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Kyle J. Greene

Cedarville University, kylegreene362@gmail.com

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ISIS: Trends in Terrorist Media and Propaganda

Kyle Greene

Cedarville University

### Abstract

This paper explores the rise of ISIS in the realm of terrorist media and propaganda. It starts off by first examining trends and goals in terrorist use of media in the past, with emphasis on al Qaeda as a particular example. The main differences between al Qaeda and ISIS are reviewed, before a lengthy exploration of major examples of ISIS propaganda is given. Strategies in the use of social media are explored, as well as in-depth analysis of several issues from two online publications, the *Islamic State Report* and *Dabiq*. Several major video releases are also analyzed, focusing on “Flames of War,” the execution video featuring the immolation of Jordanian pilot Lt. al-Kaseasbeh, and videos from the series “Lend Me Your Ears” featuring captured British journalist John Cantlie. Finally, trends and themes from these resources are gathered and analyzed.

*Keywords:* media, propaganda, ISIS

### Media and the Islamic State: The Forefront of Muslim Extremist Propaganda

Among current global events and topics in the international community, few have been covered for quite as long and with as much attention as the various rebel uprisings, political turmoils, and terrorist groups which are establishing themselves across the Middle East and Southeast Asia over the past several years. Of particular interest to academics and intellectuals in the western world has been the analysis of the continued refinement in the area of media and propaganda techniques used by these extremist organizations. Only five years ago, al Qaeda was a forerunner at the center of this topic, but now a new group has risen up to rival it with the broadest, most sophisticated, and modern propaganda machine at its fingertips. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State (IS), now holds a significant portion of the two countries in its name, and has for the most part held it for over a year now despite a sustained bombing effort by coalition forces and enemies on multiple fronts. Now it continues to draw personnel, monetary resources, and equipment from around the world, and many experts would attribute that to the equal emphasis the organization puts on media projection compared to military effort. But what is the background of media and propaganda interaction in the realm of terrorism in the past, and how does the Islamic State differ? What are some examples of the extra efforts which ISIS has utilized in propaganda? How have these methods helped their cause, and how have they hindered it?

### **Terrorism and Media in the Past**

The Islamic State is certainly not the first extremist organization to pursue use of modern media tools to draw attention towards its agenda. As early as 1999, Hamas began operating the Palestinian Information Center (PIC) in a variety of languages online, a sort of “gateway” website which served as a link to other online information sources which cast a favorable light

on the organization. In a 2010 study, the different versions of the website could be distinguished both in their apparent linkage to Hamas, and the amount of violence in the images portrayed (Jihadist Media, 2014). For example, the English version had no apparent links to the organization or pictures of extreme graphic nature, while the French version did not attempt to hide the Hamas logo or violent pictures at all, and targeted its emotional appeal for vengeance towards the sizeable minority population of North African immigrants living in the country. In 2008 Hamas launched AqsaTube, a sort of knockoff website based on the functions of YouTube, but used for sharing jihadist videos (Jihadist Media, 2014) instead. Although authorities forcibly shut down AqsaTube soon after, it is an instance where one terrorist organization sought to bring its use of media up to par with modern tools before the rise of the Islamic State overshadowed it. But Hamas is just one case. Al Qaeda provides a more opportune and deeper example of a terrorist organization which utilizes its own local propaganda as well as foreign media sources to make its presence known and its voice heard. Before investigating al Qaeda's propaganda methods, however, it is beneficial to cover the differing perspectives held by terrorist organizations in regards to the nature of media in general, as well as past classifications of their various motivations for its use.

### **Motivation for Media Coverage**

According to a study by Tanja Milosevska and Nenad Taneski (2014), terrorist organizations do not even need to source their own media in order to use it as a weapon in their own interest. Indirect use of the public media's desire to gain viewers often automatically draws nationwide and sometimes even global attention towards small acts of terrorism. The authors note:

The structure and competitiveness of the news industry appear to influence media attention to terrorism. As the media environment becomes more decentralized and competitive, news outlets may try to maintain market share by devoting more attention to terrorist attacks that employ novel tactics or that are particularly violent. Such a development could pose new challenges for the media relations of homeland security agencies by giving the public a distorted picture of the threat from terrorism and reducing the ability of the authorities to explain their policies and to put the problem of terrorism in an appropriate context. (Milosevska et al., 2014, p. 58)

Thus, small, individual acts of focused and extreme violence can be used to manipulate the fears of a large population and turn national policies towards a direction which might favor them. The public attention is especially favorable for terrorist organizations when the groups can use it to garner sympathizers who otherwise would never have given support, as has been the case with the Islamic State (Milosevska et al., 2014, p. 58).

**The symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media.** It is no news that terrorism and the media have a particular symbiotic relationship. As revealed in the information just discussed, the two entities can both directly and indirectly feed off of each other, especially as mainstream news media is more often than not drawn to violence (Torres Soriano, 2008, p. 3). In their study, Milosevska et al. found several relevant models to classify the various type of relationships seen between terrorism and the media. In the first model, the media encourage more terrorist attacks to occur by reporting on them. Labeled the “culpable-media model,” this trend places part of the fault in terrorism on the media, as terrorists would have less of a motivation to go to such drastic measures if they knew it would be less consequential in the public’s eyes (Milosevska et al., 2014, p. 59). This model is probably more accurate when applied to “lone

wolf” terrorist attacks, as opposed to acts which are carried out by ideologically motivated terrorist organizations which may or may not have carried out their attacks regardless.

The “vulnerable media model” is a second model, which acknowledges the difficult position the media is placed in when a terrorist attack is carried out (Milosevska et al., 2014, p. 59). In a reality where multiple decentralized and independent media agencies compete, one television station may choose to not cover an attack, but will lose viewers to all of the others that still do. This is especially the case in western countries which hold a high value for free speech, and governments do not hold a heavy hand of censorship. In such scenarios, the media has to make the difficult choice between being perceived as “covering up” a piece of important news by not reporting it, or giving terrorists a voice.

**Models of behavior towards the media by terrorists.** Another notable section of the study listed the differences in perspectives and attitudes seen by terrorists held towards external media. First is that of “complete indifference.” As noted earlier, actions which sensitive cultures view as terrorism can be disregarded by ideologically or locally motivated groups which simply do not care what the rest of the world thinks about their actions, and hold different views as to the methods of conducting their wars, politics, or civil governorship practices. Second is the position of “relative indifference,” where “terrorists are not concerned with being on the news, even though they are conscious of the power that explaining their cause in currently existing media can provide them” (Milosevska et al., 2014, p. 60). Thirdly is the “media-oriented strategy,” where terrorists are aware of the media’s impact on their goals, and alter their actions in order to affect political changes in their favor through either indirect or direct manipulation of the press. Both al Qaeda and ISIS strongly operate according to a media-oriented strategy. Lastly is the “complete breakaway” attitude, where terrorists “see journalists and reporters as enemies

that must be destroyed, putting them on the same level as other direct adversaries.” As the authors agree, it does not take long investigation into terrorist activities to realize that terrorist organizations do not have to fall into individual categories, but can either shift between them as time progresses or share multiple perspectives simultaneously (Milosevska et al., 2014 p. 60).

### **Al Qaeda**

When investigating use of media and propaganda by the Islamic State, al Qaeda provides the best example for a specific terrorist organization to compare to, as this group and its various offshoots have long held similar goals and derive from an extremist version of fundamentalist Islam. Al Qaeda has also been at the top of NATO’s list of enemies in the war against terrorism for the past decade. Before ISIS, this terror group also had perhaps one of the best known “organized” media fronts, including heavy influence of messaging through its media arm known as “as-Sahab” (Seib, 2008). As-Sahab grew steadily throughout its operations during the last decade. It is reported to have released “16 videos during 2005, 58 in 2006, and produced more than 90 in 2007” (Seib, 2008, p. 74). Most of these videos are available to watch on the internet. But as-Sahab is just one piece of al Qaeda’s propaganda network. An organization called the Global Islamic Media Front also operates under their influence, and has created documentaries such as “Jihad Academy” which film such things as the assemblage of IEDs, as well as speeches reasoning jihadist’s motivations to fight the United States and other allied forces. An online magazine called *Zurwat al-Sanam* (The Tip of the Camel’s Hump) was started by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2007 (Seib, 2008) and many other decentralized offshoots have hosted other media products related to al Qaeda’s cause and operations. In analyzing the various sources of media used by al Qaeda, researchers have come up with several apparent strategies and themes used by the organization in their propaganda.



**Strategy characteristics.** Carl J. Ciovacco at Harvard University formed a list of nine strategy characteristics perceived being used by al Qaeda in media publications from organization head leadership leading up to 2009, specifically focusing on speeches and media releases by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Ciovacco, 2009). The study concluded that:

1. Al Qaeda's top leadership exploits local sensitivities with tailored statements for specific audiences around the world. (Top al Qaeda leadership refers to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.)
2. Anniversaries serve as "message projection opportunities" for al Qaeda's cause.
3. Al Qaeda's top leadership emphasizes Koranic and historical justification to provide legitimacy for its actions.
4. Seven platform themes are reinforced in nearly all media releases. In descending order of frequency as observed in media releases, these themes are: call to jihad, clash of civilizations, United States–Israel connection, Muslim unity, United States is weakening, apostate Muslim leaders are betraying Islam, United States is stealing Muslim oil.
5. Release timing trends show that the time interval between a geopolitical event of significance and subsequent media release is shorter following an al Qaeda "loss" than an al Qaeda "win." Following geopolitical events that tend to hurt Al Qaeda's cause (loss), bin Laden and Zawahiri release transmissions sooner than after geopolitical events that tend to favor al Qaeda's cause (win).
6. Al Qaeda's top leadership attempts to prompt local al Qaeda affiliates into action by providing specific guidance in their media releases. The efficacy of these "calls

to arms” is fairly high with a strong correlation between initial guidance and a resulting attack.

7. Al Qaeda’s top leadership attempts to influence American foreign policy with targeted messages directed toward Americans at critical moments in time.

8. Video releases are normally of greater significance than audio recordings, although this disparity is decreasing with al-Sahab’s direct posting of videos to the Internet.

9. The degree of top al Qaeda involvement in an attack and the actual results of the attack itself figure prominently in whether bin Laden or Zawahiri ultimately claim responsibility. (Ciovacco, 2009, p. 868-869)

Of these nine characteristics to the al Qaeda voice in media, perhaps the most important to understand when comparing the organization to one like ISIS are the seven platform themes under characteristic four on the list, as the majority of these themes are very often seen repeated in other Muslim extremist groups, and continue to be seen in themes used in propaganda by the Islamic State. In the case of al Qaeda, the most important recurrent theme was that of a call to jihad, using the Quran as a basis. As for the clash of civilizations, their messages make clear that the Islamic world and the culture of the Western world are incompatible, and this incompatibility is what is leading to current conflicts. This second theme leads naturally into the third, which denounces as apostates the many Muslim leaders who take a more moderate stance and do not support acts of terrorism and violence in jihad. They have renounced their duty to the faith as interpreted in the scriptures. The fourth most stated theme, which brings up the connection between the United States and Israel, helps carry Muslim audiences back to the first theme, that of jihad. According to Zawahiri’s book, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*,

the one slogan that has been well understood by the [Muslim] nation and to which it has been responding for the past fifty years is the call for jihad against Israel. In addition to this slogan, the nation in this decade is geared against the U.S. presence. It has responded favorably to the call for the jihad against the Americans. (Ciovacco, 2009, p. 858)

Once convinced of the need for jihad against the State of Israel, it is a short step away to be swayed into believing in the need to fight the United States as well, especially with how easy it is to convince said persons with the belief that the initial and continued establishment of the Israeli State was impossible without US intervention and support. The fifth theme, Muslim unity, is used with the support of Islamic scripture to reinforce it. The continued claim that the United States is weakening as a world power is a necessary one, and whether true or not, is used to encourage both jihadi morale and will to fight, as well as to encourage would-be recruits regarding the viability of their end goal. Lastly, the theme that the United States is “stealing” Muslim oil is the least used because it is already so prevalent around the world even in western media. The truth behind many of the claims made in these seven themes is irrelevant in real-world outcomes, as it is the believability of the claims which makes the most change in the social sphere.

### **ISIS Differs From al Qaeda in its Propaganda**

While both al Qaeda and ISIS are ideologically and religiously motivated by Islam, further investigation reveals that there exist quite a few differences, and even hostility, between them. A visible split occurred when Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the leader of what was then called ISIS, declared the insurgent and terrorist group Jabhat al Nusra li Ahl al Sham to be subordinate to him in April 2013 (Barrett, 2014, p. 12). This did not go over well with al Nusra’s leader, Abu Mohammed al Golani, and Abu Bakr betrayed his true connections to al Qaeda when he

requested for bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to make a ruling on the situation. This did not work in his favor however, and Abu Bakr officially broke off connections between ISIS and al Qaeda in February 2014 (Barrett, 2014, p. 13). On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr announced the reestablishment of an Islamic Caliphate, with himself as the elected Caliph. Barrett says, "The declaration was also a direct challenge to the authority of Zawahiri and the role of Mullah Omar, who until then had been the undisputed Amir al Mu'minin (Leader of the Faithful)" (2014, p. 13). Not only was this an attempt to draw away recruits from al Nusra and al Qaeda, but showed that the groups did not have quite the same goals. This also opened the door for more public criticism between the groups, especially when it came to differences in media preferences.

**Al Qaeda has banned beheading of captives.** One area in which ISIS visibly differs from Al Qaeda is its penchant for beheadings and public executions. The filmed executions of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in 2014 were not the last to be used as propaganda by ISIS, and were just a small example of the multiple executions which they perform daily. With its extreme, publicized brutality and acts of violence, even many Arab Muslims who support organizations like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood hold an unfavorable view of ISIS. In a poll by The Washington Institute in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon,

only 5 percent of Saudis and 3 percent of Egyptians expressed a favorable opinion of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham). In Lebanon, not one Christian, Shiite, or Druze respondent expressed a positive view of ISIS, and only 1 percent of Sunnis expressed approval of the Sunni jihadist group that has overrun portions of neighboring Syria and Iraq. (Parker, 2014)

Al Qaeda realizes realities such as this, and in an effort to disassociate itself and maintain a “good” image in the Muslim world, it banned beheadings in late 2014. Nasr Ibn Ali al-Ansi, a senior spokesman for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), made this clear in a press interview soon after. Some of his most notable comments include calling the beheadings “barbaric,” and that “filming and promoting it [beheadings] among people in the name of Islam and jihad is a big mistake and not acceptable whatever the justifications are... Sheik Osama bin Laden used to say anyone with sound instincts cannot stand watching scenes of killings” (Masi, 2014). He went on to say, “Therefore, I assert that whoever does such actions [beheadings], he has violated the command of Sheikh Osama” (Coghlan, 2014). Is this new policy sincere on the part of al Qaeda? Most likely it is simply a political move, as al Qaeda has been known to film its beheadings of western captives before on multiple occasions, including American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 (Masi, 2014). However, al Qaeda’s leadership does not see this as the correct way to move forward now, at least publicly, and the new policy serves as an example of a source of tension between them and the Islamic State.

**Key distinctions in social media already noted by journalists.** Journalists have already noted a few other major differences in use of social media by ISIS and al Qaeda for propaganda purposes. While separate writers will point out different individual details, most of the primary differences can be combined into three main distinctions, as Laura Ryan outlines in “Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here’s How and Why” (2014). Essentially, the differences come down to the fact that ISIS more effectively gains new recruits by use of social media, takes advantage of newer web platforms, and glorifies extreme violence to a level which arguably is without modern precedent. According to Ryan,

both groups use social media to target and recruit foreigners, but ISIS is much better at it. The number of Westerners fighting alongside ISIS in Syria and Iraq could number in the thousands, thanks in large part to Twitter and Facebook, and this spooks the West” (2014).

Use of the newest social media platforms enables ISIS to reach out to the young, more impressionable age groups, which also happen to be more desirable because of their fighting age. In addition, every new recruit gained through social media becomes an additional asset in their propaganda campaign, as “the American public is most familiar with ISIS’s graphic images, but recruits also share messages and images of daily life in Syria as peaceful, purposeful, and orderly” (Ryan, 2014). The “newness” of the nature of social media such as Twitter and Facebook also enables IS recruits to network with others and become unified, in contrast to al Qaeda’s strategy to create worldwide “lone wolf” terrorists through its media such as online magazine *Inspire*, founded by Anwar al-Awlaki before he was killed by a US drone strike. For example, the twelfth issue of *Inspire*, published in spring 2014, contained instructions on how to make a car bomb out of basic household items, and another issue was used as a source of inspiration for the bombers at the April 2013 marathon in Boston (Ryan, 2014). Essentially, this comes down to a difference in tactics between the two organizations. While al Qaeda focuses on the “far enemy,” such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, and other “crusader” states, the Islamic State currently focuses on the “near enemy,” located in places such as the Syrian and Iraqi governments, the Kurds, and “apostate” Shia Muslims.

As for online video sharing websites such as YouTube, both organizations routinely upload their own propaganda videos. But those of ISIS are far more blatantly violent, while al Qaeda’s restrain themselves. “For ISIS, all attention is good attention... While most people react

with disgust to ISIS's graphic videos, there are some who are inspired by it—and that is exactly whom the group is trying to reach” (Ryan, 2014). As was said earlier, al Qaeda shows more visible concern with presenting a palpable image to the Muslim world. As for ISIS, they seem to be either so entirely ideologically driven that they just don't care, or it is a part of their overall recruitment strategy, as many journalists speculate. “They're a bit mad to post video and photo of executions. But it's their way of showing they're more daring, more extreme, than anyone else,” said Ghafar Hussain in an interview to NBC News (Pepitone, 2014). Some analysts speculate that it is a tactic mainly meant to draw recruits from foreign nations. Charles Lister from the Brookings Institute's Doha Center told reporters, “By underlining a sense of constant progress and success, ISIS can challenge the viability and value of rival movements” (Pepitone, 2014). If so, it appears that has been successful, at least in the area of stealing recruits. ISIS has already gathered many of its fighters from al Nusra and other rebel groups who were previously fighting in Syria in order to redirect them towards their main target of Iraq (Barrett, 2014, p. 13).

### **Main Outlets of ISIS Propaganda**

It is already apparent that the Islamic State has become a new phenomenon in the world of terrorist propaganda and media production. But what are some examples of ways in which the organization has either surpassed its competitors in this area, and in which it stands out for use of ingenuity? What are a few of the biggest actions taken in this area so far by ISIS, and why are they notable? Although the Islamic State is far spread in the diversity of its media campaign, in this study, we will examine three core areas of propaganda aimed at the West. These will consist of social media, hard copy, and video sources, and set the stage for a further evaluation of trends in ISIS media which can be assessed on their own level.

## **Social Media**

Outside of social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, Twitter is considered to be one of the largest sources of decentralized media and propaganda output by the Islamic State (Vitale, Keagle, 2014, p. 7). They are not alone in this, as most other terrorist organizations make wide use of the tool as well (Altman, 2014). The main appeal to militants towards using Twitter, however, is how it is so difficult for both site and governmental authorities to permanently eliminate extremist messages. As soon as one account is shut down or a post is blocked, the same message or post will spark up on several others (Altman, 2014). In one example case with the hour long video “Flames of War,” links were

tweeted out to tens of thousands of online supporters, who then re-tweeted the links, and, importantly, created new pages and links on justpaste.it. The video was also uploaded to YouTube on many accounts in order to overcome the inevitable suppression of the video for violating YouTube standards of use. Just one randomly selected page promoting the video among dozens of others, recorded 18,034 views within seven hours on 18 September 2014, showing the ease, breadth, and speed with which The Islamic State is able to spread its message directly to the intended audience. The problems of censoring such a decentralized distribution system were well illustrated by the two days it took the mainstream social media to notice what was happening. (Barrett, 2014, p. 51-52)

Posts can include memes, photos, or links to videos showing progress by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Sometimes, posts will show cartoons.

A popular tactic to spread ISIS propaganda across social media is to use “twitter bombs,” which target the most popular hashtags of the week and use them in IS-related posts, thereby gaining a larger audience. And “most pages owned or related to The Islamic State tend to follow



each other, so that the number of tweets and readings increases more rapidly” (Barrett, 2014, p. 55). When not “twitter bombing” and hijacking other conversations, hashtags will read as lines such as “#Baghdad\_is\_liberated” and “#Iraq\_is\_liberated” (Irshaid, 2014). On June 20<sup>th</sup> of 2014, ISIS also launched a local Twitter campaign in which it requested that supporters film themselves waving the ISIS flag, hash tagging in Arabic, “#theFridayofsupportingISIS” (Irshaid, 2014). Many times, thousands of ISIS supporters will simultaneously coordinate to post many tweets featuring the same hashtag, and repeat this throughout the day so as to generate a larger online presence than the number of supporters actually is (Berger, 2014). Up until June 13, 2014, Al I’tisam operated as the most important page on Twitter controlled by ISIS. At the time it was shut down, the page had at least 50,000 followers, most of which just went on to continue obtaining and sharing ISIS propaganda through other channels. Despite the low impact which the closure of Al I’tisam had, however, “one supporter of The Islamic State was sufficiently incensed by the closure of accounts in September 2014 as to threaten lethal retaliation against Twitter employees” (Barrett, 2014, p. 54). In addition, as sites like Twitter have started cracking down on IS-related content more and more, “other less known social media platforms such as Qwitter and Diaspora are increasingly used by The Islamic State to broadcast its messages” (Barrett, 2014, p. 54).

One of the ways in which ISIS has tried to create mass tweets was through the “Dawn of Good Tidings” app for Android and PC, which came out in April 2014 and was taken down from the Google Play store on June 19<sup>th</sup> of that same year (Marks, 2014). In addition to obtaining access to the user’s photo and media files, Wi-Fi connection information, and other personal information, the app had the ability to remotely post tweets from the user’s account on their behalf and without their interaction. This allowed the app’s owners to decide what content to

send and when to post it across “Dawn’s” user base. The brilliant part about the “Dawn of Good Tidings” app, however, is that it was programmed to randomly select only a portion of app owners’ Twitter accounts to post from at a time, thereby circumventing Twitter’s spam detection (Berger, 2014).

### **Magazine and Hard Copy Propaganda**

Social media is not the only media front on which the Islamic State fights its propaganda war. Perhaps the most influential establishment in terms of targeting its western audience is the Al Hayat Media Center (Barrett, 2014, p. 55). Along with creating many of the official messages which are shared on social media sites like YouTube and Twitter, Al Hayat is responsible for publishing online newspapers and magazines in a variety of languages other than Arabic, including English. While Al I’tisam and Al Furqan also serve as “official” ISIS channels for media distribution, Al Hayat provides arguably the most lengthy and polished of propaganda in foreign languages. This includes a six page pdf file version of a newspaper called the *Islamic State News*, or ISN, as well as a short magazine named the *Islamic State Report*, or ISR. Both sources provide regular updates on ISIS progress and important events occurring in Syria and Iraq. In addition, Al Hayat started producing a much more lengthy digital magazine called *Dabiq* in July 2014 (Barrett, 2014, p. 56). All of these publications are dated according to the Islamic calendar, as opposed to the Gregorian one. In this section, we will explore the first couple issues of the *Islamic State Report*, but spend the most time digging into the content of *Dabiq*.

**The Islamic State Report.** There can be no mistake that Al Hayat is behind the publishing of the *Islamic State Report*. At the top right corner of each issue in bold white, capital letters against a black background lie the words “Al Hayat Media Center.” It is meant to be a very colorful, visually appealing, and professionally organized newspaper. High definition

photographs plaster the backgrounds of most pages, with boxes of text covering them. Each issue is six to seven pages long, and focuses on current events in the war in Iraq, explains the goals of the Islamic State, why it is justified in its cause, and what it is doing to get there. An effort is made to show readers why and how the Islamic State is making the places it controls a better place for the people living there, even as it slaughters those who do not live up to its strict religious ideology. The magazine also places emphasis on spreading a “correct” version of Islam.

The first issue of the ISR is a great example of the effort Al Hayat is making to explain its ideology and present a good image in the area of governorship. It contains only two articles, entitled “Propagating the Correct Manhaj” and “Consumer Protection” (Propagating the Correct, 2014). Scholars and politicians may debate as to what represents the “correct” view of Islam, but ISIS has decided to enforce its interpretation of scriptures such as the Quran and Hadith in the areas it controls through force. It also makes clear that motivation for the movement is entirely founded in its religious beliefs. The first page of the magazine reads:

Spreading Islamic knowledge, correcting the people’s understanding of the religion, and clarifying the truth are all from among the most important goals of the Islamic State of Iraq and Shaam... All this in order to clarify the fundamental truth on account of which the heavens and the earth were established, for which the Messengers were sent, and which many men have fought to establish, proving truthful to their covenant with Allah. This fundamental truth is Tawheed – worshipping none but Allah, may He be glorified. (“Propagating the Correct,” 2014).

In keeping with this stated motivation, the article goes on to detail a seminar which was held just days before the publishing. “I’m happy to inform you that we now have 45 imams who’ve participated with us in the seminar, all of whom will be giving bay’ah (allegiance) within

the next few days, insha'allah (if God wills)," a quote box on the side of the second page reads (Propagating the Correct, 2014). From the article, the reader will find that seminars such as this one are based on a new book called "The Essence of Islam: Tawheed (the Oneness of Allah) and the Message." In essence, such seminars are meant to educate new imams (Islamic leaders) and khateebis to teach and lead the people according to the religious doctrine of the Islamic State. The article continues by answering potential questions that readers might have such as: What kind of work will they [attendees] do after graduating from the seminar? Who is responsible for funding the mosques, and the salaries of the teachers and khateebis? When will the third seminar take place? The authors do not want the reader to take their word for it that the seminar was beneficial and of great spiritual value; a quote sits next to the article, taken from an anonymous sheikh who attended the religious seminar: I will sum up the benefit with just a few words: "I feel like someone who has come out of darkness into light, out of fire into Jannah (paradise), and out of kufr (disbelief, blasphemy) into imaan (belief)" (Propagating the Correct, 2014).

The second article in the magazine seeks to put forth the image the Islamic State cares about the welfare of the people of Iraq and consists largely of an interview with Abu Salih Al-Ansari, "the head of the [newly created] Consumer Protection Office" ("Propagating the Correct," 2014). It starts off,

Caring for the residents of Wilayat Ar-Raqqah is a goal of the Islamic State, and because of this, the Islamic State sought to open service offices all over the wilayah through an Islamic services committee comprised of multiple departments, among which is the Consumer Protection Office." (Propagating the Correct, 2014).

For further the effect, the article contains photographs of ISIS workers completing bookkeeping operations, as well as of inspectors in white robes conducting physical

investigations. According to the interview, these inspectors are meant to make sure that no spoiled foods are being sold at market, slaughterhouses are free of “harmful substances,” and that everything proceeds in according to the edicts of Islam. “We will soon be holding a seminar, bi idhnillah, to teach the proper Islamic method of slaughter,” Al-Ansari adds (“Propagating the Correct,” 2014, p. 5). Undoubtedly, checks for “harmful substances” at market would include the prohibition of things like alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, and Al-Ansari (2014) says that there will be “surprise inspections on a daily basis at varying times” (p. 5). To the outside reader, it may become quickly obvious that this type of propaganda is meant to present a positive image of health and welfare, when in fact ISIS is making way for an institutionalized way to control each facet of everyday life according to its own interpretation of Shariah (Islamic) law.

The effort to put forth a positive face floods into the second issue of *Islamic State Report* as well, which primarily focuses on the giving of “Zakah” (also known as Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam), as well as attempting to put good light on the new IS police which patrol Ar-Raqqa. It consists mainly of captions next to pictures of workers operating John Deer harvesters, and piles of bags of food alleged to be donated to the poor and needy. The first caption, set against a backdrop of bags of food, reads, “The residents of some of the villages voluntarily gathered the Zakah and piled it up in front of the masjids of their respective villages and invited the Zakah committees to come and collect it” (Farmers Reap, 2014, p. 1). Further down, however, is a picture captioned “Informing the Community: At the start of the season, land owners were informed of the obligation to pay Zakah, which would be collected by the Islamic State” (Farmers Reap, 2014, p. 3). The impression is intended to be given that since ISIS control, members of the community have been eagerly volunteering to donate their crops according to Islamic law, but it is no surprise that the civilian populace would give up its

earnings to a heavily armed militia known for brutally killing all opposition. There is also little outside confirmation that all of this Zakah is actually going to the people it is claimed to be meant for, rather than to ISIS fighters.

The second issue of *Islamic State Report* does not stay on the topic of food aid for long. The last third of the magazine issue seeks to transform the image of the IS police force in Raqqa from one of conquerors and occupiers to that of protectors and insurers of justice. The plight of enslaved and murdered Shia Muslim, Christian, and other minorities at the hands of the Islamic State is nowhere to be seen, instead replaced with pleasant sounding descriptions such as the following:

They [Islamic police] break up disputes and return the rights of the people back to them, so no one who's oppressive is free to behave arrogantly and no one who's oppressed feels helpless. They view everyone equally, like the teeth of a comb, with no difference between rich and poor, strong and weak. Everyone will have their rights returned to them, and anyone oppressed will have their complaint answered. The people are confident in their ability to show justice, and turn to them for help after Allah. (Farmers Reap, 2014, p. 5).

It is incredibly ironic that an organization known to be enforcing the selling of captured young women and children as sex slaves would write such an article about itself; the description very well describes the opposite of reports flowing out of the region (Nebhay, 2015). Not only is reality on the ground a very twisted version of ISIS reports, but the UN has now received reports that "children, especially children who are mentally challenged... have been used as suicide bombers, most probably without them even understanding" (Nebhay, 2015). In light of

these daily events, it would be almost laughable to read such statements about equality and justice as the one above, were not the situation so grim.

**Dabiq.** *Dabiq* is a far more fleshed out and informative example of ISIS propaganda in digital magazine format. It was given its name after a physical location which bears the same name. According to the introduction in the first issue, “The Return of the Khilafah,”

This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq. (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 4)

The magazine is standardized, with each issue containing “photo reports, current events, and informative articles on matters related to the Islamic State” (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 3). It is meant to be a final product based on the previous *Islamic State Report*, and runs about forty to fifty pages, rather than the previous six to eight. The same style is maintained as before, with high definition photos taking up sizeable portions of each page. However, *Dabiq* contains much more detailed and lengthy articles, rather than just interviews and short descriptions captioned next to photos.

A noticeable aspect of *Dabiq* are the recurring sections in each issue which deal with theology. These sections usually coincide with a green background, and although sometimes the articles are more political than religious, there is never a separation of the two in terms of practical application. To give an example of the kinds of articles these sections contain, the first issue of *Dabiq* features a ten page article titled “The Concept of Imamah (Leadership) is from the Millah (Path) of Ibrahim (Abraham)” (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 20-29). This article focuses on using the traditional Islamic stories of Abraham to spin the concept behind the

Islamic State's version of righteousness, stating that part of Abraham's gift of leadership was that his descendants would also share in that position of leadership in the world. But, says the article, "Allah informed him of a principle condition that must be present in anyone assuming this position after him. {[Allah] said, 'My covenant does not include the wrongdoers.'}" (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 23). From this point, the article goes on to teach how religious leadership is inseparable from political leadership, thus fitting in with ISIS' goal of reestablishing an Islamic Caliphate. It also attempts to justify the killing of Muslims who go against this new leadership as "apostates," saying,

We will continue to obey the imam as long as he orders us to obey Ar-Rahman (the Most Merciful). But if he orders us to disobey Allah, then we won't obey those orders.

Likewise, we will strike the neck of anyone – whoever he may be – that attempts to usurp his leadership. (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 29)

Multiple issues and articles from *Dabiq* reinforce ISIS' proposed vision of a world with no moral "gray zone" or "freedom of choice" in the realm of religion. The main article from Issue 2, "It's Either the Islamic State or the Flood," uses the story of Nuh (Noah) to make its point. It lambasts both Islamic scholars and religious teachers from the other two Judeo-Christian faiths who teach that "no one has the right, regardless of whom he may be, to impose any creed or set of morals on anyone else even if that creed or set of morals is the truth revealed by Allah (God)" (The Flood, 2014, p. 5). Its author goes on to say that "every time [religious] choice is allowed it will result in misguidance, either in the present or in the future" (The Flood, 2014, p. 5). The belief that religious scriptures are unquestionably correct and must be followed unanimously by all in society is central. Also,



the da'wah of Prophet Nūh ('alayhis-salām) followed a policy from the very beginning that was completely opposed to the methodology of choice. In fact, it was characterized in contrast to this by a frank, early warning of the consequence of deviation and opposition to the truth. (The Flood, 2014, p. 6)

“It’s Either the Islamic State or the Flood” also questions the view that religious change must always be peaceful, containing an entire section labeled, “The Flood is a Refutation of the Pacifists (p. 9). This section argues that the flood was a physical punishment wrought in this life in addition to the flames of hell in the afterlife, and that it stands as an example that using force and fear tactics on wrongdoers is a perfectly legitimate way to scare the others still living into turning towards the “correct” path found in Islam.

This theme of violence being used to spread religion is also found blatantly expressed in an Issue 7 article named “Islam is the Religion of the Sword Not Pacifism” (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 20). It directly attacks the mantra “Islam is the religion of peace” with the assertion that “Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindīq (heretic) would argue otherwise” (p. 20). To support this, it quotes that Alī Ibn Abī Tālib, Muhammad’s cousin and son in law, said

Allah’s Messenger (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) was sent with four swords: a sword for the mushrikīn, {And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the mushrikīn wherever you find them} [At-Tawbah: 5], a sword for Ahlul-Kitāb, {Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Book – [fight them] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled} [At-Tawbah: 29]. (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 20-21)

Likewise, such an enthusiastic view of violence means that the authors of *Dabiq* do not shy away from portraying violent and grisly photos in their magazine issues. In addition to featuring pictures of ISIS fighters in combat, Al Hayat authors make sure to show pictures of killed or maimed civilians as victims of the Assad government, Iraqi, US, and coalition forces. A particular focus on young children is made in order to elicit an emotional response. Emphasis is habitually made on how ISIS' enemies target civilians, with pictures captioned by text explaining how ISIS retaliated against military targets instead.

One of the most profound recurring sections throughout all issues of *Dabiq* surveyed for this paper is a section titled "The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy." This section is an example of how ISIS attempts to put itself on a pedestal using words quoted from western leaders such as Senator John McCain, President Barack Obama, former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, and Benjamin Netanyahu. The first issue, published in conjunction with ISIS' declaration of a new caliphate, strives to add legitimacy to that declaration in its "Words of the Enemy" section, supporting the announcement with quotes from Douglas A. Ollivant and Brian Fishman's article, "The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (2014). Quotes include small excerpts like "The group [IS] does not have safe haven within a state. It is a de facto state that is a safe haven" (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 33), and

ISIS no longer exists in small cells that can be neutralized by missiles or small groups of commandos. It is now a real, if nascent and unrecognized, state actor – more akin in an organization and power to the Taliban of the late 1990s than Al Qaeda.

In the sixth issue of *Dabiq*, "The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy" features an excerpt from former US Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, who allegedly was asked in an

interview, “The question is do we have the will and the capacity to influence the events as we used to?” (Al-Qaidah of Waziristan, 2014, p. 57) He is quoted:

I think it isn't so much the will, I don't think. I think our capacity is different because the threats and the challenges are far more diffuse and varied. I talked about asymmetric threats. I mean the sophistication of ISIL – just take that for a moment. We've never seen an organization like ISIL that is so well-organized, so well-trained, so well-funded, so strategic, so brutal, so completely ruthless. We've never seen anything quite like that in one institution. Then they blend in ideology which will eventually lose, we get that, and social media. The sophistication of their social media program is something that we've never seen before. You blend all of that together, that is an incredibly powerful new threat. So we're adjusting to this and we're trying to – we can't do it alone. (Al-Qaidah of Waziristan, 2014, p. 57)

Similarly, issue seven features a quote from British journalist and “crusader” Patrick Cockburn, taken from his article “Isis hostage crisis: Militant group stands strong as its numerous enemies fail to find a common plan to defeat it” (2015). *Dabiq* quotes Cockburn:

Isis is surviving attempts to defeat it and holds about the same amount of territory in Iraq and Syria – an area larger than Great Britain – as it did at the end of its blitzkrieg offensives last year. Its enemies are numerous, but disunited and without a common plan. Neither the Iraqi nor the Syrian armies, its chief military opponents, are strong enough to over-run the jihadi state. (From *Hypocrisy*, 2015, p. 52)

What is important to note here is that ISIS has been making a concerted effort not only to elevate itself through the comments of important western leaders and spokespeople, but is also very aware of how the rest of the world perceives it. It also quickly becomes evident that the

organization continues to act with no apparent concern for those perceptions. Each insult it receives from the outside world, it either turns around towards its enemies in order to unveil their hypocrisy, or self-justifies by reasoning through the lense of religious dogma.

**Pamphlets.** Hard-copy propaganda extends outside the realm of the *Islamic State Report*, *Dabiq*, and other similar magazines and newspapers. In August of 2014, supporters of ISIS in London are reported to have handed out leaflets and fliers pushing for all Muslims in the area to move to the areas in Iraq and Syria controlled by the organization. Titled “The Khilafah Has Been Reestablished,” these fliers quoted Quran 24:55 as a motivation to do so, with some claiming that “abandonment of Shariah” and “manmade law” were the cause of the fall of the original Caliphate in 1924, but its reestablishment in 2014 is cause for a new call to unification of Muslims worldwide. According to the New York Daily News, various passerby were also verbally threatened by the people handing out the pamphlets, with one allegedly being told she was one of the “kuffar (kufr; nonbelievers)” and “should be killed like those Christians and Muslims in Iraq” (Edelman, 2014). This shows that the realm of ISIS-related media and propaganda is not limited to the online world, but has begun taking small steps in the direction of face-to-face interaction in countries outside of Iraq and Syria as well, including in the streets of western countries like the United Kingdom.

### **Video**

While the production and use of propaganda videos very much coincides with and is spread through social media tools such as YouTube and Twitter, it is such a big part of ISIS’ media campaign that it very much deserves its own segment in this paper. Some of their most well known videos include Abu Bakr’s declaration of a new Caliphate in July 2014, American Journalist Stephen Sotloff’s beheading the following September, and a series called

“Mujatweets” (Barrett, 2014, p. 51-55). Others include an hour long documentary called “The Flames of War” aimed at intimidating the West, as well as a twenty-minute video leading up to the execution of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh. Another series of videos which have been widely viewed in the West were produced by Al Hayat and made use of captured British journalist John Cantlie. While the videos produced and shared by ISIS are many and increase weekly, perhaps the best examples to examine in detail are “The Flames of War,” the video featuring the immolation of al-Kasasbeh, and the John Cantlie videos.

**The Flames of War.** “The Flames of War” is one of the very biggest Al Hayat video productions. Produced in September 2014, this video made full use of an anonymous narrator, who because of his flawless English helped make the video a huge talking piece and subject in western media. The video carries many of the same themes as Al Hayat’s *Dabiq* magazine, but makes them much more obvious. It consists almost solely of war footage, with background shots, dramatic narration, and excerpts taken from outside media sources to fill in gaps (Mauro, 2014).

The film starts with a brief intro to the plight of the group ISIS against their enemies, claiming, “You are with us, or against us,” and then featuring a video recording of former US President George W. Bush saying the same. It also shows an excerpt from Bush’s famous “mission accomplished” speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln during the Iraq War, but then goes on to claim, “They lied: the flames of war were only beginning to intensify” (Mauro, 2014). This theme that “the flames of war have only just begun” continues to be emphasized by the narrator throughout the video. But before the main part of the video begins, the stage is also set by a segment which talks about the many Muslims who have fallen away from the correct Islamic faith, with special emphasis on scolding those who say or believe that physical jihad is not a necessary part of the religion.

The first main segment follows a group of fighters in their battle to take over a Syrian air base. Each step in the takeover is recorded and narrated, including reconnaissance, digging of trenches, covering of advancing troops with artillery, the incapacitation of enemy tanks via use of shoulder-fired armaments, and the capture of a radar station. The narrator insists that the mujahedeen of ISIS are different from their enemies, in that they fight not for earthly gain, but for heavenly rewards. Nevertheless, loot and war booty taken in the aftermath of the fighting are interpreted to be Allah's reward. The filmmakers would also like the viewer to believe that their victories against superior enemies on multiple fronts are a result and sign of Allah's favor upon the Islamic State. Several scenes are shown where fighters advance on foot right up to enemy tanks. The tank crews try to abandon their vehicles, but get shot on their way out. The narrator dramatically says,

Allah is with his believers, and it is he who directs the rpg grenade, punishing the enemy with the hands of the mujahedeen... The tank hunters, equipped only with hand held rockets and IEDs, represent the epitome of sacrifice... They are the stallions of life... (Mauro, 2014).

Like in other propaganda material, "Flames of War" portrays ISIS' fight as one of "good versus evil," where the deaths of its fighters are not a setback, but are rather rewarded with eternal paradise as a reward. To fight such a war is also to do penance for wrongs committed against the Creator, as the narrator explains,

In the heat of such fierce battles one recalls his sins and his need for forgiveness, so he keenly pursues the noblest of deaths in the most trying of circumstances. Facing down the brunt of the enemy's strength, he and his brothers firmly standing their ground; the best of the best, in search of the greatest of rewards... What was on display for the world to

witness was that mujahedeen of the Islamic State would only accept victory or Shahada. (Mauro, 2014)

Both friendly, enemy, and civilian deaths are portrayed with all of their gruesomeness. One scene is particularly telling of the ISIS psyche. When one of the ISIS fighters is shot, the others do not stop to help him, but continue in their advance across a field in the background towards their objective. The cameraman likewise does not help, but films the man as he slowly dies. The narrator portrays his death as glorious; you are watching as his soul goes to a better place. In several other instances, ISIS fighters are shown approaching and executing wounded enemy soldiers with gunshots to the head, as the cameraman films from only a few feet behind.

After the first military victory portrayed in “Flames of War,” the video attempts to show how grateful the surrounding civilian population is to finally be “liberated” by the Islamic State. Like in certain articles from *Dabiq*, it shows them welcoming the fighters into their towns and villages, and requisitioning food for the people. And like Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, it denounces as apostates the many Islamic leaders around the world who came on television to be interviewed and “spread lies” about the Islamic State. To provide an example, it shows a video clip of Saudi cleric Saad al-Shithri saying of ISIS,

Any scholar who says that this organization is from the khawarij is mistaken. This organization is atheist, and its members are heretics. They wage war against Allah and His Messenger. They do not believe in Allah as lord, and they do not believe in Islam as a religion, and they do not believe in Muhammad (sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) as a prophet and messenger. Their disbelief is more severe than the disbelief of the Jews and Christians. (Mauro, 2014)

The narrator claims that lies such as these have been made to “justify” the aggression by “apostate” Muslims against the Islamic State. But all opposition to ISIS in the land of Sham has proven pointless, he says. Seemingly to demonstrate this fact, the video goes on to show victories against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), Syrian, and Iraqi forces. A close range firefight against “Safawi” (Shia) soldiers is shown, with only about thirty feet separating both sides. The opposition wears body armor and is supported by armored troop carriers, but quickly breaks and flees from the ISIS fighters. As they flee, ISIS fighters launch RPGs at the retreating vehicles. “Despite having American weaponry and armor at their disposal, the Safawis were scared to meet death and did not have the nerve to continue the fight. They turned back on their heels, fleeing like the cowards they are,” the narrator says. The video switches to the first-person view of a fighter, who runs up to a wounded soldier lying on the ground and shoots him in the head with his pistol. In a challenge to the claims of Saad al- Shithri, an anonymous imam of the Islamic State is heard saying during this footage:

You are allies of Allah. You wage war against his enemies and you fight in His path. He loves you and you love Him, whereas they fight in the path of the taghut (rebellion) and are allied to the taghut. Allah helps and supports you and grants you victory, whereas they are helped and supported by America and Iran. What a difference between the two. Allah is our protector and they have no protector.

This is yet another instance of proof that ISIS fights from strongly held beliefs and religious ideology. At another point in the video after a successful night ambush against an Iraqi convoy, one especially emotional ISIS fighter is shown kneeling on the ground crying in thankfulness. “Praise be to You, O Allah. O Lord, O Lord, strengthen us against them, O Lord of creation,” he is translated as saying. “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of creation (sobbing), praise



and thanks be to You, O Allah. Praise and thanks be to You, O strong and powerful One, O Allah.”

Probably the most iconic part of “Flames of War” is its ending scene showing the aftermath of the capture of the 17<sup>th</sup> Division base in Syria near al Raqqa. Several captured Syrian soldiers are shown digging in a large ditch, and viewers are led to believe that they are digging their own graves, just a few hundred meters from some towering apartment buildings nearby. Before their executions, one soldier who is digging is filmed as he gives a very lengthy statement, saying,

With regards to Bashar (al-Assad), may Allah take revenge on him and do to his children as he has done to us. Today we’re digging our graves with our own hands. The Islamic State captured us while we were fleeing from the 17<sup>th</sup> Division base. We were serving under Bashar. Bashar has abandoned us. Bashar is nowhere in sight. Bashar is despicable. A despicable man, and the son of a despicable man. Right now we’re digging our graves with our own hands. Our fate is to be slaughtered. Why? Weren’t we serving under him? But to [the] regime’s army we’re just numbers. We’re just numbers. To the regime’s army we’re just dogs. The officers fled. The officers fled and left the soldiers here. To dig here and to die here. To dig their graves here with their own hands. May Allah take revenge on you, Bashar... I advise... to get... out of the army as quickly as possible. As quickly as possible. Because it’s as if Allah has blessed the Islamic State. They captured the 17<sup>th</sup> Division base in a matter of seconds... Even though there were 800 of us, and they only numbered in the dozens.... Like ten or twenty or thirty of them captured the base when it had 800 soldiers. 800 soldiers. The Free Syrian Army couldn’t capture it. No

one was able to capture the base... I advise all of the families of the soldiers to get their sons out of Bashar's army. (Mauro, 2014)

While we do not know the actual events of the taking of the 17<sup>th</sup> Division base in detail, we do know that the filming of such a speech as the one above makes for a very strong propaganda piece meant to intimidate ISIS' enemies. To make it even more dramatic, the narrator is shown reemphasizing the theme that "the fighting/war has just begun" before taking part in a mass execution of the prisoners who had just been filmed digging. Their bodies roll down into the ditch, and "Flames of War" ends with a challenge to America.

**The execution of Lt. al-Kaseasbeh.** Besides "Flames of War," the execution video featuring the burning of captured Jordanian pilot Lt. al-Kaseasbeh is one of the most professionally orchestrated of propaganda films produced by ISIS. Lasting twenty two minutes long, it is heavily edited using computer software and video effects, so much so that it looks like it was produced for something akin to a multi-million dollar budget Hollywood spy film. The beginning and the end closely follow the themes seen at the same parts of "Flames of War," even though the central plot is different.

For example, the first few minutes consist of a wide range of video excerpts to prove al-Kaseasbeh's guilt as a war criminal. A piece from a video interview with Jordan's King Abdullah shows him saying,

The chief of staff and my brother stepped forward and said to all the pilots, listen there are four strikes against ISIS, we are looking for volunteers, so anybody who wants to volunteer, please step forward. Every single pilot raised his hand and stepped forward. (Fox News, 2015)

Still more footage shows Abdullah interacting with western leaders like President Obama, as further proof of Jordan's alliance with the kafir. In a public political speech, he is shown also saying, "I hope that there will be a global call to action to support countries like my own, at the forefront of the fight" (Fox News, 2015).

The next ten minutes consist of footage of Lt. al-Kaseasbeh sharing coalition military information with his captors, his orange prison jumpsuit standing out against a black background. The information shared includes the naming of Arab states allied with the United States and participating in the bombing of ISIS, as well as the various aircraft used by each of those countries. After confessing to his participation in airstrikes against ISIS, gruesome photographs are shown of dead and wounded civilians, particularly women and children. This footage is accompanied by audio recording of a baby wailing inconsolably, with the intent of making the viewer feel uncomfortable. Video footage is also shown of emergency crews extracting wounded civilians from collapsed buildings and rubble, and although there is no proof these events coincided with al-Kaseasbeh's bombing mission specifically, it is implied that he is at least responsible for events similar to the ones shown.

Finally, leading up to his execution, Lt. al-Kaseasbeh is shown walking through a bombed out area surveying the aftermath of his (implied) work. Well-equipped and identically dressed ISIS militiamen stand guard on each side of the street, silently watching him walk by. The whole scene was specifically set up ahead of time for this propaganda video. "Flashbacks" switch between footage of an anonymous fighter pilot in his cockpit, interspersed with more scenes of injured civilians. Every aspect is meant specifically to implicate Lt. al-Kaseasbeh as a war criminal, before finally showing him meet his grisly fate of being burned alive in a large, square steel cage.

**British photojournalist John Cantlie.** Another noteworthy effort in video propaganda by Al Hayat is a series of video reports by photojournalist John Cantlie. Captured by ISIS in Syria in November, he has since been used by the group in a “Lend Me Your Ears” video series in which he was made to talk about the “good deeds” and “normalcy” of ISIS operations on the ground in various cities like Mosul, Kobani, and Aleppo, in addition to the reports he was made to make from confinement. (Barrett, 2014, p. 57). Cantlie’s situation is truly a tragic one. According to freed Spanish journalist Javier Espinosa, who at one point was held prisoner with both Cantlie and the now deceased James Foley, Mr. Cantlie has tried unsuccessfully to escape his ISIS captors at least twice thus far, after which both he and Foley were horribly beaten and water boarded for weeks. During the second escape attempt, Foley was already through a window and waiting for Cantlie to follow when Cantlie was caught. Rather than leaving to escape by himself, Foley let himself be recaptured, allegedly telling Espinosa, “I couldn’t leave John on his own” (Culbertson, 2015). On August 19, 2014, James Foley was executed.

The “Lend Me Your Ears” propaganda series began late 2014, with the earlier interviews of John Cantlie taken with him obviously still in confinement and wearing orange prisoner clothes similar to the ones in which Foley, Sotloff, and al-Kaseasbeh were executed in. In these videos, it is very obvious that everything is scripted, both from the way in which Foley speaks, as well as from how he looks straight behind the cameraman for the entire duration of the videos. In the fourth episode of “Lend Me Your Ears,” focuses on the abandonment of Foley of himself and other British and American prisoners by their governments, as well as on emphasizing the “warmongering” of western media and governments. For example, Foley says,

Way back on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August when Obama pressed the button on US airstrikes over Iraq, he cited Islamic State’s attacks on Yazidis, a religious minority, as the reason for

billion dollar intervention using aircraft carriers and F-18 hornets. But since when has America cared about the fate of a minority in Muslim lands? Modern history is sadly littered with examples of religious minorities being crushed, and neither the US nor anyone else said a thing... Obama is terribly busy insisting US ground troops won't be going back into Iraq, but even the Pentagon admits air strikes are a stopgap military measure that will not disrupt Islamic State activities. Meanwhile, America puts 1,200 troops into Baghdad to protect their embassy and the airport. Surely sounds like troops on the ground to me. It's not too hard to see where this is headed. Once again the western media are drip-feeding the public until, what a surprise, we are embroiled in a full-scale war. (War on Islamic State, 2014)

But while these early videos consist more of criticism of the West, later ones in the series focus more on presenting the rule of ISIS in the areas it controls as a legitimate one, where, in contrast to what western media portrays, the civilian populace is getting along as good as ever. These later episodes of "Lend Me Your Ears" have also garnered more attention than the first ones, as Foley no longer appears in his orange prison garb, but in civilian clothes, made to look as if he is touring the area freely. In one such episode, Cantlie is filmed reporting from the "top of the world" in the city of Mosul, Iraq. In the video, it is emphasized how Mosul is a Sunni province "as much of Iraq used to be before the American-led invasions and pro-Iranian governments changed the political map" (Canale 25 News, 2015). It is an unapologetic effort to counter global criticism of ISIS. Claims that trash lies uncollected, there is limited electricity, and that prices for basic items have skyrocketed are refuted, as Cantlie walks through one of the central marketplaces in the city. One intermittent clip shows Cantlie buying candy from a street shop while his narration continues in the background. "I am reminded of one quote from Saudi-

owned television channel Al-Arabia,” Cantlie states, “[which] says the people of Mosul are living in very hard conditions, [and] it is very difficult. I look around, and really, that doesn’t seem to be the case at all” (Canale 25 News, 2015).

This episode continues to try to provide a sense of legitimacy to ISIS oversight of the city by taking Cantlie on a tour of the main city hospital. Interestingly, although he says he will interview the doctors and nurses at the hospital, none are seen the entire time. Only two young children are filmed, and only one section of the hospital is visited for this part. In the video, Cantlie stresses,

The room we are about go into is for children with psychiatric problems as a direct result of bombs and explosions falling from above... Now I have to talk quite quietly, because these kids are so... very adverse to loud noises because of the explosions. But as you can see, they’re very young, and their mothers are here, and they’re clearly not happy, but despite all this, there is plenty of electricity. We spoke to one of the doctors earlier, and he told us they are getting the medicines they need. So despite the bombs that are raining down – and we’re told that just two days ago an ambulance was hit by a bomb, or an aircraft – despite these things, the doctors are getting what they need, and the Islamic State is prevailing. They can take it. (Canale 25 News, 2015)

He stutters quite a bit during the paragraph above, and it is unknown whether this is due simply to trying to find the right words, or due to unsettled mind. However, there is quite an amount of emphasis placed on the words “bombs,” “aircraft,” “explosions,” and “falling from above,” insinuating that the children’s’ conditions are a sole result of US and allied air bombings.

As in the *Islamic State Report*, this video episode also makes an effort to give a good picture of the ISIS police patrolling the streets of Mosul. Cantlie points out that in both 2004 and 2014, police forces in Mosul abandoned their posts in the face of danger, whereas the IS police have a “firm” control of the city. He goes on to repeat, “There’s really very little crime being committed, from what I can see. It’s just people going about their business, and nothing like the police before who would run at the slightest sign of trouble” (Canale 25 News, 2015).

The latest episode of “Lend Me Your Ears” is particularly worrisome, as Cantlie says it will be the “last of this series” (Today Islam, 2015). After the executions of many other captured journalists like Foley and Sotloff, one can only wonder if Cantlie’s time is also running out. But the rest of the video runs with the same ideas as the last one mentioned, this time in Aleppo (also known as Halab), Syria. Al Hayat this time makes no effort to make Aleppo seem like a “normal” city, but heavily emphasizes that many of the people previously living in it have fled to other areas due to the heavy fighting. This is blamed on the “indiscriminate bombing” of the Assad Air Force, as well as of America. But the Islamic State is praised yet again by Cantlie in this video, who says near the beginning, “The advance and stretch of the Islamic state is in fact remarkable, and breathtaking. Driving into Halab, one can truly appreciate firsthand the large swathes of territory liberated and in control by the mujahedeen” (Today Islam, 2015). Like in the previously explored video, the economy and market prices are praised, in contrast to the admission only minutes ago that much of the city had emptied.

At one point, Cantlie points out an American drone circling high above. The video cuts to a location in a marketplace which was allegedly just recently hit by Assad’s bombs. He says, “we’re in the middle here of a market which is a completely civilian area, and there has just been a large bomb strike on that building behind me... The Islamic State fire brigade

are here trying to clear up the mess, but there is absolute pandemonium. And all of this follows a drone which we saw five minutes ago, and then Assad's air force comes in and drops bombs on the market. Now as far as I know, the Syrian air force does not have drones. That must have been an American drone, but that was definitely Assad's bomb dropping here on the market. So, what's going on? Someone is working with someone around here to drop bombs. Look around! It's smashed there! It's smashed there! The people are absolutely terrified from bombs being dropped by Assad's aircraft, but with American drones flying overhead. OK, we've been told we've got to get out of this area. Because that drone's in the sky they might hit this area again, so we've got to get out of here. Everyone's been told to clear the streets, so we've got to go. Come on, let's go.

(Today Islam, 2015)

But per usual, Al Hayat seeks to portray a sense of calm in the city, as if such destructive scenes do not at all interfere with the daily activities of those living there. It shows scenes of the construction of new buildings and homes using expensive stone, as well as of ISIS fighters gathering around for afternoon tea. It then switches to the topic of Sharia law, "one of the absolute principles for why they [ISIS] fight" (Today Islam, 2015). The video does not shy away from presenting the realities of the harsh penalties enacted in Sharia. Rather, it boasts that they are much more simple than the justice system of the West. Cantlie narrates,

For example, if you are convicted of robbery, with the correct number of witnesses, and such forth, you have your hand cut off. Sounds harsh, but you're not going to commit the same crime again, and it will dissuade others from doing the same. (Today Islam, 2015)

Al Hayat also makes the claim in this video that ISIS is protecting the city against outside aggression, with Cantlie saying,



As we saw with the attack on the market here, with US drones flying overhead and very possibly coordinating the bomb attack on the market itself, it is the West who are acting aggressively. The people of Halab just want to get on with their lives in peace, and that is more possible now since the Islamic State took over. (Today Islam, 2015)

What we see here is the result of several themes that run throughout not just the “Lend Me Your Ears” series, but throughout most of ISIS propaganda as a whole. But what will be John Cantlie’s fate at the hands of ISIS in the next few months? Will they continue to use him in some of their media productions as they have been, or is their use for him coming to an end? The situation continues to be a matter of interest to both his family and many British and Americans.

### **Trends in ISIS Propaganda**

As seen from the examples just surveyed, the media and propaganda arm of ISIS is quite refined, and arguably has taken a step forward beyond other terrorist organizations like it in the areas of both violence and ambition. While a more lengthy research effort would uncover countless other media productions of the group, these provide some of the best primary sources for analyzing trends and themes common across all or most of their propaganda effort. How do these trends and themes in the media produced by ISIS compare with the ones seen earlier in al Qaeda? In addition, what are the ways in which these propaganda techniques are successful for ISIS, and how are they counterproductive?

### **Trends and Characteristics**

While many trends and characteristics may be found throughout ISIS media and propaganda, there are five main ones which are particularly apparent throughout the material surveyed in this paper, some of which closely mirror the themes earlier discussed in al Qaeda propaganda.

**Western education.** The first trend is that many of the writers and organizers behind ISIS propaganda have received western and/or foreign education outside of Southwest Asia. Good technical quality in media tool production and formatting alone are not enough to indicate this. But there are a variety of factors involved. First, many if not most of ISIS propaganda is produced either with clean English subtitles in the videos, or multiple versions of printed and electronic media are produced in multiple languages, as is the case with Al Hayat (Barrett, 2014, p. 55). In the case of online publications like the *Islamic State Report* and *Dabiq*, they are written in perfect English, meaning the authors not only have a grasp of the language, but have had extensive training in English grammar and writing, most probably in Western countries. In addition, some video productions are so heavily edited with graphical and video editing tools as to give more reason to support such a claim. “Flames of War” and the video featuring the execution of Jordanian pilot Lt. Kaseasbeh are prime examples. Ahmad Abousamra, an American-educated man, is a verified example of such a trend. According to the FBI, Abousamra “grew up in Stoughton [Massachusetts] and attended schools in the Boston area” (Valencia, 2014). Now, he is on its Most Wanted Terrorists List, and the FBI has very good reason to “believe Abousamra may be using his computer and social media skills to support ISIS” (Valencia, 2014). Prior to traveling overseas in search of terrorist training to fight the United States, Abousamra received a notable college education, making it onto the dean’s list at Northeastern University in Boston for his accomplishments in computer science (Coghlan, 2014). Then there is the example of the narrator for Al Hayat’s hour long production “Flames of War,” an unknown man who speaks perfect English. Finally, there is the fact that ISIS is making a continual effort to recruit western-educated Muslims to its cause, as is seen in the first issue of *Dabiq*:

The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory...

A call to all Muslim doctors, engineers, scholars, and specialists: Amirul-Mu'minin said: We make a special call to the scholars, fuqaha' (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields. (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 11)

ISIS is by no means the only terror organization to use Western-educated people in its media production. US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki produced the online magazine *Inspire* in English for al Qaeda in similar fashion to ISIS' magazines. Yet ISIS has many more repeat examples of this trend than other terror organizations.

**ISIS strives to portray both political and religious legitimacy.** A second trend is that ISIS continually strives to effect images of both political and religious legitimacy through its media. Politically, ISIS began its transformation to the so called "Islamic State" by spreading a video recording of Abu Bakr's announcement widely enough to be picked up by international news agencies (Barrett, 2014, p. 51). In most of its major propaganda video releases featuring prisoners, the prisoners are featured wearing orange jumpsuits. This includes the executions of Lt. al-Kaseasbeh, James Foley, Stephen Sotloff, Egyptian Coptic Christians, and Ethiopian Christians in Libya. John Cantlie was also seen wearing an orange jumpsuit during the initial episodes of the "Lend Me Your Ears" series. While the jumpsuits do serve a functional purpose, it is just as likely that they are being used to give the image that the prisoners are convicted criminals. The same is true of the dress used by ISIS fighters in execution photographs and

videos, with each one using carefully matching gear and clothing, usually in new condition. While the majority of ISIS fighters are not uniformly dressed in their day-to-day jihad, it is obvious that the organization is striving to create an “official” presence by shaping the image in which they are seen in key events in the media.

Political legitimacy is also sought to be portrayed at the local level. In the *Islamic State Report*, *Dabiq*, and “Flames of War,” there are parts dedicated to showing how the Islamic State is working with tribal leaders throughout Iraq and Syria. The first issue of *Dabiq* features such a section which focuses on Halab, and claims that ISIS is

returning rights and property to their rightful owners, pumping millions of dollars into services that are important to the Muslims... ensuring the availability of food products and commodities in the market, particularly bread, reducing crime rate, [and] flourishing relationship between the Islamic State and its citizens. (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 13)

Religious legitimacy is sought to be portrayed through a variety of ways across different sources of propaganda as well. ISIS especially emphasizes that it is enforcing Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam. Various sources also show that ISIS enforces daily prayer in the places it occupies, although this is less important strategically for them to show in their media than Zakat. Religious legitimacy is also portrayed through extensive quoting of Islamic scriptures and religious leaders, especially in magazine publications where an abundance of information is written. Stories and analogies using traditional figures from the Abrahamic religions are used as religious examples in *Al Hayat* articles, with both Abraham and Noah being used in the earliest issues of *Dabiq*. Even at times when ISIS’ enemies surrender, they will throw in scripture next to the corresponding article, with quotes like, “and Allah turns in forgiveness to whom he wills; and

Allah is knowing and wise” (The Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 49). Lastly, even when scripture is not directly quoted, many articles still include referral to religious ideas.

**The Islamic scriptures are used to support violence.** Closely related to the theme of religious legitimacy is the use of religious literature to support the level of violence currently employed by the organization. This is because a large amount of the scripture used is employed in a violent context, sometimes even when others might not interpret it in the same way. The story of Noah’s flood, for example, is used to justify earthly punishment for sins, as well as to reject the idea of pacifism. And as shown earlier, one of the most blatant examples comes from Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, in an article titled “Islam is the Religion of the Sword not Pacifism” (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 20). An article in another issue examines the hadith which states, “My provision was placed for me in the shade of my spear.” The article explains:

This hadith indicates that Allah did not send His messenger to endeavor to seek the dunya, nor to gather the dunya and its treasures, nor to strive to seek its causes, rather He sent him as a caller to His tawhid with the sword. What is implied by this is that he kills Allah’s enemies who refuse to accept tawhid, legitimizes the spilling of their blood and the taking of their wealth, and enslaves their women and children, and thereby his provision becomes what Allah has given him of spoils from the property of His enemy.

(The Failed Crusade, 2014, p. 10)

One incident which caught a large amount of condemnation from the entire world was the method of execution of Lt. al-Kaseasbeh, a brutal death by fire in which he was burned while still alive, then crushed in rubble from a bulldozer. Many Islamic scholars quoted Muhammad in opposition to the act, who said, “None should punish with fire except Allah.” But ISIS claims this to be a dishonest misinterpretation of the broader context of the verse, citing multiple

historical examples of early Muslim leaders who used fire as a tool for punishment, as well as quoting An-Nahl: 126 which says, “And if you punish an enemy, punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed” (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 7). These instances only touch the surface of the vast list of examples which can be gathered of ISIS’ use of Islamic scripture to justify violence.

**The rest of the world is immoral; the world is divided.** Following these themes lies the trend of portraying that the enemies of ISIS are immoral and their war is a holy jihad for the cause of Allah. While this one is not as explicitly stated as the previous two, it can be seen underlying many of the causes behind the motivations and ideology of ISIS. According to ISIS, “The world has divided into two camps... The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy” (Return of Khilafah, 2014, p. 10). There is a growing “extinction of the grayzone” (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 54). In addition, as shown earlier, many of the propaganda videos produced by Al Hayat repeatedly condemn secularism as a force of evil to be combated, with “Flames of War” claiming that the “secular” Iraqi forces fight for land and monetary reward, while the fighters of ISIS fight rather for holy conviction.

**Muslims against or indifferent to ISIS are labeled apostates.** Finally, a major theme found in both the ideology and propaganda campaign of ISIS is their need for labeling all Muslims who either condemn, criticize, or abstain from aligning with ISIS as heretics and apostates. This is seen in “Flames of War” when the narrator defends his organization from the criticisms of “heretic” Islamic leaders. It is also seen in the theological excerpts in written pieces such as Issue 7 of *Dabiq*, where it says, “Allah has revealed Islam to be the religion of the sword, and the evidence for this is so profuse that only a zindīq (heretic) would argue otherwise” (From Hypocrisy, 2015, p. 20). In fact, this particular issue is almost completely devoted to declaring

the apostasy of rival Imams, as well as to explaining the “correct” interpretations of Islamic scripture in ways which line up with ISIS’ ideology. Now, in addition to its antipathy toward groups like al Qaeda, ISIS is even waging jihad against the Taliban in Afghanistan, with Al-Bagdadi claiming that “Mullah Omar does not deserve a spiritual or political credibility” (Khaama Press, 2015).

### **Ways in which methods are successful**

So, do all of these themes and methods employed in propaganda production actually work out for ISIS? There are both long and short answers to this question. The short answer is that as stated before, the propaganda machine of ISIS has a “new level of sophistication in messaging,” while its “media efforts have effectively silenced most other jihadi channels, and have drowned out all efforts of the West to counter” (HusIck, 2014). The first and most important success a strong social media and online presence has seen is the organization’s abundance of jihadi recruits from around the world. According to a recent UN report, ISIS has gained a huge number of foreign recruits, many of them from Western countries. It was estimated in September 2014 that “only 2300 ISIS fighters were from foreign countries. In just a half year that number according to the UN has swelled apparently up to 25000, multiplying more than ten times” (Hagopian, 2015). A secondary and closely related success is that the extreme violence portrayed in ISIS media attracts the young and violent jihadi crowd that they want and need to fight their war (Pepitone, 2014). It also closely ties in with objectives seen in Milosevska’s research (2014). In classification of its model of behavior, ISIS falls into both the third and the fourth categories (Milosevska et al, 2014, p. 60). This means that the organization has a very heavy media-oriented strategy, while at the same holding a deep amount of hostility for foreign reporters, labeling them as “crusaders” the same as their home country’s leaders and

military members. Finally, ISIS' strong media front has gained it the notoriety it desires, although the image it seeks to project may differ slightly from the one which is seen by its enemies. This notoriety, while causing more enemies abroad, may be serving ISIS at home by appealing to anti-Western sentiment in the populace (Isis Uses Modern PR, 2014).

### **Ways in which methods are counterproductive**

While ISIS appears to be very successfully meeting its goal of attracting the attention of potential recruits from around the world, its form and model of propaganda can sometimes be a double edged sword. In particular, its glorification of extreme brutality has caused international uproar overseas as well as at the organization's borders, causing it to have enemies on all sides. Secondly, although for the most part the ISIS media machine is well organized, its decentralized nature sometimes leads to mistakes. Lastly, and of prime importance, the publication of troop movements and intentions helps American and allied intelligence agencies in their campaign to bomb ISIS targets on the ground.

**Brutality garners more US and foreign support for the fight against ISIS.** As stated earlier, ISIS' extreme brutality in its media campaign has led many other similar terrorist organizations to seek to disassociate themselves with the group. Notably, al Qaeda leadership has taken issue with the exorbitant amount of publicized executions and beheadings which fit into ISIS media and propaganda tactics (Coghlan, 2014). Now, even the Taliban is waging jihad against ISIS elements in Afghanistan (Khaama Press, 2015). In addition, multiple Arabic countries surrounding Iraq and Syria have redoubled their bombing efforts against ISIS. A particular example occurred with the immolation of Jordan's captured pilot. The entire country reacted with fury and indignation, with King Abdulla pledging a "relentless war" in response:



We are waging this war to protect our faith, our values and human principles, and our war for their sake will be relentless and will hit them in their own ground,” he said, and Jordan executed four ISIS prisoners soon after (Black, 2015).

Also as mentioned earlier, the majority of Arab public opinion is unfavorable towards ISIS, according to a 2014 Washington Institute poll conducted in Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, hinting that ISIS propaganda efforts there are not as positive for the organization as would be ideal for them (Parker, 2014).

**Decentralized nature of the ISIS media machine allows less control.** The decentralized nature of the ISIS media machine provides it with an advantage when facing the filtration systems which occur in most popular social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. But it also can lead to some confusion among the social media warriors upon whom the network depends. For example, evidence from communications on ISIS forums indicate that the original publication of the execution video of Steven Sotloff was posted completely by accident and got shared widely online before the organization learned of its mistake. It turns out the video had been planned for eventual release, but was leaked before the planned moment (Kaufman, 2014). But despite small disturbances such as these, analysts agree that while decentralized in this aspect, ISIS is still incredible adept at regulating itself.

Perhaps one of the more interesting vulnerabilities to a decentralized media machine is its ability to be hijacked by opposition. Just as ISIS supporters will sometimes “piggyback” onto trending Twitter hashtags, it is possible for others to do the same to ISIS. For example, “#IslamicStateMedia” was hijacked by a crude photo of someone urinating into a bucket labeled “ISIS,” with the slogan “The ISIS Bucket Challenge” emblazoned underneath. Another one said

“LET THE BATTLE BEGIN” and pictured photo-shopped “swine rockets” being shot at ISIS (Shiloach, 2015).

**Social media helps American and allied intelligence agencies find ISIS targets.**

Lastly, the large amount of information which ISIS provides about itself in its propaganda allows the United States and other allied intelligence agencies to pinpoint personnel and equipment locations for bombing. This means that for the time being, US government officials actually prefer that social media sites like Twitter not completely filter all ISIS posts. One reporter writes for Time magazine:

“There is some value to being able to track them on Twitter,” says William McCants, a former State Department senior adviser who directs the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution. McCants recalls that a U.S. intelligence official described the site as a “gold mine” of information about foreign-fighter networks, better than any clandestine sources. (Altman, 2014).

Because of modern tracking information gathered by many electronic devices and social media accounts, unwary fighters may also be giving their locations away and enabling US drones and aircraft to target them. This is particularly because of a trend to post tweets and live updates about battles in which they are currently taking part in, real time (Masi, 2014). Many of the issues from *Dabiq* feature information and updates on the group’s latest attacks and conquests, and in some cases reveal troop locations. ISIS also releases a private, quarterly report with even more exact information on its military escapades, with these ones being even more valuable for US intelligence agencies (Masi, 2014). Interestingly, the amount of photographs currently being spread online by ISIS are enough for civilian organizations to pinpoint their locations and make that information public. Masi (2014) reports,

the State Department did not respond to the International Business Times' request for comment on whether it monitors ISIS' online presence, but civilians have been doing so successfully. The crowd-funded journalism site Bellingcat appears to have done just that without vast intelligence and surveillance technology the U.S. Military has at its disposal... using only landmarks in videos; Panoramio, which extracts location metadata from digital images; and Flash Earth, a constantly updated service that compiles information from Google, Microsoft and other map providers.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the media and propaganda efforts of ISIS do fall into some of the classifications laid out in prior years for terrorism. However, both the wide array of platforms for their propaganda, and their extreme measures have brought ISIS' media machine to the forefront of terrorist propaganda. The organization has its differences with al Qaeda, and while the majority of its propaganda is spread through social media, it does publish online magazines as well as hard-copy pamphlets for distribution as well. Its video production quality greatly exceeds that of competing terrorist organizations, while at the same time also exceeding them in its portrayal of violence and extreme brutality. Many involved in ISIS' media production have received some form of western education. Most importantly, ISIS strives to portray legitimacy in both realms of politics and religion, and uses Islamic scripture as a tool to do so, portraying itself as a cause for righteousness against a world inhabited by kufr (nonbelievers) and Muslim apostates who are in need of theological correction.

Finally, the media techniques employed by ISIS are succeeding in gaining an increasing number of foreign recruits, yet arguably have some drawbacks to the organization as well. The world grows more united against ISIS day by day, and even some terrorist organizations with

similar ideologies to ISIS are in conflict with it. In addition, some of the tactics which make ISIS so successful at making an online presence come back to hurt it in the form of very real and damaging aerial strikes. What is apparent is that the propaganda efforts of ISIS are a very real presence both in social media and in international news, and will likely continue to be as long as the group continues to maintain a strong presence on the ground.

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