The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy

By Charlie Winter

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For men to plunge headlong into an undertaking of vast change, they must be intensely discontented yet not destitute, and they must have the feeling that by the possession of some potent doctrine, infallible leader or some new technique they have access to a source of irresistible power. They must also have an extravagant conception of the prospects and potentialities of the future. Finally, they must be wholly ignorant of the difficulties involved in their vast undertaking. Experience is a handicap.

Eric Hoffer, 1951

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Foreword

For too long, the immensity of Islamic State's propaganda machine has obscured a rational understanding of it. The organisation's media strategists are producing high-definition depictions of the most abhorrent brutality on an industrial scale, ensuring that jihadism is digitalised and brought firmly into the 21st century.   The days when we saw grainy video footage played on Al Jazeera and propaganda was limited to stagnant speeches made by terrorist leaders are long gone. Islamic State has revolutionised jihadist messaging, by jettisoning operational security in the pursuit of dynamism, so that it can produce propaganda that tells a story, exciting or appalling its viewers, depending on who they are.

This has not gone unnoticed, it is forever being discussed in the pages of our newspapers and on the screens of our televisions – 'high production value' and 'high definition' are the new buzzwords of today's terrorism. While they may be appropriate terms, they have stopped us from rationally assessing the organisation behind the glossy propaganda.

This report seeks to redress that situation, presenting the most extensive analysis of the organisation's propaganda strategy to date. It demonstrates that Islamic State's media operation is carefully calculated, with jihadist videographers producing bespoke content for a wide range of audiences. It shows that the group's brutality is a red herring; that the violence depicted is a result of the propagandists' desire to outrage hostile audiences abroad and gratify their supporters at home.

It is only after we have achieved an understanding of the motivations and objectives that drive the Islamic State media machine that we can begin to challenge it effectively. How, for example, can we be expected to develop a counter-narrative without knowing what narratives we are countering? How can we propose effective counter messaging strategies unless we understand what and how exactly the messages that we are countering are being disseminated, and to what purpose?

With hundreds of citizens from across the world travelling to join Islamic State's terrorist bastardisation of the 'caliphate', the situation has never been more critical. Extremist supporters of Islamic State have already carried out attacks in countries around the world, from North America to Australasia, and the threat of their intensification increases every day. It is imperative that we – practitioners, policymakers and publics – better understand just how the messages of indoctrination are delivered and hence what drives these individuals to waste life in the name of Islamic State's violent Islamist fantasy.

With this report, Quilliam's Senior Researcher on Transnational Jihadism, Charlie Winter, has made a most important contribution to the global effort to counter Islamic State. Through his systematic research – which, over the course of the 'caliphate's' first full year, involved daily monitoring of terrorist activity on both Arabic- and English-language social media – he has been able to critically assess the Islamic State media machine, both up close and from afar.

Through his assessment of Islamic State propaganda in aggregate, after his documenting of well over a thousand individual propaganda campaigns, Charlie has been able to distil its unprecedented jihadist brand into six key narratives: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopia. With these themes and their relative prevalence in mind, it was possible for him to determine which audiences Islamic State targets in each of its campaigns: active opponents, international publics, active members, potential recruits, disseminators, proselytizers and enlisters. Evidently, the Islamic State propagandists know their game.

This war cannot be won through military and political means alone; it is as much a war of information and propaganda as anything else and, currently, it is fatally imbalanced to the advantage of Islamic State.

What this report makes very clear is that we need to respond in kind – relying upon someone else to produce a panacea to it, a single counter-narrative that is universally appealing to all audiences, is a fruitless pursuit. If the international community is to effectively approach the Islamic State crisis, it must do so in a synchronised, comprehensive manner and revolutionise its approach to terrorist propaganda.

Whether it is by matching the approach that Islamic State use or the sheer quantity of the content they produce – an average of three videos and more than fifteen photographic reports are circulated per day – we must respond to 21st Century jihadism by ensuring that we too are operating in the same century.

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Executive Summary

The following report sheds light on the strategic motivations of, and implications to, Islamic State's media operation. By analysing the organisation's propaganda output over the twelve months that followed its 'caliphate' declaration in June 2014, it has been possible to dismantle the brand into its constituent narratives and the various target audiences into their composite parts.

In doing so, the report demystifies the Islamic State propaganda machine and cuts through much of the unhelpful rhetoric surrounding it. By applying Jacques Ellul's theoretical framework to Islamic State's official messaging, this paper unambiguously demonstrates that, with all its complexity and gloss, the organisation's propaganda is not singularly responsible for radicalising individuals, let alone their joining the jihadist cause abroad or carrying out attacks at home. That being said, it does catalyse the Islamist extremist's passage from tacit supporter to active member. However, this is just one of the many functions of Islamic State's propaganda – as the following report demonstrates, it is much more than a matter of inciting and intimidating.

From the following pages, ten key conclusions emerge:

1. For the international audience, the use of brutality by Islamic State is a red herring. While, it serves to warn against local dissent and gratify sympathisers, on an international level, its prevalence has fatally derailed mainstream understanding of the organisation and its appeal to its many thousands of foreign recruits.

2. Islamic State's propaganda has generated a comprehensive brand, one that offers an alternate way of living. Like any mass movement, it captures the imaginations of its potential recruits by offering both immediate change and the ability to transform their future in the long term.

3. This brand is composed of six non-discrete narratives – brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism – each of which is analysed in detail separately, and relation to, each other.

4. While brutality is easily the most prominent of these narratives in the West, utopianism is by far the most important narrative for Islamic State's propagandists; it is the organisation's utopian offer that is most alluring to new recruits. Unless we understand what makes up this 'utopia', any attempt to challenge the ideas is doomed to failure.

5. By outsourcing its propaganda dissemination, Islamic State has insulated itself from government-led schemes to censor its content. Its disseminators are, most of the time, self-appointed and have no official position in the organisation, virtual or otherwise. They receive no reward for their activism other than gratification from within the Islamic State echo chamber.

6. It is not just dissemination that Islamic State has outsourced. By saturating the online jihadist marketplace of ideas with official content, it also provides an abundance of raw material for 'jihobbyists' to produce their own unofficial propaganda. In doing so, the organisation is able to constantly direct the trajectory of its online narrative from afar and without direct involvement.

7. Islamic State's propagandists constantly create bespoke propagandistic material for a range of audiences. They are not just seeking to attract new supporters and intimidate enemies, but are also working to polarise international publics, sustain their organisation's global relevance (in jihadist and non-jihadist spheres) and present their enlisters with 'evidence' to convince potential recruits to become active members.

8. There is no such thing as a 'recruiter', in the traditional sense of the word. Recruitment to the Islamic State organisation involves a range of different actors and processes. First, one must be recruited to the cause. It is only then that an individual is actually enlisted. The 'recruiter to the cause' is not the same individual as the 'enlister to the organisation'.

9. Social media has emerged as this decade's 'radical mosque'. While radicalisation, for the most part begins offline, Islamic State, along with other groups, has nurtured a situation in which the curious are able to have direct contact with former or current fighters, hear first-hand accounts from the battlefield and swap logistical advice. In decades gone by, this was a function served by so-called 'radical mosques'. In the digital era, social media platforms are the space where this happens. Crucially, social media platforms are not the *reason* for radicalisation or recruitment, just as 'radical' mosques and bookshops were never the reason.

10. People are not radicalised by propaganda, nor are they recruited by it. There must always be an external human influencer to spark and sustain the radicalisation process. This

could be a friend, family-member or stranger. Whatever the case, exposure to Islamic State's propaganda alone is not the reason that someone becomes a supporter. What propaganda does do, though, is catalyse the individual's radicalisation and concentrate their already-held sympathies.

If we are to effectively counter Islamic State's media strategy – something which, at the time of writing, we are certainly failing at – we must first understand it. The propaganda behemoth can and must be broken down into its constituent parts; doing so facilitates a more nuanced, considered approach to the information war on Islamic State.

Unless we understand the strategy behind the organisation's media machine, misconceptions about what drives its supporters – be they potential migrants or potential domestic terrorists – will continue to flourish. It is imperative that the coalition formed to degrade and destroy Islamic State recognises that there is no 'Golden Fleece' solution to this problem. There is no one counter narrative, nor is there any one audience that needs targeting. The coalition's information war machine, though better funded and potentially more numerous, is dwarfed by that of Islamic State. Unless its information architecture is revolutionised, the international coalition will always lose the battle for ideas.

1. Introduction

Islamic State's precipitous rise has provoked a resurgence of mainstream interest in jihadist propaganda. Such a resurgence is to be expected – when a terrorist group deliberately creates fanfare over mass executions of unarmed men and boasts about enslaving women for sex, publics, policymakers and media organisations will naturally take interest. If the group in question also controls oil-rich territories that span across national borders, commands huge capital wealth and documents nearly all facets of its existence on high-definition cameras, it follows that this scrutiny will be particularly intense. Islamic State has captured the imagination of the international media like no terrorist group before it. This is no accident. It is the outcome of a branding strategy, delivered by the meticulously planned production of propaganda and cultivation of a uniquely challenging network of disseminators. Its messaging confounds Western attempts to understand the organisation as there has been nothing like it before.

Governments and journalists never fail to condemn Islamic State's atrocities; the continual upscaling of its violence is highlighted on an almost daily basis. However, the outrage that its propagandists augment, while wholly justified, has obscured our understanding of the group. Indeed, because of it, non-jihadist audiences across the world have tended to understand Islamic State based on a tiny portion of its messaging, the bulk of which tends to go more-or-less unnoticed. As publics have sought to decode the group's violence without being exposed to the full picture of its activity, a great deal of misunderstanding has been fostered. A sense that it is politically irrational and driven by bloodlust and barbarity has emerged, something that has only been compounded by alarmist reporting. In reality, Islamic State is anything but irrational, and as a result the current state of affairs is untenable, for it obstructs one's ability to grasp the group's appeal to the tens of thousands of people from over 90 countries who have gone to join it thus far.[1]

The fact that there are legions of foreigners supporting the organisation in Iraq and Syria, militarily or otherwise, is something that horrifies non-supporters almost as much as it aggrieves the governments trying to defeat it. While foreigners have regularly been known to join distant wars in the past, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have drawn an unprecedented number of them.[2]

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[1] "Action against threat of foreign fighters must be ramped up, Security Council urges in high-level meeting", *UN Security Council Meeting 7453*, 29 May 2015.
[2] Spencer Ackerman, "Foreign jihadists flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'unprecedented scale' – UN", *The Guardian*, 31 October 2014.

Although a great deal of energy has been expended in determining how an individual living in, say, the United Kingdom might travel to join jihadists in Syria and Iraq, there has been little contemporary research conducted on the factors that led them down this path. This gap in the research also extends to propaganda.

To be sure, online terrorist activity in general has been much discussed by the likes of Paul Grishman and Gabriel Weimann.[3] Focusing specifically on global jihadist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha have offered a number of excellent assessments.[4] Regarding Islamic State's use of the Internet, in particular, some important contributions have been made, including J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan's extensive assessment of the technical mechanisms by which Islamic State delivers its propaganda on Twitter, and Ali Fisher's big data analysis of the activity of disseminators of propaganda, in which he introduces the concept of its "user curated Swarmcast".[5] To date, though, there has been little analysis that has studied Islamic State's propaganda holistically, in the context of its dissemination and strategy.

It is not enough to understand Islamic State propaganda simply in terms of its 'high-production value' and 'professionalism'. Moving beyond its eye-catching cinematography, this paper looks at the heart of the group's media machine. Below, the organisation's messaging operation will be dismantled into its constituent parts and assessed systematically by applying the 1958 theory of propaganda laid down by French philosopher Jacques Ellul in his book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, to the author's archive of Islamic State propaganda gathered between June 2014 and June 2015.[6] After setting out the methodology that was used to collect the primary source material that forms the basis of this paper, Ellul's key hypotheses are introduced. Then, there follows a preliminary taxonomy of Islamic State propaganda, its structures and narratives.

The next section presents a discussion of target audiences. Besides its supporters, engaged

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[3] Paul Grishman, *Cyber terrorism: the use of the Internet for terrorist purpose,* Axis Publications: New Delhi, 2010; Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in cyberspace: the next generation*, Columbia University Press; New York, 2015.

[4] Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Tweeting for the caliphate: Twitter as the new frontier for jihadist propaganda", *CTC Sentinel*, 25 June 2013; Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha, "Eye of the swarm: the rise of ISIS and the media mujahedeen", *US Center on Public Diplomacy Blog,* 8 July 2014.

[5] See J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter", *The Brookings Institution* (20), March 2015; Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast: how jihadist networks maintain a persistent online presence", *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9), June 2015; and "Detailed analysis of Islamic State propaganda video: 'Although the disbelievers dislike it'*", The Quilliam Foundation* and *TRAC (Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium),* December 2014.

[6] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes,* 1965, trans. by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, New York: *Random House Vintage Books,* 1973.

enemies, potential opponents and uninvolved publics, there is a close examination of Islamic State's disseminators, proselytizers and enlisters, too. It becomes clear that assessing Islamic State propaganda with past models of jihadist messaging is a mistaken approach; its media strategy, based as it is on a system of incentivised and democratised dissemination, is a marked departure from the norm, and one that is unique to its time.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasise that Islamic State is not alone in its use of propaganda, nor is it the sole disseminator of content on social media. On the contrary, nearly all jihadist groups, from West Africa to South East Asia, use the Internet to spread their message. The Syrian war, however, has presented a paradigm shift. Indeed, this "most socially mediated civil conflict in history" plays out almost in real time on computer screens across the world, as myriad groups – armed and unarmed, loyalist and opposition – compete for hegemony in the online marketplace of ideas.[7] While it is not just jihadist groups that publicise their progress, messaging from the likes of Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Levantine affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, undoubtedly takes centre stage. It should be noted that, while both employ Fisher's "Swarmcast *modus operandi*", the nature of their propagandistic messaging is distinct.[8] For that reason, this paper does not conflate their media strategies – it only examines Islamic State.

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[7] Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Syria's socially mediated civil war", *United States Institute Of Peace* (91), 2014, 5.

[8] Fisher, "Swarmcast", 17.

2. Methodology

The full body of Islamic State propaganda is vast. At the time of writing, an average of three videos and more than fifteen photographic reports are circulated per day.[9] Radio news bulletins appear daily, meticulously timed in their regularity and broadcast in multiple languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, English, French and Russian.[10] Beyond radio propaganda, Islamic State centrally composes and produces *nashīds* (jihadist music sung *a cappella*) and feature-length films that depict its most barbarous acts, which emerge on a monthly basis.[11] While it is true that other jihadist groups produce propaganda, the scale of Islamic State's operation is unprecedented, as depicted in Figure 1. This is no accidental phenomenon.

In order to identify the strategy behind such proficient use of the Internet, where this content is invariably disseminated, the author has systematically monitored the organisation's propaganda output over the course of the twelve months that followed the declaration of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as 'caliph' on 29 June 2014.[12] Each campaign was documented using a number of monitoring accounts integrated into Islamic State's English- and Arabic-speaking support network on social media platforms and forums. Propaganda from its predecessors – the Islamic State in Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – has, with two exceptions, been excluded, in light of the marked shift in quality, quantity and narrative that came in the wake of the caliphal declaration.[13]

That said, pre-'caliphate' content should not be cast aside as irrelevant; after all, the propagandistic evolution of these earlier groups is responsible for the nature of Islamic State's messaging today.[14] Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that the organisation's propaganda

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[9] Usually, this content is produced by provincial propaganda units – eg. *al-Maktab al-I'lāmī l-Wilāyat ar-Raqqa* (henceforth referred to as "Raqqa Province Media Office") – or IS' *Wakālat A'māq al-Akhbāriyya* (herein referred to as the "A'māq News Agency").

[10] All "radio" content, be it daily bulletins or dispatches from the frontlines, is delivered by *Idhā'at al-Bayān*. An English-language edition to the daily news bulletin was introduced on 7 April 2015, on top of Arabic, Russian and Kurdish. The week after, French-language bulletins were introduced.

[11] IS has its own media unit for *nashīds*, *Mu'assasat Ajnād*, or the Ajnād Foundation. These songs regularly form the backing music for IS' video propaganda. Less regular, more carefully produced content emerges from one of IS' three centralised propaganda units: *Mu'assasat al-Furqān* (henceforth referred to as al-Furqān Foundation), *Mu'assasat al-I'tiṣām* (henceforth referred to as al-I'tiṣām Foundation) or *Markaz al-Ḥayāt l-il-I'lām* (henceforth referred to as al-Ḥayāt Media Center. The al-Furqān Foundation also delivers official statements from the organisation's leadership.

[12] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the promise of Allah", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 29 June 2014.

[13] The exceptions being the al-Furqān Foundation's "Clanging of the Swords 4", which was released on 17 May 2014, six weeks before the caliphal declaration, and al-Ḥayāt Media Center's "There is no life without jihad", which was released shortly after.

[14] In the interests of ethical reporting, no propaganda is reproduced in the following pages. If policymakers, practitioners or other

output has increased significantly since June 2014. In addition to this, its branding has become more complex and standardised. In and of itself, this is significant, for it demonstrates that, even now, its propaganda machine is subject to constant evolution.

Besides the monitoring of Islamic State propaganda, the author has also engaged in a number of conversations with current and former supporters of the organisation who play, or did play, important (but unofficial) roles within the nebulous spheres of propaganda dissemination, proselytization and recruitment. The most extensive interviews were conducted over peer-to-peer social media and email with two individuals, one an Iraqi Islamic State supporter claiming to be in Baghdad, and the other a former supporter of the group that has fully retracted his views.
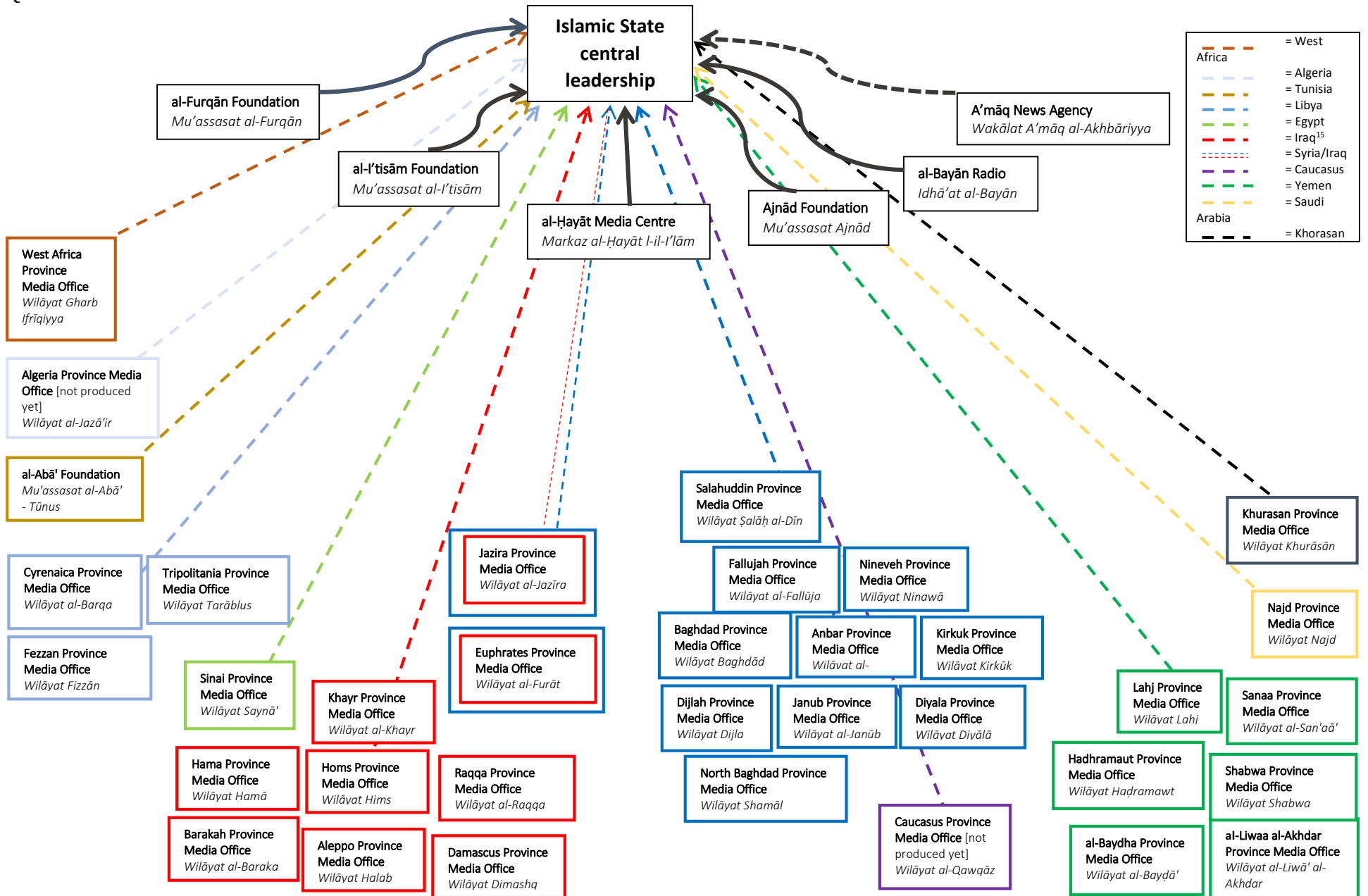
researchers are interested in accessing any of the materials referred to below, please contact the author.

Figure 1

3. Theoretical Framework for Islamic State Propaganda

Jacques Ellul's seminal work on propaganda presents an effective means of shedding light on Islamic State's media strategy. Writing in 1958, Ellul argued that propaganda was not a way to implant new ideas, but a means of compounding and crystallizing them.[16] To this end, the propagandist works to fully encircle the target individual and constantly reinforce and develop ideas already present in his or her head.[17] Ellul deems the total, immersive nature of propaganda to be central to its success – it is at its most potent when an individual is lost within it, begins to participate and, ultimately, derives satisfaction from it. At this point, when propaganda actively pervades both the individual's public and private life, it has 'succeeded'.

In Ellul's mind – and, certainly, in the case of Islamic State – the propagandist's first intention is to build a sort of symbiosis between themselves and the propagandee, so that their consumers willingly project a predetermined version of events across the public and private spheres.[18] Of course, at the time that Ellul was writing, online social media did not exist. It could be argued that now that it does, his views are more relevant than ever. In many ways, social media platforms are the optimal vehicles for propagandists to transmit their message. After all, dissemination through social media fosters something akin to this symbiosis, where "there is no longer a clear division between the audience and content producer", in a far more potent manner than traditional media does: it not only catalyses the propagandee's dependence on the propagandist, but also has the potential to launch them into an active role.[19]

When it comes to the various mechanisms of political messaging, Ellul contends that there is no single propaganda but, instead, a constant interplay of its various forms structured on the lines of various paired opposites. These, which will be discussed later in the specific context of Islamic State, are manipulated with each other in order to train, channel and orientate the recipients of propaganda. In this manner, *propaganda is not just a means of securing support, but is a way to activate an individual's participation in the transmission of ideas while they remain under the illusion of independent thought*. It presents problems and then offers the solution, it absorbs, co-opts, and then corrupts the intellectual process. In a sense, quantity is just as important as quality, for it is only through a constant stream of content that the propagandist is able to furnish

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[16] Ellul, *Propaganda, 166.*
[17] Ellul, *Propaganda, 11.*
[18] Ellul, *Propaganda, 103.*
[19] Fisher, "Swarmcast", 4.

a set of objectives and organize the traits of an individual into a given system.[20] If propaganda is to encircle an individual and dismantle their ability to discern truth from falsehood, regularity and consistency are imperative.

Propaganda does not – and cannot – operate in a vacuum. For a given messaging strategy to succeed, there must first be a milieu of supporting ideas, concepts and narratives.   This is what Ellul refers to as "pre-propaganda".[21] Without this milieu, "propaganda cannot exist".[22] For those individuals who already buy into the 'pre-propaganda', this content is not simply an external force that acts upon them passively; rather, it can become something that they seek to consume, both knowingly and unknowingly. For Ellul, this reliance is "the mentality of the propagandee", and, as the individual's interest develops and other avenues of information become dormant, the propagandee ceases to be interested in anything other than the "rigorous, exciting, active expression of that opinion" that he already holds.[23] As such, one of the key objectives for the propagandist is to reinforce the propagandee's beliefs so that they become detached from reality and alienated from their peers. Once this happens, prejudices can then multiply and, as "the individual is told that he is right in harbouring them", other already-held beliefs become further entrenched. [24] Ultimately, as an individual's encirclement by propaganda continues, once-abstract concepts are normalised and he or she "becomes another person and obeys impulses foreign to him".[25] At this stage, the propagandee is fully absorbed, dependent on consuming and transmitting the content that they are, to all intents and purposes, reliant upon.[26]

Through the lens of Ellul's work, Islamic State's media strategy may be more fruitfully contemplated. Indeed, it exhibits a great many characteristics that are consistent with his assessment of propaganda. Contiguous with what he wrote, there is no easy categorisation of its propaganda; the ideas its propagandists transmit are not simply adopted out of nowhere, and there is no single audience. In many ways, Islamic State presents us with a paradigmatic manifestation of Ellul's ideas. Too often, preoccupations with its propaganda's slickness – totally irrelevant when it comes to assessing the organisation's long-term viability – have obstructed

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[20] Ellul, *Propaganda, 14.*

[21] Ellul, *Propaganda, 15.*

[22] Ellul, *Propaganda, 112.*

[23] Ellul, *Propaganda, 104.*

[24] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 162.

[25] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 169.

[26] For IS' online disseminators, this is a common sentiment and has been described by one former supporter as 'an obsession, just blind devotion'. See Sara Elizabeth Williams, "The bullied Finnish teenager who became an Isis social media kingpin – and then got out", *Newsweek*, 6 May 2015.

analysis of how exactly it is conducting its media strategy. The following pages seek to amend this, starting with a preliminary taxonomy of the organisation's propaganda machine.

4. Taxonomy of Islamic State Propaganda

All too often, the consensus is that brutality is the extent of Islamic State propaganda. This is simply not the case. The full spectrum of its political messaging is vast – besides brutality, it is preoccupied with mercy, victimhood, belonging, militarism and, of course, apocalyptic utopianism. In no way are these ideas new. Most, if not all, likeminded jihadist organisations exploit the same ideas.[27] However, what makes Islamic State different is the quantity, quality and regularity with which it manipulates them.

Since the inauguration of its 'caliphate', Islamic State's propaganda output skyrocketed in quantity and grew in complexity. Already-present ideas were refined and new ones were inserted.[28] Since 29 June 2014, there has been a proliferation of propagandistic messaging unique among terrorist groups: daily radio and text bulletins, photographic essays and videos – all meticulously branded – depicting executions, excerpts from daily life, religious training and military operations.[29] Additionally, there are the less regular but more prominent releases from its three central propaganda video production branches, the al-I'tiṣām and al-Furqān Foundations, and the al-Ḥayāt Media Centre.[30]

It does not stop there. Supplementing its official output is the propaganda compiled by the organisation's committed supporters from around the world. There is a wealth of 'fanboy' material that includes videos, poems, posters and essays, as well as general broadcasting of 'news', forever geared towards spreading the Islamic State narrative. [31] This activity, while it may be less interesting to media outlets due to its producers' unofficial affiliation to the group, is no less

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[27] Al-Qaeda propaganda, for example, is replete with these themes too. See, for example, T.R. King, "Finding the weakness in jihadist propaganda", *Defense Technical Information Center,* 2007.

[28] Far more emphasis was put on the utopia narrative, with a distinct upsurge in photographic essays depicting things like flowers, agriculture and road-building. See "Spring in the region of Ṣarīn", *Aleppo Province Media Office,* 24 March 2015; "Aspects of the work of the Agriculture Department in the region of al-Rā'ī", *Aleppo Province Media Office,* 12 April 2015; "The Services Bureau repairs and opens a road in the village of al-'Abbāsiyya", *Khayr Province Media Office,* 5 February 2015.

[29] In a single day in June 2015, for example, there were four separate video releases depicting, respectively, a spy's execution, civilians returning to "normal life" in their village, the battle for the Syrian city of Palmyra and some tribal sheikhs pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: "War of the minds", *Sinai Province Media Office*, 8 June 2015; "The return of people to the village of al-Bu Hamām", *Khayr Province Media Office*, 8 June 2015; "The raid of Abī Mālik al-Tamīmī II", *Homs Province Media Office*, 8 June 2015; and "Bay'a of tribal notables in Nineveh Province", *A'māq Agency*, 8 June 2015.

[30] The latter propaganda unit is responsible for translations of other propaganda as well as its own videos and *Dabiq*, IS' magazine that is, at the time of writing, on its ninth issue.

[31] Foremost among this category of unofficial propagandists are the likes of Tarjumān al-Asāwirtī, al-Nuṣra al-Muqaddisiyya ("Palestinian Support"), Mu'assasat al-Khilāfa ("Caliphate Foundation") and al-Jabha al-I'lāmiyya l-Nuṣrat al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya ("Media Front for the Support of the Islamic State"). See also Robin Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Battle lines: want to understand the jihadis? Read their poetry", *The New Yorker,* 8 June 2015.

propagandistic; without it, the official content would exist in a vacuum. Whatever the case, the sheer scope and variety of the organisation's propaganda has served as an obstacle to useful analysis. As such, before embarking on an examination of the themes and narratives within it, it will be reordered into the framework provided by Ellul, in which he separates all propaganda – official and otherwise – into five pairs of 'opposites'.

Political vs. sociological

First, and broadest, is the "political" and "sociological" propaganda pair. In Islamic State's case, "political" propaganda is best understood as its *direct*, officially sanctioned messaging, whether it is aimed at friendly or hostile audiences. On the other hand, "sociological" propaganda is the result of "long-term penetration and progressive adaptation" inasmuch as it is produced by Islamic State's supporters and not its official media outlets.[32] This is the poetry, memes, photographic compilations and reordered video montages that surround the official releases. "Sociological" propaganda is, by its very nature, organic: it cannot be imposed from above, only inspired. However, while it cannot be forced, this inspiration can be accelerated. By making so much official 'raw' content available, Islamic State's propagandists facilitate the production of a steady stream of unofficial – but on-message – material. In this manner, they are able to channel a carefully curated image of the 'caliphate' and "intensify existing trends, sharpen and focus them".[33]

Tactical vs. strategic

Within the "political" propaganda category, Ellul identifies another paired opposite: "tactical" and "strategic" propaganda. "Tactical" propaganda is aimed at prompting a short-term, tangible response from the observer. In Islamic State's case, this could be anything from emigration and terrorism to intervention.[34] Conversely, "strategic" propaganda is focused upon precipitating these long-term goals; it seeks to establish and sustain the organisational line and ambience. The bulk of Islamic State propaganda, that which sustains its milieu, should be understood as "strategic". Into this category falls content that is descriptive or indirect and, often, things that

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[32] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 67.

[33] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 41.

[34] Examples abound of these forms of tactical, political propaganda. Three examples, in order, are: "There is no life without jihad", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre*, June 2014; "A message to France", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 14 February 2015; "A second message to America", *Al-Furqān Foundation*, 2 September 2014.

appear largely mundane: fighters fishing, piles of cigarettes being burned, children playing in the street, shrines being destroyed and so on.[35] On their own, the impact of these reports would be relatively small. However, the constant saturation of Islamic State's corner of the Internet with such material renders their utopian message all the more powerful. Operating in tandem with one another, both are key elements of the overall strategy.

Vertical vs. horizontal

Next, there is "vertical" and "horizontal" propaganda. The former is best described as messaging that is produced, commissioned and disseminated officially by the Islamic State itself. This category of propaganda props up the branding of the organisation, and includes all content by which it seeks to refine its image. "Horizontal" propaganda, rather like "sociological" propaganda, refers only to the content that emerges from the milieu within which the official, vertical propaganda exists. It need not be political in its message, but almost always is. Islamic State expertly fuses these two forms of propaganda together so that they feed and support each other on a constant basis.[36]

Agitation vs integration

Ellul's next pair is "agitation" and "integration" propaganda. The former is all about mobilisation. It is intended to sharpen someone's ideas into action so that they move from "resentment to rebellion" – in Islamic State's case, from passive to active support.[37] "Integration" propaganda is closely connected to "strategic" and "sociological" propaganda; like them, it is more gradual. It establishes the utopian myth and sustains the sentiments that "tactical" propaganda manipulates into action. Put simply, "agitation" propaganda is created and circulated in order to secure action, whereas "integration" propaganda seeks to secure the observer's adherence to the system of beliefs that justify the actions to be inspired later on. Islamic State's propagandists exhibit an unparalleled ability to synthesise these two forms, something that is regularly missed due to the fact that "agitation" propaganda's often brutal nature makes it the most visible and widespread so

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[35] "The tourism of my people is jihād in the way of God" [video], *Kirkuk Province Media Office*, 18 February 2015; "Disposal of wine and burning of cigarettes", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 3 December 2014; "Eid greetings from the land of Khilāfah", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre*, 3 August 2014; "Booby-trapping and eradicating the temple of shirk (Hussainiyya Qadu) in the city of Tal'afar", Nineveh Province Media Office, 4 July 2014.

[36] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 83.

[37] Konrad Kellen in Ellul, *Propaganda,* vi. An example of this can be found in, for example, "A message to the Muslims of Somalia", *Euphrates Province Media Office,* 21 May 2015.

that it "generally attracts all the attention".[38]

Rational vs irrational

The final pair of descriptors that Ellul identifies is "rational" and "irrational", both of which are used by Islamic State as it manipulates "facts to demonstrate, rationally, the superiority of its system" and the alleged reality of its imagined utopia.[39] This explains the constant stream of audio and visual evidence depicting, with "rational" references, Islamic State's *implementation* of the "irrational" jihadist project. Everything, even the most minute, insignificant-seeming detail, is worked into serving and furthering this synthesis of truths, exaggerations and lies. This pair is at the heart of Islamic State's utopian superiority complex, which, as is shown below, is of foundational importance to the group's existence and perpetuation.

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None of the above pairs are discrete. A combination of all the aforementioned elements is required if a propaganda strategy is to achieve its full potential. Certainly, it seems as though Islamic State's media strategists understand this. Over the course of its steady rise to infamy, its propagandists have harmonized all of the above – "sociological", "political", "horizontal", "vertical", "agitation", "integration", "rational" and "irrational" propaganda – in order to feed, fertilize and expand the milieu within which its message exists. Now that a framework for understanding its structures has been suggested, sufficient ground has been laid for a fruitful examination of the six key narratives of the 'caliphate' brand.

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[38] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 71.
[39] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 84.

5. Six Themes of Islamic State's Brand[40]

As has been mentioned above, a common misconception about Islamic State propaganda is that it starts and finishes with brutality. However, whether it is a video depicting the execution of a group of men by firing squad in the desert, a mass beheading, or both, ultraviolence is merely part of the bigger picture.[41] As will be explained in the following pages, brutality is just one of six broad themes that the organisation uses to bolster its presence and further its strategic goals; the other five are mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism. Similar to the mechanisms by which they are conveyed, these themes are not discrete. Indeed, they are regularly employed together.

Brutality

One cannot deny the pride of place that this enjoys in Islamic State's messaging; all of the organisation's committed ideological supporters derive satisfaction from it. After all, it supports a key aspect of its propaganda, triumphalism. Every time an execution is carried out, documented and publicised, it serves as a reminder of the group's self-proclaimed supremacy and its ability to exact revenge on behalf of Sunni Muslims against the Crusader-Shi'ite-Zionist conspiracy allegedly mounted against them.[42] Islamic State's most brutal propaganda serves as a vehicle by which to convey both vengeance and supremacy.

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[40] An abridged version of this section appeared in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor* on 12 June 2015, entitled "Islamic State propaganda: key elements of the group's messaging".

[41] "Although the disbelievers dislike it", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 16 November 2014; "A message signed with blood to the nation of the Cross", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre*, 15 February 2015; "Until there came to them clear evidence", *al-Furqān Foundation,* 19 April 2015.

[42] "Jihad 2.0: social media in the next evolution of terrorist recruitment", Full Committee Hearing, *Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs*, 7 May 2015.

As touched upon above, this content is not just aimed at declared supporters. In fact, they are not even the primary target audience. Rather, this material is intended for Islamic State's active or potential opponents. Exactly which usually depends on the unit responsible for its production and on who is being executed. For instance, the November 2014 video that documented the execution of three members of Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Arab Army had a very different audience to the one in which Japanese journalist Kenji Goto was killed.[43] Both videos were brutal and shocking, but for obvious reasons, only one – the latter – had international traction. When Islamic State depicts the gruesome execution of men that it alleges are 'spies', it is seeking to warn potential local dissenters of the unwavering ruthlessness with which they will be dealt.[44]

Whatever the case, weaving brutality into the fabric of Islamic State's messaging has four motivations. Beyond the simple gratification of supporters, it seeks to intimidate enemies, warn local populations of the punishments associated with espionage or dissent, provoke outrage from the international media and cause knee-jerk responses from hostile policymakers. Often, all four motivations are sought – and achieved – in the same release.[45]

Mercy

The mercy narrative is regularly featured in tandem with brutality. It is closely connected to the idea of repentance, before God and the Islamic State organisation itself. A particularly striking example of this may be

found in an April 2015 video entitled "From the Darkness to the Light", in which fighters from Jabhat al-Nuṣra, the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Arab Army – all of whom are said to be

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[43] "Execution of three officers from the Nusayrī army", *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 6 November 2014; "A message to the government of Japan", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 29 January 2015.

[44] See, for example, "Liquidation of a network of spies by the Security Forces", *Salahuddin Province Media Office,* 5 January 2015.

[45] See, for example, "Healing of the believers' chests", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 3 February 2015.

former sworn enemies of Islamic State and each other – are shown reneging on their former beliefs and joining Islamic State together.[46] Islamic State regularly circulates content like this, where people are seen responding to its *istitāba* (appeals for repentance). Upon repenting, footage like this invariably shows individuals being received into the embraces of the jihadists. The message is clear: Islamic State will forgive one's past affiliation, provided it is wholly rejected and obedience to the 'caliphate' is guaranteed. If these conditions are met, an individual may become 'one of the gang'.

This 'mercy' does not just extend to fighters, but also to civilians and former government employees. For example, in the run up to the first caliphal 'school year', primary and secondary school teachers in Syria were reportedly shown to be repenting *en ma*sse, after which they were re-inserted into the education system.[47] There has even been a thirty minute documentary-style video on the topic.[48] In aggregate, the mercy narrative has an almost symbiotic relationship with that of brutality. The two ideas are regularly entwined, presenting as they do the populations under attack from Islamic State with a stark choice: resist, and be killed, or willingly submit, recant past beliefs and be rewarded with mercy.

Victimhood

The next narrative, a recurrent theme shared in the propaganda of all jihadist groups, is that of Sunni Muslims' victimisation at the hands of a perceived global war on Islam. Like that of mercy, the idea of victimhood is regularly used in tandem with

brutality. One of the clearest examples of this came in the al-Furqān Foundation's "Healing of the Believers' Chests", in which Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh is burned alive before rubble is

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[46] "From the darkness to the light", *Khayr Province Media Office,* 16 April 2015.

[47] "*Istitāba* of teachers in the east al-Karāma region", *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 6 March 2015.

[48] "Education in the shadow of the caliphate", *Raqqa Province Media Office,* 5 March 2015.

bulldozed over his body. Here, the binary opposites of victimhood and retributive violence are strikingly manipulated.[49] Seconds before the sequence that depicted Mr. al-Kasasbeh's final moments, footage of the aftermath of coalition airstrikes was cut in, showing images of dead or dying children. This was done for two reasons: firstly, to remind the observer of the justification for the "resistance" narrative in the Islamic State war and, secondly, to drive home the theological basis from which this means of execution was derived, namely *mumāthila,* or retaliation in kind.[50] A similar juxtaposition of violence and victimhood was also used in a November 2014 video in which twenty-two members of the SAA were simultaneously beheaded in Syria.[51]

A June 2015 video from Islamic State's Nineveh Province provides another good example of this. It opens with the depiction of a fighter handling a child's disembodied arm at an unnamed bombsite. Shortly after, three groups of alleged 'spies' are burned alive in a car hit by a rocket propelled grenade, drowned in a steel cage and beheaded with explosives.[52] The depiction of the child's corpse at the beginning of the video is intended to drive home the victimisation of Iraq's Sunnis as well as justify what followed. Evidently, the brutality narrative was also tapped into here and exploited most successfully. Locally, the video sought to intimidate Sunnis considering leaving or fighting against Islamic State; internationally, it was intended to be transmitted by Western media outlets and conveyed to disengaged, hostile publics. To be sure, the propagandists achieved their objectives – some media outlets published still images of the 'spies' in the process of being executed, which were shared tens of thousands of times in a matter of hours.[53]

It is worth noting that Islamic State's propagandists regularly eschew this juxtaposition altogether, choosing to focus solely on the aftermath, for example, of coalition air-raids on what they claim are civilian targets. Whatever the case, collateral damage is the Islamic State propagandist's friend; dead babies and maimed children are instrumentalised, routinely integrated into a catalogue of crimes that have been perpetrated by the 'enemy'.[54] This is no surprise. Since President Obama's decision to engage in military airstrikes against Islamic State in August 2014, its decision to manipulate the victimhood narrative to play on the hearts of its audience was inevitable.

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[49] "Healing of the believers' chests", al-*Furqān Foundation*, 3 February 2015.
[50] "What is the ruling on burning the kāfir until he dies?", *Office for the Research and Issuance of Fatwas,* 20 January 2015; as pointed out by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi.
[51] "Although the disbelievers dislike it", *al-Furqān Foundation,* 16 November 2014.
[52] "But if you return, we shall return", *Nineveh Province Media Office,* 23 June 2015.
[53] "Sickening new ISIS video shows caged prisoners lowered into a swimming pool and drowned, shot with an RPG and blown up with explosive-filled 'necklaces'", *Mail Online,* 23 June 2015.
[54] "The bombing of the Crusaders on Muslims", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 3 May 2015.

W ar

Islamic State's war machine is a fourth, very prominent, part of the brand. Its propagandists routinely zoom in on the organisation's military gains, with regular depictions of training camps, parades featuring artillery guns, tanks and armoured vehicles, as

well as martyrdom operations through photographs and videos.[55] They also circulate footage of frontline fighting, delivered almost in real time by the roving "war reporters" of IS' A'māq News Agency.[56] Besides this, there is a particular preoccupation with "booty" – the looting of enemies' weapons and munitions – something that plays well into the propagandists' intention to portray both its momentum and supremacy. [57] All of the above, combined with the uniforms, the discipline and the choreography, are intended to feed into the idea that Islamic State is a real 'state' with a real army, hence contributing to its utopia-building narrative.

Although ostensibly aimed at instilling fear in hostile forces and raising fighters' morale, this content also serves a tactical purpose. As well as presenting supporters and sympathisers with a skewed understanding of its successes, its proliferation enables the organisation to obfuscate on-ground realities by disseminating disinformation to its enemies. After all, though it likes to give the impression of doing so, Islamic State does not publicise the whole of its war. On occasion, its propagandists intensively document fighting on one front while a media blackout is imposed on another. In a conflict where human intelligence is scarce, intelligence that can be gathered online from open sources has never been more tempting as a resource. Taking this into account, it seeks

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[55] "Blood of jihad I", *Nineveh Province Media Office,* 10 October 2014; "Parade of the army of the caliphate in Barqa Province", *Barqa Province Media Office*, 16 November 2014; "Correspondents' programme – the raid to liberate Bayji refinery", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 13 May 2015; "Battles in Ayn al-Islam", *Aleppo Province Media Office,* 9 December 2014

[56] "Deployment of fighters of the Islamic State in the streets of Ayn al-Islam", *A'māq Agency*, 10 October 2014.

[57] "Some of the booty from al-Karmeh", *Anbar Province Media Office*, 13 May 2015.

to curate the information available by cultivating a monopoly on battlefield reporting. Its Ramadi offensive in the spring of 2015 was a paradigmatic example of this. In the early weeks of the offensive, visual evidence that it was taking place was almost totally non-existent. Concurrently, Islamic State propagandists saturated the airwaves with photographs and videos from a separate assault on Bayji oil refinery, which drew observers' attention in the wrong direction. Hence, when it came in May 2015, the final assault on the Anbar capital was, in their own words, a surprise to many of those directly involved.[58]

Belonging

Closely connected to, but distinct from, the above four themes is that of belonging. This idea is one of Islamic State's most powerful draws to new recruits, particularly those from Western states. Through their regular publication of, for example, videos and photographic reports depicting *istirāḥat al-mujāhidīn* – fighters relaxing with tea and singing with each other – the propagandists emphasise the idea of brotherhood in the 'caliphate'.[59] The carefully branded camaraderie that one is absorbed into upon arrival in Islamic State-held territories is, as the propagandists would have their audiences believe, almost overwhelming. In most of the foreign-language videos to emerge from the al-Ḥayāt Media Centre, for example, 'brothers' from around the world are filmed with each other in parks having a good time, their faces a picture of serenity.[60]
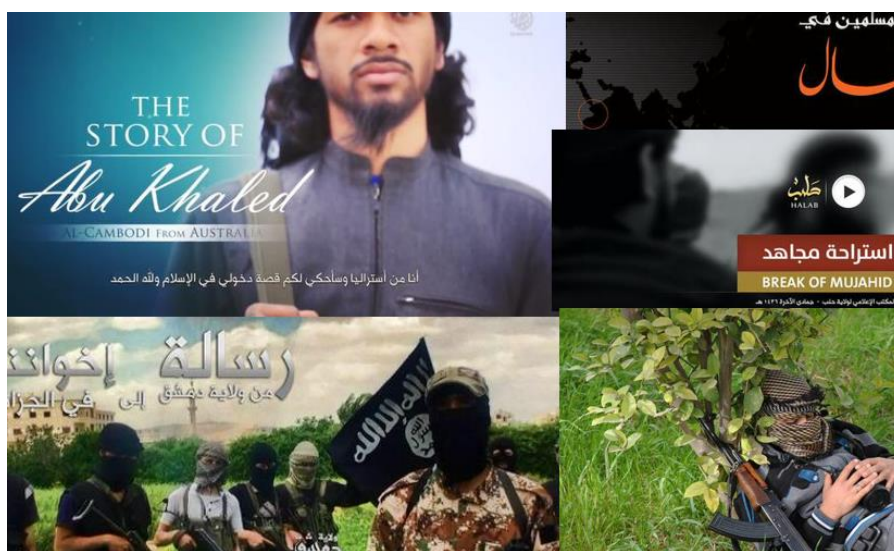
It is not difficult to recognise why this narrative is exploited; if Islamic State is to continue replenishing its ranks, it needs to target foreign recruits. Understanding radicalisation better

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[58] Mick Krever, "Iraqi deputy PM: Ramadi 'surprised all of us'", *CNN,* 25 May 2015.
[59] "Photographic report of the break-time of the mujahidin on the Euphrates river", *Raqqa Province Media Office,* 29 December 2014.
[60] "Eid greetings from the land of the caliphate", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre,* 2 August 2014.

than most, its propagandists recognise that offers of friendship, security and a sense of belonging are powerful draws for its supporters abroad. The same ideas are also manipulated to draw in recruits from closer to home. For example, in "On the Prophetic Methodology", the al-Furqān Foundation's propagandists insert clips of fresh recruits rapturously embracing their new brethren shortly after pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi.[61]

Islamic State turbo-charges the concept of the *umma* and takes it beyond al-Qaeda's elite vanguard narrative. In so doing, it democratizes the ability to engage with the struggle, makes it a 'do-it-yourself' jihad. Along with the aforementioned thematic elements, this powerful idea of belonging is incorporated into the final component of the Islamic State brand, discussed below.

Utopianism

The final narrative that Islamic State propagandists exploit is that of apocalyptic utopianism, which is arguably the broadest and most important theme. Indeed, all of the above narratives support it cumulatively. Fertilised by new content several times a day, the idea of the utopia-'caliphate' runs strongly throughout all the organisation's messaging. Its constant presence makes sense: Islamic State's establishment and implementation of the 'caliphate' is the organisation's unique selling point. Constantly reminding the world – particularly rival jihadist groups and potential recruits – of this is imperative. The more 'evidence' that is made available, the more resilient Islamic State becomes to assertions that it is illegitimate.

The desire to promote its 'state'-hood is something that has led to the appearance of the bizarre:

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[61] "Upon the Prophetic methodology", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 28 July 2014.

from fishing trips and *da'wa* caravans to sheep cleaning and road-building.[62] While this content may seem, at first sight, benign, its presence is critical. It is the organisation's way of keeping up appearances. Along with its labelling of its 'Ministries', 'Departments' and 'Offices', Islamic State is forever seeking to provide evidence that it is not just talking about the 'caliphate', but that it is *enacting* it, too: teaching children to recite the Quran by rote, establishing *sharī'a* courts, implementing *ḥudūd* punishments and collecting and dispensing *zakāt*.[63] Its corner of the Internet is replete with such material, all motivated by the need to reinforce the implementation narrative.

Of course, much of this content is multipurpose. Taking its daily circulations of images depicting *ḥudūd* punishments as a case in point, it is clear that each target audience is affected very differently. To locals, it aims to demonstrate that, despite the fact that it is being attacked from all sides, Islamic State can provide security and stability.[64] The ruthlessness and efficiency with which crime is punished can be an appealing idea in the context of rampant warlordism and lawlessness. For potential opponents, this imagery serves as a warning. For ideological supporters and active members, such images provide legitimization and gratification on a most basic level. For potential recruits, it is simply part of the 'evidence' that is used to convince them that Islamic State is legitimate. Finally, for non-jihadists – potential enemies, involved opponents and international publics – these punishments are worked into the brutality narrative outlined above, evincing as they do a rejection of international norms and the resolute defiance with which Islamic State is pursuing its 'caliphate' project.

By declaring the re-establishment of the 'caliphate' when it did, Islamic State seized the extremist Islamist initiative. It asserted itself above all other jihadist groups as *the* utopia that they all aspired to create. As such, its propagandists need to keep the idea afloat and, seeking to amplify it, further capitalize upon the strand of Islamic eschatology that is central to so much of the organisation's official rhetoric. Routinely, the nearing apocalypse is emphasised to increase the

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[62] Fishing: "From inside Ḥalab", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Center*, 9 Feb 2015; "Da'wa caravan for cubs of the caliphate", *Nineveh Province Media Office,* 20 April 2015; "Taking care of livestock", *Jazira Province Media Office*, 27 April 2015; "Overview of the work of the Services Bureau in the southern region", *Khayr Province Media Office,* 20 March 2015.

[63] It has an "Education Ministry" (Diwān al-Ta'līm), "Health Services" (al-Khidmāt al-Sāhia), a "Treasury" (Bayt al-Māl) and an "Office for Security" (Maktab al-Amin) – that these all sound like state institutions is no mistake. With regards to the other ideas, examples abound, among them: "Honouring the cubs that have memorized two parts of the Quran", *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 29 March 2015; "Establishment of *ḥadd* for theft in the city of Dar al-Fatḫ", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 17 February 2015; "Establishment of *ḥadd* for drinking wine in before the door of the *sharī'a* court", *Barqa Province Media Office*, 22 October 2014; "Distribution of *zakāt* in one of the mosques of Raqqa Province", *Raqqa Province Media Office,* 9 July 2014.

[64] "Establishment of had for banditry on two individuals who erected checkpoints for theft in the name of the state", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 30 April 2015.

sense of urgency. The idea is that, with the rise of Islamic State, the Day of Judgment looms ever nearer; the 'caliphate' has been established and, as of August 8 2014, the 'Crusaders' are being confronted head on.[65] The message is simple: join now or face an eternity in Hell.[66]

Eschatological allusions are not a novel introduction to jihadist propaganda.[67] However, the amount that Islamic State media emphasises this idea *is* new. In every high-profile address from the leadership, the looming nature of the end of the world is emphasised, and every time a new issue of *Dabiq* surfaces, its pages are replete with references to Armageddon.[68] The emphasis on eschatology lends urgency to the IS narrative and incentivises other jihadists – individuals or groups – to join the organisation.

In the year that followed the caliphal declaration, some responded to this call, incorporating themselves as new 'provinces', at least in terms of their messaging, into the 'caliphate'.[69] At every opportunity, these assimilations are celebrated; whenever a new *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is announced on Islamic State social media, it is projected far and wide as evidence of the organisation's divinely ordained success. Then, in the weeks that follow, countless provincial videos emerge showing the happy reactions of the civilian population.[70] This is geared towards maintaining a sense of momentum. After all, the perception of continually growing power is not just symbolically important, it spawns real authority.[71]

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Islamic State has eschewed many of the traditional resistance-based aspects of its rivals' narratives, opting instead for "the propaganda of winners" and, through the synthesis of the above six themes, it is able to incite with unparalleled efficacy.[72] It leverages urgency and religio-

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[65] "US launches new air strikes on Islamic State in Iraq", *BBC News,* 8 August 2014.

[66] In Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's May 2015 statement, for example, he speaks of 'the signs of the Malāhim', urging Muslims to join IS to 'feed the winds of victory within them'; see "Go forth, whether light or heavy", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 14 May 2015.

[67] Indeed, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's official propaganda outlet, the Mu'assasat al-Mulāḥim (al-Mulāḥim Foundation), is named after the Final Battles.

[68] See "Dabiq, issue II: The Flood", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Centre*, 27 July 2014.

[69] To date, there have been pledges of allegiance and "provinces" declared in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Russia.

[70] For example, see "Joy of the monotheists regarding the *bay'a* of Nigeria's *mujāhidīn*", *Dijla Province Media Office,* 11 March 2015.

[71] See Noman Benotman and Charlie Winter, "Islamic State one year on – understanding and countering the caliphate's brand", *The Quilliam Foundation,* 17 June 2015.

[72] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Jihad 2.0: social media in the next evolution of terrorist recruitment", Full Committee Hearing, *Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs*, 7 May 2015.

political legitimacy with one another such that the imperative to act – whether the 'act' in question is joining, disseminating propaganda, or carrying out an attack – is as pressing as possible. Combined with the easy accessibility it has cultivated between its fighters and curious onlookers, this cocktail of reimagined, reinvigorated jihadist narratives has been of untold assistance to it as it has worked to maintain the perception of momentum and legitimacy. The manner in which its supporters, committed and otherwise, interpret the group is critical to its success – a well-defined, carefully refined image allows Islamic State to differentiate its product from that of rival groups like al-Qaeda and cause a sort of jihadist 'brain-drain'. Competition for resources among jihadist groups is fierce; recruits and donors are scarce indeed. Hence, perception is central to longevity. In the next section there is a discussion of Islamic State's target audiences, as the rationale behind saturating the Internet with propaganda is explored alongside Ellul's theory of the 'propagandee'.

6. Islamic State's Target Audiences

As Ellul writes, "one cannot make just any propaganda any place for anybody"; there is no one-size-fits-all messaging strategy for any political movement, jihadist or otherwise.[73] Different forms of propaganda, while they may cross over, affect different audiences in very different ways. When it comes to our understanding of Islamic State propaganda, the analysis is skewed by the assumption that brutality is the extent of it. However, as indicated above, contrary to the common consensus, much of the content focuses on something far more potent: the portrayal of 'normal life' in the 'caliphate', the regular depiction of things like markets, service provision and agriculture.[74] While its brutality is undeniable, understanding the group's propaganda strategy based on the assumption that it does not go beyond violence is mistaken. As has been demonstrated above, the 'caliphate' brand is much more than that.

This situation is exactly as the Islamic State propagandists have calculated – they know their audiences. For example, propaganda that is intended to find a home in the West to menace and intimidate its governments and populations invariably finds itself transmitted to a mass audience in Western media, sometimes even rendered available in full on news websites.[75] After all, fear sells.[76] Conversely, propaganda that focuses on 'everyday' life in the 'caliphate' rarely makes it into the mainstream press due to its subject matter; disengaged publics are not interested in Islamic State's administrative efforts. Often, this content is left wholly ignored, even though it is just as important as violence when it comes to the brand.

Evidently, the propagandists recognise their audiences' varying patterns of consumption. In determining who these audiences are, it is worth looking beyond Ellul's broad category of 'propagandees', because Islamic State has many of them – engaged and potential opponents, international publics, active members, potential recruits, disseminators, proselytizers and enlisters. Each of these categories is examined in greater detail below.

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[73] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 34.

[74] "Economic activity in al-Farūq Dam", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 8 June 2015; "Laying a new road from al-Shadādī to ar-Raqqa", Baraka Province, 3 April 2015; "Taking care of livestock", *Jazira Province Media Office*, 27 April 2015.

[75] Fox News streamed the entirety of "Healing of the believers' chests", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 3 February 2015.

[76] Roy Greenslade, "The Times and Mail Online were wrong to publish Isis execution images", *The Guardian,* 24 June 2015.

Involved and potential opponents

When it comes to Islamic State's opponents, there is much variation. As such, content is tailored to resonate specifically with local, regional and international enemies. Usually, the aim is demoralisation and intimidation but it also seeks to agitate, polarise and provoke intervention.[77] After all, for jihadist groups, this is something that has a positive correlation with legitimacy. Directly combating "anti-Sunni" forces, whether they are 'Crusader-Zionist', 'Crusader-Iranian' or 'Crusader-Assadist', is something that the organisation revels in.

The political boons of provocation are evident. For example, every time its propagandists publicise a summary execution of Iran-backed Shi'ī militiamen in Iraq, they contextualise and justify the act within the oppression narrative, such that it can engender a level of support from local, disenfranchised Sunnis.[78] Likewise, whenever it boasts about, say, beheading alleged spies of the Assad regime, it carefully catalogues the 'crimes' that they purportedly helped to facilitate, before killing them.[79] The same formula is also used when it is a Westerner that is being beheaded.[80] In each case, Islamic State derives legitimacy from the act by loudly asserting itself as the aggressive Sunni vanguard in an untenable status quo. The bloodier and more provocative the punishment, the more effective it is as propaganda.

International publics

As well as its active opponents, Islamic State's propagandists also target disengaged international publics, principally through the media. Uncomfortably, the potency of its attempts to scare international publics is a direct result of its ability to leverage Western media. It is no coincidence that much of the organisation's propaganda seems tailored to international transmission. Indeed, for its highest profile videos, most of which are translated before circulation, one of the chief motivations is to cause outrage and international condemnation, to polarise publics such that they pressure their respective states into further entanglement. The video that depicted the immolation of Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh, which came on the back of weeks of speculation that

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[77] For more on this, see Charlie Winter, "How the Islamic State makes sure you pay attention to it", *War on the Rocks,* 12 February 2015; and J.M. Berger, "Can we win the war against ISIS by focusing on social media?", *Huffington Post*, 24 February 2015.

[78] "The implementation of the law of God upon 11 members of the Rejectionist People's Mobilisation", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 20 April 2015.

[79] "A lesson for everyone to take into account", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 20 December 2014.

[80] "A message to America", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 19 August 2014.

Islamic State carefully precipitated and an eight hour promotional campaign, is a clear example of this.[81]

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The ways in which propaganda affects the above audiences are fairly unambiguous. Less clear is the fundamentally important impression that it has upon the next five categories, its active members, potential recruits, disseminators, proselytizers and enlisters. In the following pages, the way that these groups are affected by, and affect others with, Islamic State propaganda will be explored. Before proceeding, it is important to note that these are nebulous groupings, between which there is a significant amount of overlap.

Active members

A political movement's active members are never homogenous, which is as true of Islamic State as any other group. Its supporters vary greatly in their motivations, whether they are theological, ideological or political.[82] Reflecting that, the organisation's propagandists have developed a range of themes to run through its messaging that, when combined, maximise and sustain its appeal to the various demographics of its active supporters, those who participate in its political and military campaign. As such, the focus of propaganda varies between invocations of religious legitimacy – Islamic State as the 'caliphate' – to an emphasis on resistance – Islamic State as 'the revolutionary movement'. In this manner, the propagandists are able to broaden its allure across ideologies, localities and nationalities.

To this end, universally appealing narratives – security, social justice and so on – feature more prominently than the niche theological ideas that the organisation claims to sustain itself with.[83]

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[81] The media frenzy was first initiated with IS' release of a video showing two Japanese hostages kneeling at the feet of 'Jihadi John', in which he demanded a ransom in exchange for their lives ("A message to the government and people of Japan", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 20 January 2015). During the 11 days that followed, misinformation abounded as to the fate of the hostages. The ransom was not paid and, one week after photographic evidence emerged showing the decapitated body of one of the hostages, Haruna Yukawa, IS released a video in which 'Jihadi John' beheaded the second hostage, Kenji Goto ("A message to the government of Japan", *al- Furqān Foundation*, 31 January 2015). Speculation as to the fate of the Jordanian pilot, whose release IS falsely led the world to believe was closely entwined with that of the Japanese hostages, was at fever pitch when IS announced another video a few days later, in which al-Kasasbeh was executed ("Healing of the Believers' Chests", *al-Furqān Foundation*, 3 February 2015).

[82] Adherence to IS' particular brand of jihadism, bandwagoning on Sunni uprising. See "Understanding Jihadists: In their own words", *The White Papers*, March 2015.

[83] One of the most regularly appearing themes in IS propaganda is the depiction of its implementation of *ḥudūd* punishments against thieves ("Implementation of the *ḥadd* for theft against one of the soldiers of the Islamic State in al-Qā'im", *Euphrates*

Potential recruits

The way that Islamic State's propagandists combine varied themes to satisfy active members is also echoed in its appeals to potential recruits. By channelling multiple narratives, from the overtly theological to the political, it can project its message across a broader set of demographics than it otherwise would. Thus, it is able to draw in ideology-seekers almost as skilfully as it can attract those who reject the global status quo. Of course, propaganda alone does not act as an agent of either radicalisation or recruitment; no curious observer graduates from potential recruit to active member without direct engagement from another party, either on- or offline. However, what propaganda does do is facilitate and catalyse the process. As will be dealt with at greater length below, it provides the 'evidence' for the claims made by the recruiting party and reduces the need for charisma. Without this to refer to, the recruiter's job would have to be based solely on rhetoric and chance. With it, they are able to quickly address doubts with ready-made visual and audio arguments.

Disseminators

Despite the skill with which it is executed, Islamic State's media strategy would fail were it not for the efficacy with which its propaganda is disseminated, something which, since the end of summer 2014, is not done through official channels.[84] A lot of the time, those responsible for transmitting it are not even fighters, just individuals seeking to help the Islamic State cause through media activism. What's more, many of them openly say that they are not *mubāyiʿīn* (allegiant to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).[85]

The most prolific of these individuals are paradigmatic examples of Ellul's 'propagandee'. They

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Province Media Office, 2 January 2015), murderers or rapists ("Implementation of the ḥadd for banditry on three men who stole from a house, raped its owner and tried to kill her sons", *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 10 December 2014). Depictions of ḥudūd implementation against drunks ("Implementation of the ḥadd for he who drinks wine", *Barqa Province Media Office*, 22 October 2014), sorcerers, homosexuals ("Implementation of the ḥadd for two men, one a sorcerer and the other a sodomite", Nineveh Province Media Office, 14 May 2015), or blasphemers ("Implementation of the ḥadd for someone who offended God the Almighty", Homs Province Media Office, 13 December 2014) are prevalent too. However, while the subject matter is similar, this latter strain of content does not give the same message of security. Instead, it is circulated with the intention of portraying IS' theological credibility. Both themes are central to its utopianism.

84 There are officially appointed disseminators, but they are not self-advertising. Official propaganda accounts used to be present and branded as such. However, they ceased to exist following Twitter's pro-active suspension strategy, which was greatly facilitated by the fact that they were easily identifiable.

85 In a private conversation with the author, one of the most prolific non-official disseminators of IS propaganda declared that, not only was he never party to operational information, he had not even pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

do not exist passively, but are "generally very dedicated", wholly absorbed by Islamic State content and always seeking out the latest propaganda to circulate. [86] Without them, the group's propaganda would be limited to a much smaller audience. With them, it can easily reach tens of thousands.[87]

To facilitate and encourage this, Islamic State has outsourced its propaganda dissemination. It relies almost entirely on a group of individuals – not just Arabic-speakers – who are often just self-appointed fans of the organisation. Taking this into account, as much as the propagandists target the other consumer groups dealt with in this section, they are also seeking to satisfy the needs of their disseminators, who do not have to be numerous to have an impact. As well as the prolific use of Twitter 'bots', their influence is greatly magnified by their consistent commitment to peddling the Islamic State line, something symptomatic of the "asymmetry of passion" that has characterised all counter-messaging efforts to date.[88]

The disseminator audience is one of Islamic State's most important, for it is the vessel through which its messaging is transferred from Iraq and Syria to the rest of the world, from Arabic to English, from peer-to-peer to open source. Often seemingly reliant on its content, the disseminator derives satisfaction from transmission and becomes intoxicated by its circulation. They are responsible for feeding the proselytizers, securing their commitment, fertilising their environment with new ideas and, crucially, facilitating the Islamic State echo chamber by opening it up to others. In Iraq and Syria, specific social media teams have been assembled to wage this information war.[89] The most prolific and influential disseminators of propaganda, while not always appointed, are specifically "referred to in [Islamic State] social media strategy documents as the *mujtahidūn,* the industrious ones".[90] Similar to their counterparts in the rest of the world, their consumption and dissemination of propaganda is compulsive, obsessive even. They do nothing other than transmit a predetermined and carefully refined version of events, often just

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[86] Private interview between Abdullah, formerly an Islamic State disseminator that tweeted under the handle @Mujahid4life, and the author, 20 June 2015.

[87] See Berger and Morgan, "ISIS Twitter Census". When propaganda is transmitted by media outlets, of course, it reaches the hundreds of millions.

[88] Abdul-Rehman Malik, "Understanding and combatting terrorist propaganda under the broad CVE agenda", *Australia's Regional Summit to Counter Violent Extremism,* Sydney, 11 June 2015.

[89] Photographs routinely emerge from IS depicting these individuals at work in Internet cafes. Footage depicting the operation is available from Sky News, which acquired video evidence of the online operation, where IS supporters 'work in shifts according to their nationality and the time zones of the people they are targeting'. Stuart Ramsay, "First footage of Islamic State grooming HQ", *Sky News,* 28 May 2015.

[90] Berger and Morgan, "ISIS Twitter Census", 29.

copying and pasting, en masse, comments made by other individuals.[91] In the West and elsewhere, disseminators tend to be volunteers with no formal relationship with the Islamic State media machine.

Whoever they are, even if they are sworn supporters of the organisation, a lot of the time they have no intention of fighting – their 'jihad' is waged through the Internet.[92] Islamic State's propaganda strategy has been created in a manner that is just as much about sustaining support from non-active sympathisers around the world as it is about attracting new recruits. Saturating the Internet with content that documents every facet of 'life in the caliphate' not only creates a comprehensive vision for the utopia, but it also secures continued participation from onlookers. Saturation brings the interested observer into the cycle of violence as well as the social movement; it is a means of activating the individuals who support the political-military campaign of Islamic State but have not yet taken – and may never take – the leap to join it.

Proselytizers

One achieves disseminator ascendancy through commitment and constant engagement, not through direct appointment. Likewise, an individual can join the Islamic State 'diplomatic corps', its Internet proselytizers, on a voluntary basis.[93] This group, acting organically, identifies vulnerable candidates and actively seeks to absorb them, reinforce their doubts about their current situation and, ultimately, to convince them, through friendship and propagandistic 'evidence', that Islamic State offers a way out.[94] Operating anonymously over the Internet, the organisation's international proselytizers engage in a sort of 'jihad-lite', a less risky but still potent form of support that can be participated in from around the world. Individuals in the echo chamber refer to themselves as a family – through organic, mutualistic support, they ensure each other's commitment.[95]

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[91] Whenever there is "breaking" news from IS, these individuals act as vehicles by which a predetermined, carefully branded IS version of events is circulated.

[92] In conversation with the author on 29 May 2015, one of IS' most prominent Iraqi disseminators responded to the question of whether he had considered going to fight for the organisation with, "No, I think I am doing my best here on Twitter ☺". In another, on 2 June 2015, when asked by the author, "Why do you support Islamic State by tweeting?", he said, "Because I am more effective on Twitter than on the battlefield".

[93] Of course, some prominent disseminators have made the transition from rhetorical to military support – others have tried to do so and failed. However, the majority remain stationary supporters of IS. See Williams, "Bullied Finnish teenager".

[94] A paradigmatic example of this can be read about in: Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the lonely young American", *New York Times,* 27 June 2015.

[95] Typing "baqiyah family" as search term into Twitter immediately yields countless references by English-speaker IS supporters to this network. For more of the "family" and how it has acts a social system based on mutualistic support, see Amarnath Amarasingam, "Elton 'Ibrahim' Simpson's path to jihad in Garland, Texas", *War on the Rocks*, 14 May 2015.

One is not contractually bound to fulfilling this role. Hence why so many of those involved, when identified, turn out to be reclusive young people living double lives, engaged not just because they are committed ideological supporters of Islamic State, but because this is their way of rebelling.[96] For them, evangelizing for the organisation is a way of rejecting convention, a form of counter-culture and, in the words of one former proselytizer, a means of "doing something" and securing a "feeling of belonging to something bigger".[97]

Wherever they are located, the means by which an individual is integrated into the echo chamber is not immediate. It takes time and it is highly fluid. However, there is no question that regular engagement with the propaganda – circulating it, promoting it, commenting sympathetically on it – catalyses this process. As Ellul writes, if an individual "has committed an act reprehensible by traditional moral standards" and has done so with impunity, the act can become intoxicating – "he needs a justification for this and he gets more deeply involved by repeating the act in order to prove that it was just [...] thus, he is caught up in a movement that develops until it totally occupies the breadth of his conscience".[98]

This model cannot be applied to all of Islamic State's propagandees, but for the most prolific cases of those who choose dissemination or proselytization over emigration or fighting, this is often the case. The organisation not only recognises this, but exploits it – implicit in much of its propaganda is encouragement of this behaviour. After all, its brand of jihadism is not just about fighting. The jihad of supporting the 'caliphate' through journalism or medical services is just as legitimate as the jihad of war.[99] This idea stretches to electronic war, too.[100] Its online supporters feed off this idea, for it enables them to frame their obsessive circulation of the Islamic State message as part of its jihad. While official recognition for their efforts is sometimes present, more often than not the chief reward is purely reputational and received exclusively from within the online supporter clique.[101]

Islamic State's self-selected, self-appointed and self-gratifying missionaries are the key

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[96] See Hassan Hassan, "The unmasking of an Islamic State Twitter troll", *Foreign Policy,* 17 December 2014; "Senior female ISIS agent unmasked and traced to Seattle", *Channel 4 News,* 28 April 2015; Williams, "Bullied Finnish teenager".

[97] Williams, "Bullied Finnish teenager"; interview between Abdullah and the author, 30 June 2015.

[98] Ellul, *Propaganda,* 30.

[99] "Health services in the Islamic State", *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 24 April 2015; "*I'lāmī* ('media man'), you are a *mujāhid* too", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 19 May 2015.

[100] "Message from the soldiers of Islam to those on frontlines of the media", Nineveh Province Media Office, 21 March 2015.

[101] Growing and sustain a large following is, for many disseminators, reward enough. Disseminator celebrity is something of a social media evolution of the idea of "jihadi-cool".

components of an outreach strategy that resembles a wide-knotted net, the interwoven strings of which are propaganda. Rarely does one just happen across this net but, because of the very nature of the outreach strategy employed by Islamic State, it is not difficult to find for those who are looking. Most of those who do arrive at it simply pass through, but a minority get caught. The longer these individuals are stuck, the less exposed they are to other channels of information and the more entangled in the milieu and propaganda they become. The longer they are trapped, the less likely it is that they will pass through the other side because, once fully encircled, they are enveloped in an intense feeling of organic, but carefully fostered, camaraderie. Entering the propagandee fold is difficult, but leaving it is even more so. As Ellul writes, like "supporter[s] of a football team, though not physically in the game, [they make their] presence felt psychologically by rooting for the players".[102] And, like supporters of a football team, these missionaries are bound together by a sense of being and a need to express – almost competitively – their commitment to the cause. Such a situation could only ever emerge in the presence of social media, which not only enables but fosters this kind of "passive participation obtained through propaganda".[103]

Enlisters

At this stage, it is crucial to recognise that although some within the above categories have a clearly identifiable role in the recruitment process, they are not recruiters in the traditional sense of the word.[104] If anything, they are recruiters to the *idea,* rather than recruiters to the *cause.* While it is true that they "inspire indirectly", drawing in the curious and vulnerable and facilitating connections between them and active members of Islamic State, they are not responsible for actually *enlisting* individuals directly into participating roles.[105] This is something that tends to be done by individuals in the active member category, discussed above – the foreigners of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq who actively advertise themselves on social media as sources of logistical information and advice to would-be migrants.

Like the proselytizers, but much smaller in number, these individuals use the huge milieu of Islamic State propaganda as 'evidence' of the utopia they are trying to sell. Reinforcing everything they say with reference to propaganda, they give specific, specialist advice to the would-be

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[102]   Ellul, *Propaganda,* 27.
[103]   Ellul, *Propaganda,* 27.
[104]   See Amarasingam, "Simpson's path to jihad in Garland".
[105]   Interview between Abdullah and the author, 30 June 2015.

recruit. [106] The information that potential recruits acquire from private, peer-to-peer engagements with these individuals is often, but not always, the thing that tips them over the edge – it closes the distance between the bedroom and the battlefield in a manner that propaganda alone simply cannot. Without such 'evidence', the enlisters would be unable to support their claims. In that sense, Islamic State's propaganda therefore acts as the fuel that keeps the recruitment machine running smoothly.

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As has been demonstrated above, the means by which different audiences are exposed to Islamic State's propaganda vary widely, as does the way in which they engage with it: opponents, viewing it involuntarily, are menaced by it; hostile publics, exposed to it through the media, are outraged by it; active members seek it out, derive satisfaction and legitimation from it; potential recruits come across it organically, and have their passage to active membership catalysed by it; and enlisters use it at 'evidence' to convince their would-be colleagues to sign up. Disseminators and proselytizers, two categories between which there is much overlap, seek it out and, again like members, derive satisfaction from it. However, for these individuals, the reward is in dissemination and participation as much as it is in consumption. It is worth noting that many, but not all, of Islamic State's new recruits emerge from amidst the ranks of these two categories. In any case, just as Islamic State's audiences vary substantially, so does the messaging of the propaganda itself – there is no one structure, narrative or theme.

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[106] See Callimachi, "Lonely American"; "We've already got you a husband: what sinister ISIS recruiter said to tempt her targets to war zone", *The Daily Mail,* 22 May 2015; Fulya Ozerkan and Emmanuelle Baillon, "Frenchwoman's journey to ISIS in Syria", *AFP*, 26 June 2015.

7. Concluding Remarks

In jihadist strategist Abu Bakr Naji's 2004 book, *The Management of Savagery,* a text said to be one of the "most prominent" influences upon Islamic State's ideology and practices, he speaks extensively about the superpower's manipulation of a "deceptive media halo", a carefully managed media image that creates a feeling of invincibility, a feeling that "it is an all-encompassing, overwhelming power and [that] people are subservient to it not only through fear, but also through love because it spreads freedom, justice, equality among humanity, and various other slogans".[107] In a sense, Islamic State has mimicked what Naji claims is one of the key sources of the 'Crusaders'' success. At an accelerating rate over the last year, it has systematically set about creating an absorbing, comprehensive and easily accessible image of itself, one that saturates the Internet and, by its very prevalence, is the lifeblood of its momentum narrative.

As has been shown above, it is only through a holistic assessment of the organisation's media activities that one can begin to garner an understanding of just how important propaganda is to the success of the organisation. It is evident – and perhaps unsurprising – that Islamic State has drawn from the propaganda rulebook of totalitarianism; its strategists rightly deem that a good image not only brings symbolic influence, but tangible power too. By creating content intended for consumption by a wide range of mass audiences, all meticulously branded with caliphal motifs, the organisation is able to consolidate appeal and cement its menace.

To non-jihadist audiences, Islamic State's propaganda has extraordinary salience, something that comes as a direct result of its manipulation of the media. Terrorist groups have long recognised that the mainstream media can assist them in their political ambitions. Regardless of the ideological inclination of the group in question, this is not new; it has persistently presented a conundrum to journalists for decades. In the wake of an interview with Palestine Liberation Front terrorist Abul 'Abbas during the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship, it was "stressed that since liberal governments agree that a new mode of terrorism has emerged which depends on media exposure, there may be times when the public good is best served by deliberate 'non-exposure' by the press".[108] Despite the sense behind this statement, even at the time it was unrealistic. In the age of the 24 hour news cycle and social media, 'non-exposure' is not just

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[107] Hassan Hassan, "Isis has reached news depths of depravity, but there is a brutal logic behind it", *The Guardian,* 8 February 2015; Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, translated by Will McCants (2006), Harvard: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, 17.

[108] John David Viera, "Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television", *Journal of Film and Video,* 4, 1988, 28.

unrealistic, but wholly unachievable. Islamic State's propagandists have recognised this vulnerability and continually exploit it. In doing so, they are able to ensure the continual perpetuation of their organisation's relevance and menace. As a result of this, it is now undeniable that – rightly or wrongly – Islamic State has supplanted al-Qaeda as the world's most feared jihadist group, even if its longevity may be more questionable.

To members, sympathisers and potential recruits, the organisation's propaganda has enabled it to assemble a multi-layered, nuanced brand that not only promises military escapades, but utopian adventure as well. Through the audio, video and photographic content that is circulated constantly, its propagandists paint a picture of jihad that no other group has come close to. Because of it, joining the 'caliphate' is not simply an exploit for those wanting to shoot a gun – recruitment to the Islamic State cause is sold as a means of participating in God's project on Earth. There is a frontier-like allure to it, as uncommitted supporters are convinced to migrate and engage by the promise of being a 'founding father or mother' of this utopia. To one who does not relate to the Islamist caliphate project, such an idea is alien. However, to those few extremists who both believe in the 'caliphate' idea and see Islamic State's violent means as justified, the vast quantity of 'evidence' that it produces to back up its claims is intensely alluring.

Beyond opponents, engaged and otherwise, and active supporters, Islamic State's propagandists tirelessly work to keep their disseminator and proselytizer audiences interested. Without the commitment of this self-appointed tier of propaganda peddlers, the organisation would have a far smaller reach. Although the organisation is not unique in this, the sheer volume and quality of content that it produces has augmented a situation in which its disseminator and proselytizer supporters are more numerous, more aggressive and more viral than those of other groups.

In particular, their viral nature is crucial. On the Internet, no content, let alone terrorist propaganda, is viral in a vacuum – it requires committed 'fans', a body of consumers who derive satisfaction from transmission and promotion. Building on this premise, Islamic State has facilitated and encouraged the emergence of a tier of supporters who are obsessive in their live archiving of everything caliphal. The persistence and commitment of these individuals inflates their numbers and projects their voices. It thus follows that an understanding of how they operate, something that is currently lacking, is key to determining how to respond to the Islamic State propaganda machine.

As has been discussed in this report, much of the recruitment process can now be conducted over the Internet, an arena that has emerged as the modern-day jihadists' 'radical mosque', the place for already-radicalised potential recruits to receive first-hand accounts of violent jihad and advice on how to join in. Couched in anonymity, supporters, sympathisers and the curious can have direct, interactive access with the battlefield without running the risk of being identified by the security services on their way in or out of extremist meetings, as was so often the case in the 1990s and 2000s. Recognising this, Islamic State shifted its messaging efforts from password-protected fora to open source social media. The regularity and consistent quality of its propaganda's transmission, coupled with the challenges presented by governments' attempts to censor it, has spawned a new class of jihadist sympathisers who are keen to express their rejection of the status quo but are all too conscious of the risks attached to doing so physically and so find solace and satisfaction in consumption and dissemination.

By no means is Islamic State the first jihadist group to produce high quality and widely disseminated propaganda. That its propagandists expend a great amount of energy catering to a range of audiences by manipulating varied narratives is not new either. However, the complexity and efficiency of its media strategy, something that could only be a product of its time, is totally unprecedented. In any analysis of the organisation, it is imperative that this is understood. It is a mistaken approach to try to interpret the group through the same lens used to comprehend al-Qaeda and its affiliates; likewise, countering it cannot be done using the same mind-set and tools developed to counter past jihadist threats. This extends to its messaging strategy, too.

As Konrad Kellen writes in his introduction to Ellul's book, propaganda hands man "in veritable abundance what he needs: a *raison d'etre*, personal involvement and participation in important events, an outlet and excuse for some of his more doubtful impulses, righteousness – all factitious, to be sure, all more or less spurious; but he drinks it all in and asks for more".[109] Islamic State, capitalising upon this in a wholly unprecedented manner, has succeeded in formulating and fortifying a branding exercise of almost epic proportions.

Moving forward, it might be worth taking a leaf out of Islamic State's own strategy book. Of course, that does not mean boasting about executions and misogyny but, for example, it would help if the coalition were to recognize, as Islamic State does, that it is always broadcasting to different audiences – among them, members, sympathizers, enemies and publics. Different narratives

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[109] Konrad Kellen in Ellul, *Propaganda,* 6.

appeal to different people, so it follows that some scaling up is required.

For obvious reasons, it would be improper for the coalition to model its messaging strategy in the same way as a genocidal jihadist group, but it must acknowledge that targeting 'counter-narratives' solely at those few who are on the brink of being recruited to Islamic State is far too restrictive an approach. Furthermore, although they are necessary evils when it comes to officialdom, red tape and bureaucracy are bound to hinder government efforts to counter Islamic State messaging – 'volume' and 'originality', two pillars of its media strategy, are very difficult to achieve in a formal state structure. Therefore, coalition member states are structurally impaired from competing with Islamic State's messaging. Hence, our efforts must be cross-sector: governments, NGOs, independent activists and civil society organisations must all be involved in coordinated, incentivized counter-messaging.[110]

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[110] For more on this, see Will McCants and Charlie Winter, "Experts weigh in (part 4): can the United States counter ISIS propaganda?", *Brookings Institution Markaz*, 1 July 2015.

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