar government CVE endeavors have found a way to overcome these problems. Realistically, Affinis Labs could be seen as a bypass of government restrictions. Between the two founders they worked for the Intelligence Community, State Department, and the Whitehouse. They may no longer work for the government, but what they are working on is more or less the same as before. Affinis Labs, the government's non-government solution.

Digital Disruption: Teaching Critical Thinking. There are NGOs engaged in countering ISIS propaganda who do not have strong background connections to the government. Digital Disruption, a non-profit was started with the support of media and marketing companies in England. The beginning of every page on the

¹³⁶ Affinis Labs. Incubating Ideas Until They Hatch. 2015. <http://www.affinislabs.com/incubation.html>. 15 September 2015.

digitaldisruption.co.uk reads “You’ve been watching Propaganda.” The websites “about” section describes their *raison d’être* as:

Digital Disruption is a specialist education project that develops and distributes the tools and training to improve young people’s digital literacy and fluency. We call this critical digital judgement skills. Digital judgement combines ‘traditional’ critical thinking skills, such as source verification, with ‘new’ knowledge about how the digital world works, such as understanding search engine algorithms and how conspiracy theory filmmaking works. This website is being developed as a one-stop-hub for teaching these critical digital judgement skills across the *curriculum*.¹³⁷

They provide workshops and curriculum that can be used in classrooms. The organization’s start predates the rise of ISIS (or the CSCC), it has been around since 2008.

The authors of the study on the radicalization of women, Saltman and Smith, called for exactly this kind of organization’s resources. One of their recommended CVE steps was to preempt extremism with education teaching critical thinking.¹³⁸ They pointed to drug and sexual health education programs as models.

YouTube: Teaching Vloggers How To Drown Out ISIS. YouTube took the initiative to counteract ISIS. The video hosting site is frequently used by extremists as a platform despite the company’s best efforts to prevent that. As a counter measure they reached out to Muslims and brought them together with successful YouTube vloggers to workshop ideas on CVE. The main theme of the workshop was to encourage Muslims to find their own voices, be themselves, and use the YouTube medium to distract from ISIS

¹³⁷ Disruption, Digital. *About*. n.d. <http://www.digitaldisruption.co.uk/about>. 15 September 2015.

¹³⁸ Saltman, Erin Marie and Melanie Smith. “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon.” 2015. http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf. p.54

and create alternate content to pull viewers into a different culture than extremism.

YouTube does not want their efforts to be associated with the government; instead they want to show members of the Muslim community how to become an effective organic, grassroots level counter weight to ISIS.¹³⁹

Following the workshop Aman Ali, a well-known comedian in American Muslim circles, created mini-documentaries and comedy sketches on Muslim life in America. He posted the videos on his YouTube page “Homegrown Homies”. The workshop taught people like Ali about camera angles, continuity, search engine optimization, best practices for headlines, and how to go viral. The workshop seems to have helped. Ali’s videos have more than 150,000 views. His response to the Charlie Hebdo murder has garnered over 20,000 views, more than most State Department videos get on their Think Again Turn Away YouTube page. Building up real view counts is important. Tanya Silverman, a program associate at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue says it can be enough, “As long as someone is watching your video about being a Muslim-American in New York instead of one about ISIS luring you over.”

It is not necessarily about refuting every line of argument from ISIS videos. Creating alternative content pulls people completely away from ISIS propaganda. Shahed Amunullah, the co-founder of Affinis Labs, also attended the YouTube workshop. He says the focus is on the “the 500 million-strong Muslim youth market that is woefully underserved.” He adds, “We’re like Walmart here with so many resources, yet this little

¹³⁹ Kaleem, Jaweed. "YouTube's Battle Against ISIS." 24 August 2015. *Huffingtonpost.com*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/youtube-battle-against-isis_55d61416e4b0ab468da037a6. 10 September 2015.

startup of ISIS is running circles around us. They are driven by passion, not afraid of risk, and leverage the crowd. We need to do the same thing, too.”¹⁴⁰

Whether or not YouTube’s strategy works faces the same problems of proof as any of the CSCC’s endeavors. Pandith, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out, “Can you know for sure that it was a program or video that changed someone’s mind? We need evidence and that takes time. Look at a campaign like getting kids to stop smoking or use condoms for safer safe sex campaign. It has usually taken years and a consistent campaign and years to blast the marketplace with those ideas and messages.” Thankfully YouTube is willing to make efforts without worrying about immediately meeting impossible standards to prove effectiveness.

The CSCC Responds To Some But Not All ISIS Messages

This section is an evaluation of whether or not the CSCC is countering the messages of ISIS. This assessment is separate from any evaluation of whether or not the response is effective, properly targeted, or using the appropriate mediums. ISIS uses a range of mediums and messages, targeted at a variety of audiences. The CSCC does not counter the full range of ISIS messaging nor does it reach all of the audiences that ISIS does.

The CSCC challenges ISIS’ narrative of being powerful and winning. The winner’s narrative was identified as one of the main vulnerabilities of ISIS propaganda. The Think Again Turn Away campaign emphasizes and draws attention to battlefield defeats of ISIS and shows footage from airstrikes against ISIS. It also highlights the fight by Iraqis and Syrians against ISIS. These messages counter the narrative in *Flames of*

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

War and the *Nov. 14 2014* video in which ISIS communicated they are mighty, to be feared, have power, and can win.

The *War is Cool* video is countered by CSCC showing pictures of dead ISIS fighters. This message may also be countered by the CSCC's highlighting actions taken by forces opposing ISIS. *War is Cool* is not an exclusive message and can be used just as much to encourage people to join the fight against ISIS. However, the CSCC and the USG in general are discouraging individuals from joining the conflict. The CSCC could highlight that the people who fight against ISIS are 'cool'. The CSCC has a war is uncool message but nothing that shows those fighting against ISIS are cooler.

The 'war is cool' propaganda theme caters to young men's sense of adventure. That sense of adventure needs to be redirected. The CSCC does not have anything for that. One of Affinis Labs' efforts "Champions of Islam" was specifically designed for this. It helps young men focus on competing in doing good works through a series of intellectual, physical, and spiritual challenges. It may not be on the same level as the adventure of war, but it is an attempt to divert and refocus young men on non-violence.

The CSCC does not have a response regarding the length of commitment to the conflict. In *Flames of War* ISIS conditions its followers to see the conflict within the context of a long war with the last twelve years marking just the beginning. While ISIS is committed to a long term fight and can clearly message about it, the CSCC is limited in how it can discuss this. In vague terms the USG discusses commitment to allies and fighting for freedom and defeating ISIS. However, a clear long term policy has not been defined. Rashaad Hussein does not put any time frame on the messages of the CSCC. The absence of a response to this ISIS message leaves open the possibility to the idea that

ISIS is more dedicated and patient, and thus able to win in the long run. If ISIS does stay in control of territory and maintain its organizational structure and capabilities, the continued threat by ISIS to the US will eventually require different approaches and possibly more engagement. ISIS supporters will be psychologically prepared for the war. The Western public may not be.

The CSCC faces the challenge of Islamic theology with videos like *There is no Life without Jihad*. The speakers in the video were calling undecided ‘brothers’ to jihad. Their message of jihad was wrapped in terms of honor, reward, guilt, gaining heaven, and seizing the opportunity. Their messages are one part political and one part theological. Theology requires jihad, their politics defines who the enemy is. The Think Again Turn Away campaign emphasizes the atrocities of Assad’s regime as well as ISIS’. It tries to point out how civilians and Muslims are dying because of ISIS not because of Western forces. On the theological side CSCC has no response to counter the reasoning for jihad. The CSCC does not engage in theological arguments. It recognizes it lacks legitimacy within the jihadist religious dialogue. However, there are moderate clerics who do engage the jihadist arguments and yet, a group of Australians are sitting in Syria espousing ISIS’ definition of jihad that they learned from jihadists. The CSCC has conceded this area and does not have a full response to the message of *There is no Life without Jihad*.

Affinis Labs does have a means to engage audiences on theology with its apps. QuickFiqh connects people with authoritative religious scholars. Pentor puts young people in touch with mentors that can keep them clear of radicalization. The CSCC may not have a full response but the private sector does.

The story of Abut Khaled al Cambodi from Australia (Neil Prakash) presents the challenge of responding to a claim of spiritual fulfilment. The video does not focus so much on theology as it does on Prakash's personal search for and finding of spiritual calling and fulfilment. This is perhaps the hardest message for the CSCC to counter. How does a secular government respond when ISIS takes the deepest longings of the soul-the darkest and the noblest, and marries them to an all-consuming cause? The cause can be attacked and delegitimized. But it can be difficult to disavow people of established political views. A stronger appeal is to individuals' conscience, which may divert some people from embracing the barbarism of ISIS. Fernandez's attempt to play back the brutality of ISIS was an attempt at this. However, the fear mongering in *Run from ISIS Land* and Monty Python inspired approach lacked the tack for moral argument; although it may have inspired some moral revulsion to ISIS. What may be more effective are stories about victims of ISIS brutality. Think Again Turn Away websites share information and links about women who were enslaved and raped by ISIS fighters. Recently a video was shared from the Human Security Centre reporting on ISIS recruitment of child soldiers with an interview of a boy whose foot and hand were chopped off for refusing to fight.¹⁴¹ The CSCC may not be able to provide guidance for those searching for spiritual fulfilment but it can at least appeal to their conscience and show them ISIS is not the answer.

It is hard to prove Affinis Labs or even YouTube's new vloggers will affect someone's spiritual journey, but they are at least in a position to make an attempt and are actively engaging Muslim youth on spiritual matters. This is not to say only Muslims are

¹⁴¹ HSC Executive Director discusses ISIS child soldiers on German ZDF. Dir. Human Security Centre. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKKxuK-Upu0&feature=youtu.be>.

engaged in spiritual dialogue, but these particular companies are taking actions with a deliberate intention to counteract ISIS propaganda.

Recruitment featuring the glamorous life of jihad and promising comradery are countered by CSCC' focus on defector stories. The stories highlight why people who saw ISIS first hand did not want the life style or want to be part of the community. While word of mouth from ISIS recruits is spreading through social media enticing their friends to join them, negative word from former recruits is being cycled back as well.

The CSCC has few messages that strongly address the three push factors identified by Saltman and Smith that contribute to radicalization.¹⁴² Push Factor 1: Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, including questioning one's identity and uncertainty of belonging within a Western culture. ISIS propaganda calls on people to make hijra to ISIS territory, arguing that staying isolated in kufr lands is bad for the spiritual wellbeing of Muslims. International conferences and cooperation with Muslim groups are advertised by and attended by the CSCC. These events may spur organizations and individuals to cooperate in CVE. However, Muslim culture and identity are not really something the CSCC can easily define or influence. Affinis Labs and YouTube do directly engage Muslim culture and identity. Access to the right app or viewing Muslim YouTubers help create an alternative network and culture for those drifting towards radicalization. Push Factor 2: Feeling that the international Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted. This is a recurring theme ISIS fighters mention throughout their videos. The CSCC has made attempts to paint ISIS as the persecutor of Muslims. ISIS provides a lot of content for this. Even so, as one commenter on the

¹⁴² Saltman, Erin Marie and Melanie Smith. "‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon." p.10

Facebook page of Think Again Turn Away said, “US is worse then daesh. daesh killed 20.000 iraqis the US 1,5 million. #facts. [sic]”¹⁴³ While the CSCC does not need to get into online debates with such commenters this is an example of Push Factor 2. This narrative is only partially engaged by pointing out the acts of ISIS. The other part of the narrative needs to include defending and qualifying the actions of the West as helpful and not as persecuting Muslims. Western aid and support is highlighted but could play more prominently. Push Factor 3: An anger, sadness and/or frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution. As mentioned before, highlighting aid and support provided by the West can help, but the CSCC can only advertise as much support as the West is actually giving. There is not much Western propagandists can do about that, that is a wider policy decision.

The CSCC has messages that respond to some important ISIS messages but the CSCC falls short in other areas.

- The narrative of ISIS winning is countered.
- Glamorous jihad and comradery-counteracted.
- War is cool-partially countered; the other part is answered by the private sector.
- The long war narrative-no response.
- The theology of jihad-no specific message, but the private sector engages this topic.
- Spiritual fulfilment-no direct response, but an appeal to conscience is an alternative message. The private sector engages this a little more directly.

¹⁴³ <https://www.facebook.com/ThinkAgainTurnAway> post Sept. 30th 7:24am by Oussama Benabdelmoumene.

- Regarding the three push factors towards radicalization the CSCC somewhat responds to issues of culture, identity, and isolation for Muslims. The private sector engages this issue more so.
- The USG only partially counters themes of Muslim persecution. The CSCC and other public diplomacy offices of the government can do little regarding the perceived lack of response to Muslim persecution.

ISIS has diverse messages the CSCC has some diversity, while the private sector also makes contributions. Overall the full breadth of ISIS messaging is not being countered.

Women and new converts to Islam are not specifically targeted by USG counter-propaganda

CSCC messages are fairly broadly targeted. The above counter messages are applicable to a variety of audiences. However, several distinct audiences are not effectively addressed by the USG: women, recent converts of Islam, and individuals who have taken large steps in becoming radicalized.

The CSCC could do more to engage female audiences. Saltman and Smith said there are few preventive measures standing in the way of female recruitment of women. A page search for ‘women’ and ‘woman’ on the Think Again Turn Away Facebook page revealed only five posts mentioning women from the beginning of 2015 through the beginning of October. Highlighting the stories of the dangers of living in a warzone could help counter propaganda about sisterhood, glorified ISIS widowhood, and the supposed utopia ISIS is calling on women to help build.

The further along an individual steps into ISIS theology the more the CSCC concedes to ISIS. New converts to Islam are a very vulnerable audience, especially ones who are coming from a background of law breaking and rebellion. People like ‘Betsy’

and Cuspert already shirked society's standards of right and wrong. Zarqawi, the forefather of ISIS had his own criminal background of drugs and violence. Although such individuals' conversion and new found spirituality may put them on a new path in life and give them a sense of purpose, redemption, and spiritual fulfilment, their acceptance of violence and opposition to the Western establishment are the same. Side tracking their commitment to ISIS by appealing to their conscience may not work. For others, appealing to their conscience may not work if they have already accepted ISIS theological justifications for the use of violence. The CSCC should not give up on an audience once their conscience has been corroded by ISIS propaganda or their own criminal past. The stories of defectors show that some of these people can be dissuaded, although in those stories dissuasion required seeing and experiencing everything first hand. Perhaps they could have been dissuaded before they joined ISIS if ISIS theology was more forcefully challenged.

The CSCC lacks messages that directly challenge ISIS theology. The reason is because the USG is reluctant to engage directly in religious and theological messaging. The USG assumes it does not have any credibility within the realm of these topics. Recent converts however, are not fully steeped in Islamic understanding. That is what makes them vulnerable to jihadist ideas. That vulnerability exists for Western propagandists as well. New converts from non-Muslim backgrounds have made a choice that requires rejecting part of their past within Western society and culture. This is an advantage for ISIS. Without fully challenging the transition new converts are making into radicalization the USG is making a concession to ISIS.

The focus here is on Westerners coming from a Western background who are learning how to justify ISIS ideas. These individuals' thinking is still influenced by their background and they probably are trying to justify themselves to their Western friends and families. Betsy's flight to Syria followed an argument with her parents about an ISIS inspired attack. The USG may not have credibility within jihadist theology but it still is a part of the world these vulnerable radicalized converts are still in.

There should be messages that challenge the narrative for who has legitimacy on theological ideas. Direct challenges to the theology of ISIS should also be made. Even if the USG does not have an alternative theology or does not feel comfortable arguing for such, jihadist theology can be directly challenged. Getting a reaction and involving an individual in the process of trying to argue a point can force that individual to engage in critical self-awareness. Searching for the justification of an assumption or a bias may reveal a lack of proof. Creating challenging messages pushes ISIS to respond and justify themselves. Forcing the other side to defend its claims is better than conceding. This is an important message area involving a vulnerable audience that ISIS propaganda is engaging but to a full degree the CSCC is not.

Problems With USG Approaches

The ability of the USG to fully engage the vast diffusion of consumers and propagators of ISIS' propaganda and its many outlets is limited by the structure and approach of the USG's response. The government approach to countering ISIS propaganda is to consolidate messaging, connect interdepartmentally, put everyone on the same page, and have a unified message. The government can only find success by

accepting the need for more creativity and diversity in its messaging and by finding a role it can play in conjunction with a supportive private sector capable of engaging in diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms.

A non-classified memo from the State Department printed in the New York Times revealed how the USG is dealing with countering ISIS messaging with bureaucracy and uniformity. Last June Richard Stengel, the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, wrote a note regarding a meeting in Paris this summer. The memo addressed to the Secretary explained that from a messaging angle, “The coalition does not communicate well internally or externally.”

The big proposal to fix the internal/external coalition messaging problem is to create a full-time coalition communications hub. This unit of about 20 people (one each from 20 countries, or two each from 10, etc.) would live in the region and do daily and weekly messaging around coalition activities and counter-ISIL. It would produce a daily thematic guidance, similar to the work of the CSCC/ICC (Information Coordination Cell); it would communicate internally to all the partners and liaise with the coalition spokesperson that we hope to put in Baghdad. This seems like an obvious and simple solution.¹⁴⁴

The note is indicative of how Stengel and the government in general approach the issue and what they spend a lot of their time on: getting everyone on one page, replicating the bureaucracy, and connecting the numerous branches of governments and allied governments. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, in fact it is part of how governments work. There is a constant struggle for organizational structuring. There is a gravitational pull towards consolidating control. However, the nature of how the government works inhibits the fight to counter ISIS propaganda.

¹⁴⁴ Stengel, Richard. "State Department Memo on the Islamic State Group." 9 June 2015. *newyorktimes.com*. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/12/world/middleeast/document-state-department-memo-on-the-islamic-state-group.html?_r=1. 22 September 2015.

William McCants is a fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy and director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. He hosted a series articles for Brookings by prominent figures working on countering ISIS messaging. They point out the short comings and difficulties the USG's efforts face:

Clint Watts, Fox fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, levels the charge, "For the bureaucrat, it will always be better to initiate an ISIS counter propaganda program rather than to complete one; better to wait and hand the end product off to a successor for fear of what one's superiors or the media might find wrong with it during implementation." Watts constructs an argument for what he sees as wrong with the "whole-of-government trap" that Stengel and others are pursuing.¹⁴⁵ The first issue is resources, capability, and authority misalignment: The State Department has the most authority for engaging ISIS globally. The Defense Department (DoD) has most of the messaging resources and capacity. The intelligence community (IC) has the technical capabilities and knowledge for social media analysis and engagement but little authority for counter-messaging. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have jurisdiction over US domestic space but little authority or capacity for counter narratives. State Department lacks resources and capacity, DoD lacks the necessary knowledge and skills, the IC is limited in its engagement with US targets, DHS and FBI lack authority and capacity. DoS and DoD "divide their efforts up, at different times, into geographic commands, bureaus, and countries, further complicating ownership and authority over engagement. Meanwhile,

¹⁴⁵ Watts, Clint. "Experts weigh in (part 6): Can the United States counter ISIS propaganda?" 13 July 2015. *Brookings.edu*. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/07/13-us-counter-isis-propaganda-watts>. 23 September 2015.

ISIS runs rampant, rightly seeing the social media landscape for what it is: one battle space they can (and do) easily dominate.”

The second problem Watts identifies is timeliness. He says, “U.S. counter narrative campaigns can take far too long to plan, develop, and execute to ever successfully derail ISIS.” He explains that he has worked on social media assessments of jihadist activity during a specific time period and then was asked to provide the same briefs to military commands for up to two years. In that time period social media changes and terrorists change their online names. “Social media interactions occur in seconds and minutes, while U.S. government responses usually take months and often years to acquire needed approvals. If we are ever to be effective, counter narrative efforts must speed up dramatically”

The third problem is flexibility. Watts describes the level of oversight placed on counter narrative programs as “staggering.” The required concurrence from multiple agencies also makes it impossible for the USG to keep up with ISIS. He recommends having a large number of engagement officers free to assess, plan, and respond to ISIS messaging in real time. They should operate with clearly defined objectives, basic restrictions, and a commander’s intent, and the freedom to execute their jobs. An adequate amount of time, perhaps six months to a year should be allowed before reassessing and calibrating the program.

The fourth problem is endurance. Watts notes that the CSCC needs support all the way up the chain of command. Creating effective counter narrative campaigns takes some trial and error and time to learn what works. A failed message should not be seen as a strategic failure. Watts calls for patience and support from leaders.

The final problem area Watts identifies is trust in delegation. He says media scrutiny and bureaucratic infighting, “has created a micromanaged environment where no effort is likely to succeed.” He assess there is no collaborative learning environment in which the White House, DoS, and DoD trust each other and their subordinates to work against ISIS with unity and with their best abilities.

LeBaron, the first director of the CSCC discussed the current state of the effort to counter ISIS propaganda. He put things in perspective by pointing out, as numerous as ISIS tweets may be, ISIS must be frustrated that out of the millions of Muslims they could recruit, a tiny fraction are actually paying heed to their message. LeBaron believes, “the notion that the United States lacks influence on the decision-making of young Muslims is also flawed.” He points out the vast array of assets the USG employs in public diplomacy, especially intercultural exchanges that brings people from varies age groups to America for transformative experiences. Very few Muslims answer the ISIS call, but some do. To overcome challenges in reaching those Muslims LeBaron says, “We need to give our people the space to act imaginatively in this hall of mirrors, without fear of ridicule and abrupt changes of course as they experiment and innovate.” He argues, the USG does have a voice that people will listen to and it should not be afraid to use it.¹⁴⁶ This is a clear call to expand the range of messaging the USG is engaging in.

¹⁴⁶ LeBaron, Richard. "Experts weigh in: Can the United States counter ISIS propaganda?" 17 June 2015. *Brookings.edu*. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/06/17-lebaron-us-counter-isis-propaganda>. 22 September 2015.

Fernandez, the CSCC director from 2012 to early 2015 echoes LeBaron's point on how limited the results are from ISIS propaganda.¹⁴⁷ However, he pointed out how ISIS does find success by focusing its propaganda on the real atrocities of the Assad regime. "The best propaganda is the truth." Fernandez blames part of ISIS success on the weak response by the West to Assad. However, the USG is not the only one to fail in countering the ISIS message. According to Fernandez, by comparison the UK and Saudi Arabia have spent more money than the US. Al Qaeda and regime Islamic clerics who speak with Islamic authority, have all failed to defeat ISIS messages. Money and Islamic legitimacy are not the keys to success.

Fernandez presents three areas in which the USG can improve its efforts. Matching the volume of ISIS propaganda has not been tried. The number of social media users actively opposing ISIS is overwhelmed by the thousands of online supporters for ISIS. Fernandez says if the private sector cannot do it, the government needs to find ways to create similar networks. In order to match this volume the USG must recruit its own network of supporters to amplify and duplicate its counter-messages. Fernandez highlights the role these people could play, "Volume alone, occurring in the time zone where events are breaking, should create organic opportunities for messaging that do not exist today."

¹⁴⁷ Fernandez, Alberto. "Experts weigh in (part 2): Can the United States counter ISIS propaganda?" 15 June 2015. *Brookings.edu*. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/06/19-us-counter-messaging-isis-fernandez>. 22 September 2015.

Charlie Winter, senior researcher at Quilliam Foundation, supports Fernandez's call for matching volume.¹⁴⁸ Winter describes volume and originality as the pillars of ISIS propaganda. He says, "There is no one-size-fits-all approach to counter-messaging. Like ISIS, which channels a cocktail of narratives ranging from brutality to utopianism, the coalition must think bigger." Fernandez mentions the government needing to find a solution. Winter believes the private sector is key to doing this. He says government red tape and bureaucracy will get in the way of volume and originality.

Fernandez's second recommendation is to replicate ISIS' personal networking and communication with radicalizing individuals. A friend, family member, or religious teacher is often instrumental to the radicalization process. Individualized tailored recruitment, according to Fernandez, is only replicated by law enforcement when they are trying to arrest someone. He suggests trying to have councilors standing by to match the personal interaction provided by radicalizers.

During Fernandez's time as the director he noticed, "One of the daily challenges confronted by the tiny but intrepid team at CSCC to counter ISIS messaging was finding enough images to counter the flood of original images that ISIS was producing." This inspires his third recommendation, "creating a central repository of images, testimonies and stories for use by counterterrorism communicators is a practical common sense step that would not only provide the building blocks for anti-ISIS messaging, it would also enlist the power of citizen journalists and civil society activists in Syria and Iraq." One must wonder why, in the three years he was director, Fernandez did not implement this

¹⁴⁸ Winter, Charlie. "Experts weigh in (part 4): Can the United States counter ISIS propaganda?" 1 July 2015. *Brookings.edu*. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/07/01-us-counter-isis-propaganda-winter>. 22 September 2015.

“practical and common sense step”? However, the situation will be ameliorated; thankfully he is writing a paper about it soon. Perhaps Fernandez deserves less criticism. He was working with a limited budget and had all of the usual bureaucratic hurdles to overcome. Without support, ideas cannot be implemented. Perhaps his paper will convince those whose support was lacking before. But even then, that is only one step towards overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. By the time such a measure goes up and down and across the lines requiring support and comes into effect a great deal of time will have transpired, media use will have changed as well as ISIS’ tactics.

Evaluation Of Criticism

LeBaron and Fernandez argue the vast array of USG assets along with partner nations’ assets do reach a broad range of audiences in a variety of ways and a variety of mediums. Very few Muslims respond to ISIS propaganda. There is a level of success that is not acknowledged. The problem is harnessing all of these assets to target the narrow demographic that does respond to radicalization and at the same time competing with the volume of ISIS messages targeted at and consumed by this demographic. The CSCC is trying to solve that problem. It has an important role to play, but it must recognize its limitations.

Watts charged bureaucrats are disincentivized to take risks and complete projects. Regardless of what intentions and incentives may be, Fernandez revealed he had a good idea and failed to bring it to execution. The problems described by Watts apply to any endeavor the government engages in. They are not reasons for giving up, but challenges that have to be overcome. Stengel is trying to overcome them with better communication

and coordination. However, the government is never flexible enough or trusts enough in delegation to deal with ISIS' volume and diversity. While the CSCC is trying to bring a diverse range of assets onto one page, coordinating an approved counter narrative, ISIS is propagating a "cocktail of narratives ranging from brutality to utopianism." Whatever response the government does come up with will be slow and late and only respond to a portion of ISIS' messages.

The private sector is doing a better job in some areas. One of Fernandez's recommendations was to match the personal persuasion that ISIS recruiters apply. Affinis Labs is already doing that with their QuickFiqh and Pentor apps which connect people with scholars who can give them answers to their questions. It is doubtful the government could create a series of potentially successful apps, especially ones that engage directly in matters of Muslim life and theology. The approval process would take a long time. The technical expertise needed would require outside help. The problems of engaging directly with theology would be difficult to surmount.

Instead of struggling with finding a counter narrative to ISIS, YouTube decided to help those who can create a variety of counter narratives. By teaching and helping a variety of Muslims, religious teachers, comedians, 'regular Muslims' etc. they are helping create a diversity of messages to diverse audiences while also increasing its CVE volume. Affinis Labs and YouTube are succeeding in areas the USG is struggling in.

There are areas that the government can and should play a role in. Fernandez's idea for creating a central bank of images, videos, and material that can be quickly accessed to counter ISIS messages is a great idea. This data base would not just be for CSCC people to use, but for activists and journalists as well. Fernandez called attention

to the need to have a network that can stand up to the ISIS network in the digital battlespace. This requires leadership and providing the arms for people to fight with. ISIS created its New Dawn app so that it could organize its followers and use them for a coordinated campaign. The CSCC and Stengel spend a lot of time bringing agencies and departments together. Stengel's job title includes Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs; he should be recruiting the Western public not just instruments of government to engage in the fight. Establishing a central database and targeting a different audience, one who is already on the non-radicalized side, will help create an online army to counter ISIS supporters. The creation of this database could also help the volume problem. Combined with YouTube's efforts to educate new vloggers and talent the database could help inform and provide resources for these newly empowered propagandists.

It is worth noting that an NGO could also set up this database. However, NGOs need funds to operate. The USG would still be needed to either do the project itself or provide funding to support the efforts of NGOs/contractors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE USG AND PRIVATE SECTOR

It is possible to counter ISIS propaganda with a grassroots network that is quick to engage, adaptive, and wide ranging in its responses. ISIS recruits sympathizers to relay its messages and create organic grassroots propaganda. The creation of a similar grassroots counterforce is needed. This section details how such a force can be created as a USG partnership with the private sector and a sympathetic public. This is a program proposal that addresses the USG problems by:

- Bypassing the government's inflexibility and slowness.
- Making up for short comings in manpower.
- Creating a large volume of messages.
- Countering broad ranges of messages.
- Using creativity and adaptability.

The USG can fund a private group to create a group website for an online army (it would have some sort of cool name, for reference purposes it will be called the online army source page, (OASP). There are millions of people who oppose the ideology of ISIS, and most of them probably feel like there is not much they can do about it from their civilian position. If given an opportunity there are many people who could engage in countering ISIS propaganda.

The concept for OASP is a website with a hit list of social media profiles and messages in which individuals are expressing support for ISIS. Rather than people happening across pro-ISIS content, the hit list site could gather links to tweets and posts so that those eager to counter ISIS propaganda can quickly engage them.

Recruiting an online army starts with creating a user group who has access to this hit list who can then post their own counter messages. Recruiting and advertising for the online army should target students, professors, imams, pastors, and people from social networks consisting of well educated professionals. Recruiting people from all over the world is important, particularly from Muslim countries. There will be some cyber bullying. That is why access to the hit list should require membership. Membership is open to the public, but requires setting up a profile, username and password. Members who are reported for bullying can be banned from the group. This online army solves the CSCC's lack of manpower and inability to respond to the large volume of ISIS messages.

The group page providing access to the hit list could also provide links, news updates, and libraries of information so that users can become familiar with recent developments, what jihadist terms mean, what ISIS is saying, and some stories and information that could be used by members for the arguments they will engage in on the social media battlefield. This is the main channel by which the USG can make contributions and infuse themes it wants the online army to propagate. The CSCC and open source intelligence centers along with other agencies could provide information for the libraries and newsfeeds of the website.

Partnering with think tanks and private institutions for the maintenance of this library would help relieve the CSCC from some of the burden of tracking the vast array of ISIS publications and generating explanations and responses. Approved group members could also add to this library or submit links to newly discovered ISIS videos and publications. A group message board would provide users a forum on which to discuss with one another and provide feedback to the OASP administrators. The CSCC

can hold essay contests and monitor the group message board in order to identify good ideas worth highlighting for other members to read. For example, every time ISIS publishes a new issue of Dabiq a short essay contest for rebuttals would follow.

Theological concepts could be addressed without the USG directly writing or publishing them (it would just elevate their prominence on the webpage with the authors receiving sole attribution.) Linking group members to trending ISIS propaganda and feeding group members new information, thoughts, and ideas enables group members to instantly generate responses. These responses are created by a vast array of people who have different ideas, perspectives, and approaches. This system bypasses the normal inflexibility and slowness of the government with immediate responses and quick adaptation to new trends.

Fernandez' suggested image database could tie in to the OASP. It could also be expanded to include a meme creation center on the group page. It would be a page where people can create memes and graphics to use against terrorist propaganda. There are already numerous places online to do this; however, creating a page and a database of created images within the group's website would help concentrate the creation and accessibility of relevant imagery. Along with the inherent variety that will come from different group members, resources such as the meme center will enhance and encourage creativity and unique forms of communication.

This online army does most of the work, but with some oversight. Some members could play the role of spotters, finding terrorist propaganda and finding people who are supporting it. Other users would then follow the links and post their own responses. Website administrators would play a role identifying people who are doing a good job.

The more an individual spots the right kind of content the higher their rating and the less time administrators spend checking their work. The same approach could work for users who are getting on messaging boards and responding to terrorist sympathizers with good arguments and a non-bullying manner. As an incentive, members of the group could earn points based on their participation, ranking up as they gain more points. A leader board could show the top performers. This is a natural way to spur people's competitive nature. It would also show that people's efforts are being noticed and appreciated. Prizes could even be offered for top performers, these could be cash prizes or t-shirts and badges.

The OASP layout could help organize and direct users' response to terrorists' and sympathizers' activity. A link identified for ISIS content (or any other terrorist group) would have a number next to it showing how many group members have responded to it. That way all efforts are not wasted on a handful of posts. The offending poster is unlikely to keep up with a deluge of negative feedback. Users who notice offending messages with zero or a few responses could pick those. On the other hand a deluge of negative comments might convince some terrorist supporters to delete their comment. Once a post has been clicked on by a certain number of responders it could be removed from the top of the hit list. To further organize the online army's response the web page could also be equipped with language filters helping users narrow their efforts to the languages they know.

There are some drawbacks to the concept. Terrorist sympathizers may feel more isolated and harassed and pushed further towards isolation and radicalization. That is why the recruitment of and participation from Muslims and people living in areas affected by terrorism is important. These people hopefully can engage in the most persuasive manner.

These people can also disabuse terrorist sympathizers of notions that terrorists represent the ummah and speak on Muslims' behalf. Peer pressure is powerful. It is harder for individuals to find support and justifications for ISIS if everything they say online is challenged by their peers.

Responding to terrorist propaganda and sympathetic posts raises their prominence and draws more attention to them. However, at the same time all of the negative responses and counter arguments also rise in prominence. ISIS is interested in what kind of response it is getting from its content. It is just as eager as the USG in evaluating effectiveness. ISIS will notice negative responses. It may even feel compelled to respond. A cyber attack or any direct propaganda efforts against the OASP will be the best indicator for gaging its effectiveness.

The OASP concept is centralized, organized, yet diffused with a network of responders generating messages with a great variety of content. It also provides a way to keep up with the ever changing and ephemeral nature of the internet. Bringing a vast array of individuals to the propaganda battle will help generate a variety of messages that the government is unable to express or too inflexible to try. The CSCC can provide funding for the OASP and establish certain requirements that allow it access and input while still leaving the websites in the hands of a private group. The OASP concept helps address the short comings of the current USG approach by establishing a partnership with the private sector to engage in diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms.

CONCLUSION

The vast array of assets that the USG brings to propaganda battles makes a difference. However, it is struggling to engage the narrow audience that does become radicalized. Despite good ideas and intentions the USG is struggling to maximize its capabilities in an efficient and effective manner. Its range of messages and counter messages is lacking. A small terrorist organization is recruiting thousands of Westerners to join their cause. The private sector can provide solutions in areas that the USG cannot. However, the USG can still play a role of leadership and play an effective and supportive role alongside the private sector in countering ISIS propaganda.

The current government approach to countering ISIS propaganda is to consolidate messaging, connect interdepartmentally, put everyone on the same page, and have a unified message. The ISIS approach to propaganda is to express diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms and rely on a dispersed network of grassroots level supporters to amplify and share its messages.

Adopting programs such as the proposed OASP or similar projects will challenge the vast array of ISIS propaganda. Potential ISIS recruits and supporters will have a harder time accepting indoctrination as ISIS messages draw counter arguments and social pressure. When ISIS adapts and finds new ways to exploit different mediums, an online counterforce will keep pace. ISIS will have to change its tactics and shift from a strategy focused mostly on offense to a defensive posture trying to fend off attacks from a proactive online army fighting against ISIS' warped theology, interpretation of history and current events, and political cause. The government can only find success by

accepting the need for more creativity and diversity in its messaging and by finding a role it can play in conjunction with a supportive private sector capable of engaging in diverse messages to diverse audiences across diverse platforms.

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