COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point

Pulling Back the Curtain:

An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization

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Introduction

As he spoke, the visual behind him was supposed to remind the audience, in part, of the lengths to which the Islamic State's enemies would go to prevent the group from spreading its message to a larger audience. The image behind the speaker was a mangled metal frame and other debris, the remains of what had been an Islamic State media kiosk. The messenger was John Cantlie, a British journalist who had been captured by the Islamic State nearly four years earlier in November 2012. His words were an attempt to drive the visual image home:

> "The kiosks are used to distribute pamphlets and information regarding the Islamic State and serve to expose some of the lies and propaganda the Western media continues to peddle in their never-ending mission to tarnish the image of the Islamic State."

What goes unsaid is that the Islamic State's effort to "distribute pamphlets and information" is not just a benign messaging campaign. Instead, it is a highly choreographed influence campaign in which the group has *invested* significant institutional effort. While the results of the Islamic State's media efforts have received a significant amount of attention from governments, scholars, and analysts, most of these research efforts have been based on the group's end products: videos, picture reports, texts, and magazines. This is of necessity, as information or documents based on the group's internal media policies and procedures have been difficult to find.[1]

However, captured enemy material obtained by the U.S. Department of Defense in operations targeting senior Islamic State Khurasan personnel in Afghanistan and provided to the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) provides a look inside the group's media operations. This examination comes through the lens of a number of memos and documents that communicate instructions from the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media (central media organization in charge of the group's media operations) to those charged with coordinating the group's media efforts in Afghanistan.

It is important to note that although the materials used here came from Afghanistan, they do not appear to be specific to the Islamic State's Khurasan media bureau, which is responsible for the group's media productions in Afghanistan-Pakistan. There are no specific references in any of these documents to issues unique to Afghanistan. Instead, despite the fact that the Department of Defense obtained them in Afghanistan, they appear to be the general training materials that the Diwan of Central Media provided to media bureaus across all the Islamic State's provinces (*wilayat*). Indeed, the fact that most of these documents were recovered during an operation targeting a senior Islamic State-Khurasan media official increases their value and supports the assumption that these documents were actively being utilized to shape the group's media operations.

Another important issue related to these documents is the timeframe that they cover. The documents themselves were obtained by the Department of Defense between 2016 and 2017. However, this date provides little evidence about when these documents were created. Unfortunately, it is impossible to state the date of authorship for most of these documents with any level of certainty. Indeed, there are only three date reference points in the entire set of documents. The first is in a document titled "Information Security." This particular document carries a specific date, Muharram 1437, or Octo-

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1   There are a few notable exceptions to this. In the first CTC report on the Islamic State's propaganda efforts, the authors relied on a number of declassified captured enemy documents from the 2006-2008 time period to examine the group's structure and strategy. Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016). In another example of using the group's information to examine its operations, one scholar utilized a translation of a document that the Islamic State released online that explained the group's overall media strategy. Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2017). Finally, a well-known and respected analyst and purveyor of leaked internal documents from the Islamic State wrote a piece that examined internal tensions within the group's media arms. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State," Jihadology, September 28, 2017.

ber-November 2015.[2]

The other documents do not actually carry a date, but instead we can assess the date based on the items referenced in the document. One of these documents, "Top Ten Releases Month of Rajab," references various Islamic State videos that were released in May 2016.[3] These 10 videos are among the 34 videos evaluated in spreadsheet format in another document, "A Table of the Statistics for the video releases."[4] Although it may be tempting to use these two specific dates as the bookends for the likely time of authorship for the other documents, there is no way to be sure of the origin date for most the other documents.

The CTC is committed to continuing to search out unique sources of data to provide insight into the workings of terrorist organizations and, when possible, making them available to the broader research community, which will undoubtedly add its own insights and continue to enhance our collective understanding. To further this end, all of the documents (both the original Arabic as well as English translations) referred to in this report are being released on the CTC's website at ctc.usma.edu.[5] These 13 documents provide interesting and important insights on four main topics regarding the Islamic State's media organization.

The first insight is that these documents offer, for the first time, a conclusive link between the Islamic State's central media bureau and Amaq News Agency. More specifically, these documents show that the central media bureau considered Amaq to be on par with other previously recognized central media entities such as Al-Naba and Al-Bayan. Furthermore, the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media encouraged local media bureaus to send content to Amaq, going so far as to make cooperation with Amaq a part of each local media bureau's monthly evaluation.

The second is that these documents show the emphasis the organization placed on producing different types of products in order to convey a broader narrative about the caliphate. Although examining the group's propaganda products after they have been released demonstrates this as well, the level of detail and effort put in by the group to this end, as highlighted by these documents, is more expansive than previously acknowledged.

Third, these documents show very clearly how the Diwan of Central Media created rules, evaluations, and internal memos that were designed to strengthen the centralization of the group's media bureaucracy, solidifying the central media organization's control over what and how the local media bureaus carried on their propaganda work. This finding runs counter to some discussion on decentralization as one of the main reasons for the success of the group's media operations.[6] There certainly is an element of decentralization to the group's online activities, but these documents show there is a limit to the group's willingness to decentralize in the media realm. Indeed, in a document titled "General Guidance and Instructions," we find the following counsel:

"We also advise the brothers to avoid innovation because it is mostly the main cause of mistakes."[7]

Finally, the documents show that the Islamic State's media organization exercises self-awareness in terms of its potential vulnerability. Indeed, the documents provide several insights into how the media side of the organization recognized that its role in promoting the group meant that the media components of the group would be in possession of information that could result in harm if it were known

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2   "Information Security."

3   "Top Ten Releases Month of Rajab."

4   "A Table of the Statistics for the video releases." Additionally, another document references the specific categories used to evaluate videos, which suggests that it was likely created no later than May 2016, but that it is not so old that it wasn't relevant anymore.

5   The author would like to thank Mr. Muhammad al-`Ubaydi for translating all of the documents.

6   Brendan I. Koerner, "Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War," *Wired*, April 2016.

7   "General Guidance and Instructions."

or otherwise obtained by the enemy. This led the group to focus on the importance of information security among media operatives.

The Islamic State's efforts in each of these four areas provide a more detailed understanding not only of how the group organized and implemented its media strategy, but also how a militant organization was able to capture the world's attention using the art of propaganda. This report proceeds by examining each of these four areas in turn.

Amaq News Agency

Amaq News Agency first appeared in 2014 during the battle for control of the Syrian border town of Kobani. Not much is known about the specifics behind its formation, although in May 2017, one of its founders, Rayan Mash'al, was said to have been killed in an airstrike according to an online post attributed to his brother.[8] In one early example from October 2014, Amaq footage shows Islamic State fighters engaged in combat through the streets of Kobani, absent any narration, the typical polish, or the *nasheeds* playing in the background that are common in many Islamic State videos.[9]

Since its emergence in 2014, Amaq has played an increasingly important role in a variety of functions, most notably issuing claims of responsibility for Islamic State operations both in locations it proclaims as part of its caliphate as well as operations in Western and other cities around the world. Nevertheless, the group has left its official role and place in the group's media hierarchy opaque, with scant mention even among the many leaked internal Islamic State documents that have emerged recently.[10]

One approach that Amaq has taken to maintain the appearance of objectivity is to temper both the language it uses to describe the Islamic State's enemies, as well as avoiding any public mention of formal official ties to the group.[11] In turn, the Islamic State has never formally acknowledged Amaq as an official part of its media organization.[12] In fact, as recently as July 2018, the Islamic State released a statement clarifying that "no content whatsoever … can be attributed to the Islamic State … as long as it has not been released through the Central Media Diwan's official platforms for dissemination, and that any content released through any other platforms does not represent the Islamic State, its wilayat, and its leadership."[13] Amaq is not an official platform of the Diwan of Central Media and would therefore appear to fall under this guidance. The continued adherence to maintaining an appearance of separation from the rest of the organization and some level of objectivity is a strategic move by the group.

Part of the reason for this is that although widely acknowledged by many analysts and Western governments as a well-connected mouthpiece of the Islamic State's propaganda effort, Amaq's claims and videos remain widely circulated and cited, and not just within the jihadi community. Some news

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8   The actual claim can be seen at https://justpaste.it/rayanmashaldeath. It was also reported in media outlets. For example, see "US-led coalition strike 'kills founder of Islamic State media outlet Amaq,'" *Telegraph*, May 31, 2017. The U.S.-led coalition also mentioned Mash'al's name in connection with a series of airstrikes it carried out against the group's media organization. "Coalition Announces Death of ISIS Leaders," Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, July 27, 2017.

9   See this example of one of Amaq's earlier videos during the battle of Kobani: "Islamic State video 'shows street battle in Kobani' – video," *Guardian*, October 11, 2014.

10   This lack of mention is so much the case that Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi specifically called out the mention of the Amaq News Agency in a leaked document in September 2017 as "the only internal [document] so far that mentioned Amaq News Agency by name." Al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State."

11   Rukmini Callimachi, "A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity," *New York Times*, January 14, 2016.

12   See point #4 in Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's discussion of a video outlining the organizational structure of the caliphate. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Observations on the new Islamic State video 'Structure of the Caliphate,'" July 6, 2016.

13   "Media Notice Regarding the Attribution of Certain Written, Audio, and Video Materials To the Islamic State," July 15, 2018.

organizations regularly cite the group's claims of responsibility for operations.[14] To be clear, many news organizations that use these products do caveat their usage of the group's claims through Amaq, especially in the wake of high-profile claims that later appear to have been false.[15] To be clear, the usage of Amaq information is not just done by some news organizations when it comes to claims of responsibility. Amaq has also published videos showing the aftermath of airstrikes, including graphic images of civilian casualties. These videos have subsequently been cited by news organizations and human rights groups.[16]

Insofar as it's still needed, the documents released with this report provide conclusive and convincing evidence that, contrary to claims by the Islamic State or others, Amaq is an official node in the group's media organization. This connection is clearest in a document explaining the role of the Diwan of Central Media, in which the "official institutions" are listed, to include "a news agency which is Amaq."[17] Beyond this admission, there are two other ways in which these documents show the importance of Amaq to the Islamic State's overall media strategy.

First, the documents explicitly elevate and discuss Amaq News Agency on the same level as other officially recognized Islamic State media entities. For example, the document titled "General Guidance and Instructions" notes that one of the responsibilities of the provincial media bureaus is "publishing media releases that come from the center like the releases of (al-Furqan, al-I`tisam, al-Hayat, al-Furat and *Amaq)*" [emphasis added].[18] The same document later discusses the two types of news releases each bureau might release in its own name, but then notes that if news happens that falls outside of those two categories, such news items "could be good for publishing via *Amaq Agency* or al-Naba newspaper" [emphasis added].[19]

Al-Furqan, al-I`tisam, al-Hayat, al-Furat, and al-Naba are all officially accepted and recognized mouthpieces that produce official content from the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media. The fact that the group, in its own internal documents, lists these entities in the same sentence next to Amaq without any differentiation is a powerful testimony of how the group views Amaq.

Second, Amaq's official status with the Islamic State is solidified by the fact that these memos show that provincial media bureaus were directed to provide content to Amaq. The same document referenced earlier, "General Guidance and Instructions," has a section in it titled "General Cautions," which begins with the following statement: "We ask all the brothers to cooperate with Amaq News Agency by providing it with details about main events that take place inside the wilayat."[20] The document then proceeds to encourage the provincial media bureaus to read a document titled "Responsibilities of the Media Offices towards Amaq Agency."[21] This document, which is also being released by the CTC, begins with the strongest of endorsements for Amaq News Agency by the Islamic State's Media Monitoring

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14   There are many examples of this, but note the variety of news organizations in a number of recent incidents—May 13 attack in Surabaya, Indonesia: Muktita Suhartono and Rukmini Callimachi, "Indonesia Church Bombings Carried Out by Family With Children in Tow," *New York Times*, May 13, 2018; May 12 attack in Paris: Elaine Ganley and Angela Charlton, "Paris stabbings investigated as terror attack, claimed by IS," Associated Press, May 13, 2018; May 19, attack in Chechnya: "Islamic State claims responsibility for church attack in Chechnya," Reuters, May 20, 2018.

15   Two prominent examples of this were the June 2017 attack on the Resorts World Casino in the Philippines and the October 2017 attack at a concert in Las Vegas. For an important discussion on Amaq's claim following the Las Vegas attack, see Graeme Wood, "Why Did the Islamic State Claim the Las Vegas Shooting? Assessing the Group's Puzzling Statement," *Atlantic*, October 2, 2017.

16   Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Video from Mosul shows civilian deaths from apparent airstrike," *Washington Post*, May 4, 2017. The nonprofit organization Airwars, which reports on civilian casualties in conflict zones, will sometimes cite Amaq as either a primary or, more frequently, a secondary source. Its work can be accessed at https://airwars.org/civilian-casualty-claims/

17   "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State."

18   "General Guidance and Instructions."

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

21   Ibid.

Committee, the centralized bureau tasked with overseeing all of the Islamic State's media operations:

> "After close monitoring of Amaq Agency by the Media Monitoring Committee, it has been found that many brothers in the media offices have not realized the role of Amaq News Agency, what are their responsibilities towards it, and what are the materials they should send to it to be published? Therefore, it has become necessary to clarify this matter."[22]

The fact that the Media Monitoring Committee felt the need to draft a document to address cooperation with Amaq shows that there was not simply a passing interest in its success, but rather a view that Amaq played (and likely continues to play) a central and valuable role in the group's propaganda efforts. The document then describes each of the types of product that should be given to Amaq. Then, in an effort to drive the point home, the document concludes with the following, which is a mix of encouragement and warning:

> "Therefore, we demand from all our brothers in the media offices, may God grant them success, to cooperate with the Agency, do not ignore it, and rush to answer their needs for information and details.
>
> We also note that cooperating with Amaq Agency is counted in the monthly evaluation and effect it.
>
> We will create another evaluation for the videos that are sent to Amaq Agency and get published."[23]

The direction here, as conveyed through the petition for provincial media bureaus, as well as the reference to an evaluation (of which cooperation with Amaq forms an important part), displays the Diwan of Central Media's willingness to use both carrots and sticks, persuasion and threat, to see that Amaq has the material necessary to fulfill its role. Going to such lengths for an entity that the Diwan of Central Media did not have control of and a vested interest in would be highly unlikely. To that end, it is worth noting that a similar document is being released with this report that shows essentially the same level of expectation for how provincial media bureaus interact with the Islamic State's officially recognized radio station, Al-Bayan.[24]

Having reviewed what these documents teach us about Amaq, it is important to clarify that the insinuation is not that news organizations, human rights groups, and even open-source intelligence analysts should avoid using Amaq products completely. However, it is very important that all who use Amaq products be aware of what they are getting: highly cultivated and selected clips funneled from the Islamic State's regional media bureaus up through Amaq, which is a part of the group's central media organization. Given this knowledge, it is important that any organization considering using information obtained from the group give such information appropriate scrutiny and, if used publicly, provide a clear caveat regarding its origins.

Moreover, most observers will not be surprised by the revelation that Amaq is an official part of the Islamic State's media organization. However, the Islamic State itself has continued to avoid outright admission of this fact, which is likely an indication that it sees some value in its continued policy of not acknowledging Amaq's formal role. These documents foreclose on this course of action using the group's own internal words.

22   "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency."

23   Ibid.

24   "Responsibilities of the Media Offices Towards Al-Bayan Radio."

A Diversified Portfolio

Aside from the role of Amaq News Agency, these documents also reveal the importance the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media placed on producing (1) a wide range of media products that (2) cover a broad variety of issues from military operations to governance initiatives undertaken within the caliphate. These two components seem geared toward one of the goals that the organization has for its overall media effort, that of "showing the strength of the Islamic State and its control."[25]

First, it is intriguing to see the priority placed on creating different types of products, as well as the guidance then given in the creation of these different products. According to "General Guidance and Instructions," there are four types of releases: photo reports, videos, individual images, and statements.

Photo reports, in the group's description, are collections of photos put together with a cover page that are intended to highlight a particular aspect of what is happening in the caliphate. This includes the provision of services by the Islamic State, battles being fought, and "the status of Muslims there."[26]

Even more interesting is the fact that one of the memos outlines 10 "dos" and "don'ts" when it comes to publishing photo reports. They are not all listed here, but most have to do with ensuring each report features "a clear idea," uses the highest quality of photography available, and adheres in format and dissemination to the group's approved practices.[27]

When it comes to videos, the group similarly outlines best practices. What is unique in the video section of the memo is that the guidance much more explicitly emphasizes the importance of having videos of high quality. In "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid," the Diwan of Central Media explicitly states that "raw materials don't get to be published as is."[28] In "General Guidance and Instructions," there are a number of admonitions regarding the importance of maintaining the highest of quality:

- "When there are big mistakes, the video should not be published, all mistakes should be corrected: the small and big ones"

- "The brothers should appear in a very suitable appearance, and they should be well spoken, and we do not accept anything less than that"

- "Filming should be done using more than one camera, and any bad filming using one camera will be rejected"[29]

Among the products the regional media offices are tasked with producing and disseminating, those related to military successes seem to be the most important. It is for this reason that the local media

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25   "A Short Summary for the Media Mujahid."

26   "General Guidance and Instructions."

27   Ibid.

28   "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid." What is particularly interesting about this statement that raw materials cannot be published is that this is almost precisely the type of content Amaq News Agency has published in great abundance. It is curious then that this pamphlet does not mention that those types of videos should be sent to Amaq. One possible explanation for this is that the pamphlet was created prior to the formation of Amaq News Agency, as it does not mention Amaq anywhere else in the pamphlet. Another possible explanation is that the group, at this point in time, did not distinguish between standards for "official" releases as opposed to releases through Amaq, so it saw no need mention it. Finally, it is possible that the group saw no need to address Amaq in this pamphlet, given that other materials existed that would guide media operatives in what types of content they would send to Amaq.

29   These three citations all come from the document titled "General Guidance and Instructions."

official is charged with closely coordinating with the military media,[30] so that potential propaganda products are not missed. To drive the point home, the document emphasizes that missing a battle is missing that which "[was] written with the blood and souls of your brothers."[31]

In addition to military-themed releases, there were also three other categories the local media official was instructed to create:

• Sharia news: news related to al-Hisba, courts, Da`wa, mosques

• Services: all the services take place inside the *wilaya*, such as fixing and cleaning roads, water, electricity and other related topics

• Miscellaneous: various other events not included in the topics above like the event of snowfall in areas of the Islamic State and the rise of the water level in a river[32]

For these last three categories, there was much less discussion regarding content and procedures than with military-themed news, at least in the documents referenced here. There was discussion, however, with regard to the propaganda angle of punishments carried out by Islamic State fighters and officials. In the case of punishments, three items of instruction were presented:

• "[Do] not show faces of Muslims receiving Hudud, except for the apostates"

• "Advise the brother recit[ing] the statement to advise the brothers not to show signs of happiness for the killing or whipping of Muslims"

• "Avoid filming the apostates saying the Shahadah before executing them, and if it happens, it should be removed during the editing of the clip"

This last quotation is particularly interesting. There is a religious debate among Islamic scholars regarding whether or not saying the Shadadah before death is something that would grant an automatic entrance to heaven. Neither the details nor resolution of that debate is germane to this report. However, the fact that the Islamic State's media organization felt the need to mention it in its instructions shows the importance of this issue. For whatever reason, the group felt that the mention of the Shadadah during an execution took away from the image it wished to convey. In any case, these instructions remind us of a very important lesson regarding the Islamic State's media activities: just like all propaganda, they are carefully choreographed, edited, and distributed in order to show the group in the best possible light. In particular, these instructions speak to the group's desire to hide the true emotional and physical reactions of people living under its rule.

Media Centralization

The third area of interest covered in this report is the way these documents reveal how the Islamic State's headquarters bureaucracy tried to exercise control over the regional bureaus. Indeed, the very existence of these documents (which are likely only a fraction of the whole) testifies to the Diwan of Central Media's desire to control the media bureaus headquartered in each of the group's provinces.

This desire is reemphasized in "Organizational Structure of the Media Office," which is a pamphlet outlining the media organization of the Islamic State. In this pamphlet, the group offers clear and

30 The "military media" likely refers to a media operative or fighter with media duties who works within individual military units. According to one of these documents, the military media official within a unit has two roles: to document battles and "educate" fighters using propaganda. In other words, he is to make sure that propaganda is created from his unit, but that his unit is also continually fed propaganda to keep it animated and directed toward the group's objectives. "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media."

31 "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media."

32 These categories and references are not direct citations, but are compiled from the document "General Guidance and Instructions." These same categories are referenced in the document titled "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid."

detailed organizational diagrams and lists of responsibilities for how the local media offices should be structured and run.[33] For example, the translated diagram illustrating the structure of the local media office appears in Figure 1. Beyond structures, another document, "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State," explicitly states that the goal of the Diwan of Central Media is to "standardize the language used by monitoring, supervising, and reviewing the production before publishing it."[34] There is also an injunction in the same document to "hear, obey, and abide by the guidance of the Central Media."[35]
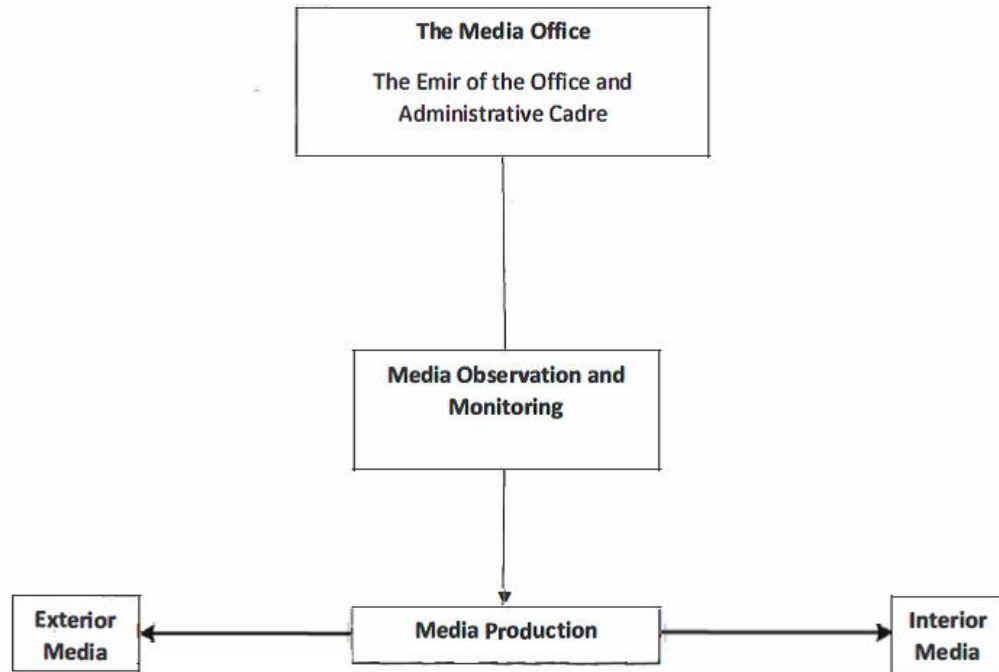
Figure 1: Translated Diagram of Local Media Bureau Structure

Beyond this type of specific guidance, there are four key points in these documents, which, when taken together, show how the Islamic State media arm undertook significant efforts to centralize control over the production and dissemination of its message.

Exhibit #1 of Centralization Preference: The Dos and Don'ts for Local Media Bureaus

First, the documents show the Diwan of Central Media's careful articulation of both the specific topic areas and activities for which the local media bureaus are responsible. They also contain sections that discuss in some detail the specific actions that local media bureaus are not supposed to undertake.

This is especially clear in a Diwan of Central Media pamphlet titled "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid," which was intended to be given to media operatives to help them learn their duties.[36] The cover page of this pamphlet appears in Figure 2. In this pamphlet, there is a key distinction drawn between interior publication and exterior publication. Interior publication refers to propaganda products that the local media office is responsible for distributing to both soldiers and civilians located

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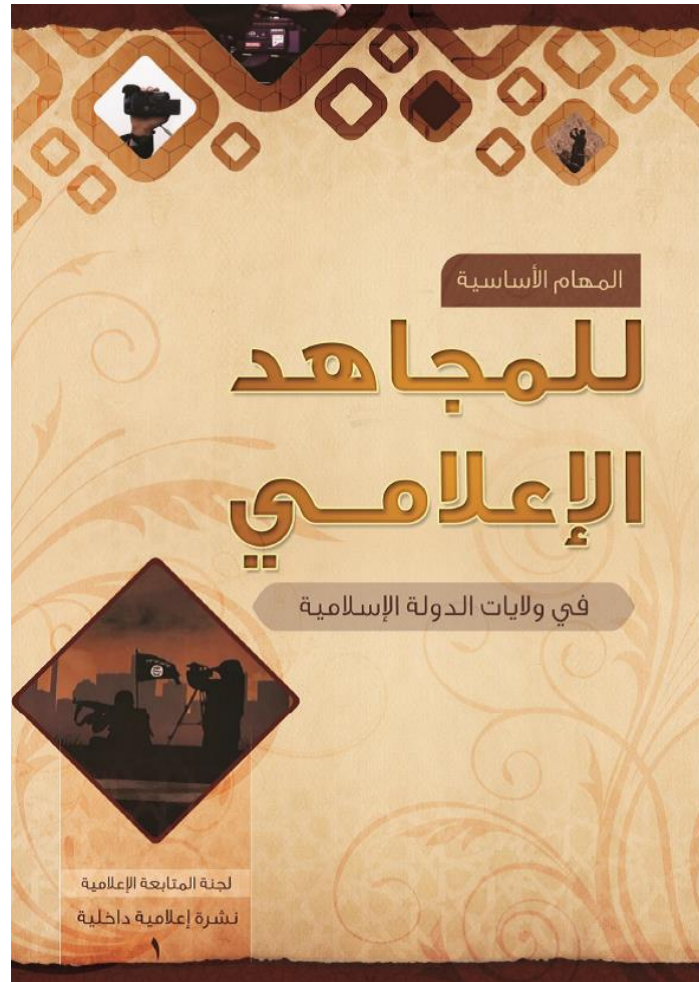33   "Organizational Structure of the Media Office."

34   "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State."

35   Ibid.

36   "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid."

within its geographic locale. In particular, there are two classes of audiences for interior publication: (1) "the soldiers of the Islamic state ... [in] headquarters, camps and ribat lines [frontlines]" and (2) "public Muslims." The delivery of information to the latter group is directed to occur at media points, mosques, Da'wa meetings, official Islamic State government buildings, visits to villages and rural areas, and checkpoints.[37]

Figure 2: Cover Page of "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid"

To carry out the tasks of interior publication, the Media Monitoring Committee, in the document titled "Organizational Structure of the Media Office," recommends that each local media office create four teams with the following names and responsibilities:

1. "Publishing and distributing team – Among the duties of this team is to deliver media materials that have been produced to the soldiers of the Islamic State ... [and] to the citizens of the Islamic State

2. Media points team – Among its duties is to manage media points, monitor closely what has been produced, and distribute it and play it [to the public]

3. Flicks and ads team – Install flicks and posters inside the wilayah

37   Ibid.

4. Al-Bayan radio team – Coordinate with the central radio [team] to broadcast radio inside the wilayah and record audio materials"[38]

It is important to note that these local production teams are not just responsible for distributing their own products, but are also tasked with ensuring that they distribute media products that come from outside the bureau as well. In other words, the Islamic State used centralization not only to control the quality and quantity of products put out, but also to institutionalize an efficient way to get information in front of the target audiences living inside its territory.

Exterior publication, on the other hand, refers to the dissemination of "what has been documented to the exterior world via the internet."[39] What is important to note is that, based on the document, the Diwan of Central Media is very clear that it is to serve as the focal point for the distribution of external content. In response to a question in the document as to whether the local media bureaus are allowed to publish externally, the emphatic demands of the Diwan of Central Media comes through in the language:

> "The exterior publishing (via the internet) is the responsibility of the central media *exclusively*. The media bureaus of the wilayah are authorized to publish *according to restrictions and directions centrally formed that are executed under the supervision of the Media Monitoring Committee of the Diwan of Media. And it [the Diwan of Central Media] has the right to withdraw that authority* from the wilayah and deprive it access to the outside world in case it doesn't abide by the media policy according to the restrictions and directions put by the Central Media Diwan."[40] [emphasis added]

Such a clear delineation of duties, particularly as it applies to external publication or material seen by the world at large, speaks to the group's desire to control the creation of the message as much as possible. This stands in contrast to the group's treatment of the propaganda dissemination process, which is more decentralized, although not entirely. In the dissemination process, the initial posting of non-Amaq Islamic State products is done by Nashir channel through Telegram, whereas Amaq products are posted on the Amaq channel on Telegram. From these initial central distribution points, the process then becomes rapidly decentralized. This hybrid centralized-decentralized process has been undertaken by the group to magnify the reach of its messages.

Exhibit #2 of Centralization Preference: The Centrally Directed Inputs to the Details of Propaganda

The second key evidence of the group's desire to centralize its media operations can be found in the documents' detailed discussion of the media editing process, through which the group creates and refines its propaganda products before they become publicized. What is particularly important to note is that these techniques were compiled and distributed from a centrally controlled location, the Diwan of Central Media. A number of these details, particularly those related to video and photograph techniques, have already been described in the preceding sections of this report.

Still, there are additional details, ranging from the trivial to the significant, that illustrate the way in which the Diwan of Central Media tried to exercise control. On the seemingly trivial side, there is a reminder that "the word (Caliphate) should not be used to name certain things like rockets, cannons, cars, etc.)."[41] It is relatively easy to imagine the set of circumstances that led to this directive, particularly among the eager and excited fighters who make up the group's ranks. That said, it seems a relatively

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38 "Organizational Structure of the Media Office."

39 "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid."

40 Ibid.

41 "General Guidance and Instructions."

detailed and small issue to address in the general issue instructions to the group's media operatives.

On the more significant side, this same document contains the instruction to use only the official Islamic State flag in propaganda products. "No report is accepted with a different flag like (a white flag) or any other flag rather than the Islamic State flag."[42] Although this may seem like a small issue, the Islamic State's flag is a significant part of the group's overall visibility around the world. Not only has the group featured its flag in propaganda releases, but it has also become an item used by individuals who seek to perpetrate violence in the name of the group around the world.[43] Given this direction, clearly the group wants to stay consistent in how it portrays the flag in its media.

Exhibit #3 of Centralization Preference: Evaluation Scheme for Local Media Bureaus

The third way in which these documents demonstrate an attempt by the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media to centralize the media process is evident in the existence of an evaluation scheme designed to offer feedback and increase the quality of work being done in its media arena.

The method for evaluating video products is highlighted in a coding rubric put out by the Media Monitoring Committee, a part of the Diwan of Central Media.[44] Per this document, titled "The Table to Evaluate Video Releases," there are three components to the scoring of each video, which is out of 100 percent:

1. "Scenario, idea and comment – weighted at 30%;"

2. "Professional filming and quality of raw materials –weighted at 30%;"

3. "Montage, graphics, effects, editing and choosing scenes – weighted at 40%"

While the rubric does not go into detail regarding what specific factors should be considered in each of these three general categories, it is clear that there is emphasis placed on both cinematography as well as narrative development. These scores, once compiled for each video, are then combined into an overall score, with videos achieving a score of more than 75% labeled "excellent," those scoring between 60% and 69% designated "Very good," those between 50% and 59% referred to as "Good," and finally those with between 40% and 49% given unremarkable distinction of "acceptable."

The Media Monitoring Committee, which "The Table to Evaluate Video Releases" states will conduct this evaluation on a monthly basis, notes that the purpose of the evaluation is three-fold. First, the evaluation should help "to maintain the required quantity and quality of official productions." In another document, this requirement is referred to as the "minimum required" level of production and places responsibility for meeting it squarely on the shoulders of the leader of the local media office.[45] Second, the evaluation is seen as a mechanism for helping bureaus to see where they come up short and "take the necessary steps" to address deficiencies. The third outlined purpose, which is in part implicit in the document, is to provide a baseline assessment that can be used to track improvement. The fact that each release was given a label ranking from "excellent" to "acceptable" provides the group with the opportunity to evaluate the change in individual media bureaus over time, as well as to identify best practices and top-performing bureaus in a relatively simple fashion.

Another document, "A Table of Statistics for the Video Releases Produced by the Media Offices and

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42   Ibid.

43   Liz Burke, "ISIS flag has been brandished by extremists in Australia for at least two years," news.com.au, August 27, 2014; "Sydney siege: gunman 'demands Islamic State flag,'" *Telegraph*, December 15, 2014; "How did an Islamic State flag end up in Edmonton? Flag sellers offer theories," CBC, October 9, 2017; Michelle Mark, "The NYC attacker asked to display an ISIS flag in his hospital room and planned to attack the Brooklyn Bridge," Business Insider, November 1, 2017.

44   "The Table to Evaluate Video Releases."

45   "Organizational Structure of the Media Office."

Their Evaluation for the month of Rajab," shows in detail how this evaluation process played out in the month of Rajab. This document is a table of 34 videos and the corresponding scores across each of the three categories described above.[46] There is no year on the document itself, but the videos evaluated were released between April and May 2016. There are three additions to this detailed breakdown that differ from the format that the group presented in the coding summary (in the document titled "The Table to Evaluate Video Releases").

First, the category of "weak" is added for videos that have a score of below 35. Two videos fell into that category. Second, a line below the scores for all the releases notes that "top quality" video releases are said to be those achieving a score of 70 or above. A total of 14 releases earned this distinction in the month of Rajab. The third is a summary of the month's releases at the bottom of this particular document; the individual who compiled this list has broken down the month's releases into categories of distinction.

Overall, these documents show an effort to centralize control through the creation of a system of assessment that will allow the Media Monitoring Committee to have a clear, unified system through which it can evaluate and control the large number of local media bureaus working under its direction. A related but equally important point is that this document provides evidence of a bureaucratic approach to centralizing control, one that has much in common with a modern public affairs firm.

The document that contains the rubric for evaluating videos also mentions that a top-10 videos list will be released once the monthly scoring of videos has been compiled. Indeed, something akin to a top-10 video poster was published by the Islamic State a number of times from April 2015 to October 2016. The poster contained 10 separate screenshots, one from each of the top-10 videos. It is interesting to note that early during this period of time, the group referred to the 10 videos as either "best" or "top." However, it eventually switched to referring to the 10 videos simply as "selected." Regardless of the name of the poster, in total the group published 26 such posters from April 2015 to October 2016.

This same time range also saw two other forms for publicizing their "selected" videos. On six occasions, the Islamic State's Al-Hayat organization also released a short video with clips from each of the 10 videos. Additionally, the first and second issues of the Islamic State's foreign language magazine Rumiyah, which were published in September 2016 and October 2016, respectively, also contained one page highlighting the group's 10 "selected" videos from the month. This practice then stopped, but was started again (with one difference) in Rumiyah 6, published in February 2017, and continued until Rumiyah 11, in July 2017. The difference was that instead of 10 "featured" videos, these later appearances only showed three "featured" videos. It is unknown if these videos represented "top" videos according to an internal evaluation or not.

This semantic difference between "selected" and "top" appears to indicate a very deliberate choice by the group. This can be seen by looking at another document released with this report, "Top Ten Releases Month of Rajab," in which the group refers to these videos from the month of Rajab internally as "top" videos.[47] Although no date was listed on the document itself, the 10 videos referred to in the internal document as "top" correspond with the "selected" 10 graphic released by the group in May 2016, which is shown in Figure 3. Additionally, those same videos were presented in a short video of two minutes, 51 seconds publicly released by the Islamic State in early May 2016. In the video, a screen shot of which can be seen in Figure 4, the group counts down the "selected" videos for the month of Rajab from 10 to one while playing short clips of each.

46   "A Table of Statistics for the Video Releases Produced by the Media Offices and Their Evaluation for the month of Rajab."

47   "Top Ten Releases Month of Rajab."

Figure 3: Individual Graphic Released With "Selected" Ten Videos, May 2016

Figure 4: Screenshot from "Selected" Ten Video Presentation, May 2016

Although the presence of an evaluation framework specifically for videos is intriguing, within the documents there is an allusion to an even more encompassing evaluation system. Indeed, two of the documents released with this report seem to refer to an evaluation system that goes beyond a focus on individual products, and is instead an actual evaluation of the individual media bureaus themselves.

In the first document, "General Guidance and Instructions," the local media bureaus are asked to provide a variety of monthly statistics regarding how many products and publications they are putting out. This type of monitoring sends the message that the Diwan of Central Media is watching output levels, and it would also allow the Diwan of Central Media to quickly and easily compare productivity across the various local bureaus under its control.[48]

The second reference, however, makes clear that this evaluation system was not simply related to the number of products. It comes from the document titled "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency" and is particularly evident from the following two sentences:

"We also note that cooperating with Amaq Agency is counted in the monthly evaluation and effect it."

"We will create another evaluation for the videos that are sent to Amaq Agency and get published."[49]

The second of these two sentences, in particular, specifically references "another evaluation" that might be made specific to videos sent to Amaq. This seems to indicate that an evaluation was already ongoing and that the evaluation was not limited to one specific type of product or metric. While we do not currently have more information about the group's evaluation process outside of that used for specific releases, these two sentences suggest that other factors, including cooperation with Amaq News Agency, impact the overall evaluation the Diwan of Central Media appears to have been conducting of the local media bureaus. In short, it seems that the Diwan of Central Media was not just exercising oversight in regard to the number of media products each local bureau was able to put out, but that it also cared on some level about the cooperative spirit and the quality of products that came out.

One of the likely byproducts of this evaluation system helps explain why the group was able to create such a vibrant media organization. Indeed, an evaluation system such as the one described here may very well have led to a sense of competition among each of the media bureaus in order to receive the highest evaluations from the Diwan of Central Media. That said, these documents do not provide any insight into what carrots or sticks (if they existed at all) the Diwan of Central Media had at its disposal

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48   "General Guidance and Instructions."

49   "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency."

to reward or sanction media bureaus that either exceled or fell short of expectations as revealed by the evaluation process.

Exhibit #4 of Centralization Preference: Multiple Stages of Approval for Publication

The fourth major demonstration of the group's desire to exercise central control over media activities that is revealed in these documents is the group's use of a tiered-system of quality control for the production and dissemination of propaganda using encrypted communications software. These documents provide a detailed view of the way in which the group, at least at the point in time when these documents were written, managed the propaganda activities of the local media bureaus. This process, as described in "General Guidance and Instructions," is summarized in Figure 5.[50]

The process consists of a series of three private group rooms on an online messaging service such as Telegram or WhatsApp. Each of these rooms has a specific purpose in the process whereby officials in the Diwan of Central Media and local media bureaus could communicate with each other and move a product from its initial draft to the final version ready to be pushed out through the group's dissemination process.

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50   "General Guidance and Instructions."
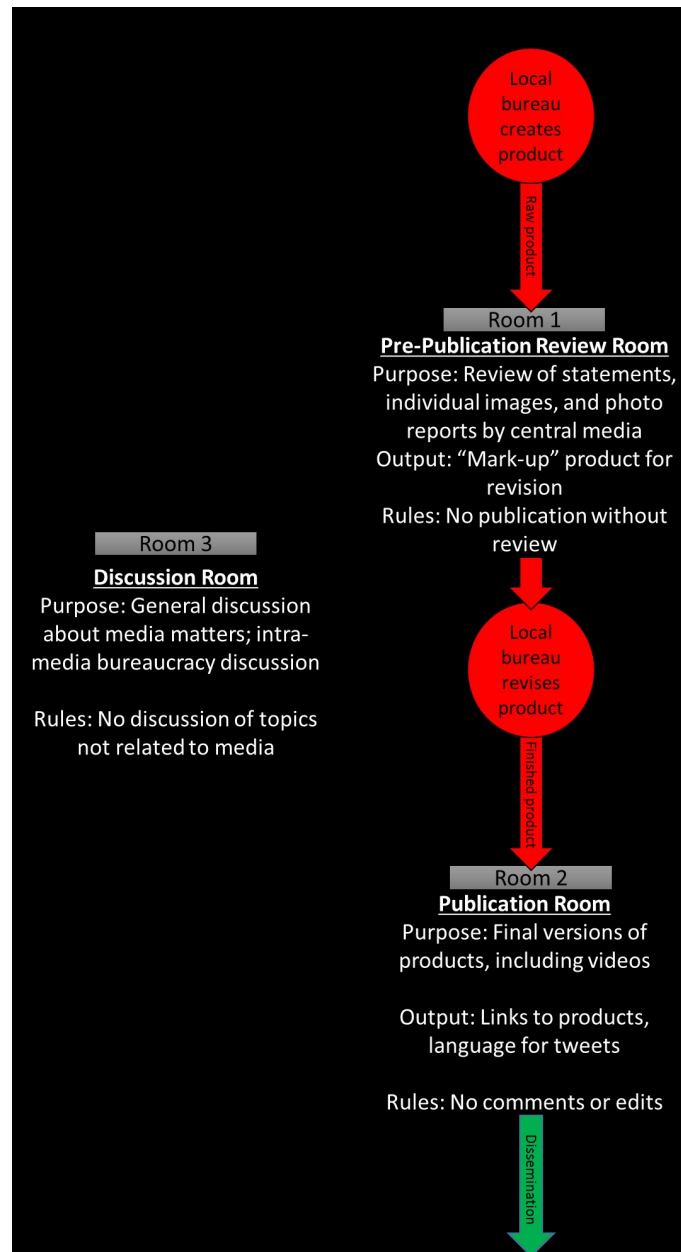
Figure 5: Islamic State's Three-Pronged Approval and Feedback System

As seen in Figure 5, the quality-control process used by the group has elements of review, feedback, and revision. At least at the time these memos were written, local media officials, though they may generate the initial version of a propaganda product, do not have *carte blanche* to publish whatever products they see fit. In one of the documents, the Diwan of Central Media emphasized that the role of local media bureaus was documentation, not publication.[51] In sum, it seems that the Diwan of Central Media used the process outlined in Figure 5 as a mechanism to verify that the guidance discussed above was being followed.

These examples of the group's efforts to centralize control in its media operations show an organization

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51   "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State."

that is thinking creatively, but also managerially, about both the challenges it faces in the media sphere as well as the opportunities available to advance the group's interests. How this centralized effort has weathered the group's latest setbacks is unknown. While recent research has shown that the number of propaganda products distributed by the organization has dropped, it is unclear how the group's overall setbacks may or may not have changed the underlying media organization itself.[52]

Despite not having more recent documents that show how the group has adapted its media organization to fit its current environment, we can speculate regarding a number of changes that might have taken place or may still take place in the future. To be clear, these changes are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive in terms of the possibilities, but they seem likely given what these documents teach us about the organization's approach to the media.

It may be the case that the continued monitoring and enforcement of so many rules may prove difficult given territorial setbacks, personnel losses, and continued counterterrorism pressure. Consequently, the Diwan of Central Media may choose to reduce the rules and regulations it has put in place in order to allow the local media bureaus more independent action without its approval, particularly if the pressure makes approval hard to obtain in an efficient manner.

Of course, a reduction in oversight is not costless. In this scenario, the Diwan of Central Media will have to balance the possible loss of editorial and quality control with the ability to get more products out. Indeed, such a decentralization and deregulation could have a number of effects. It may lead to reduced quality or errant messaging from local bureaus. This latter scenario, of local bureaus operating more out of step with the Diwan of Central Media, may occur regardless of whether rules are relaxed if the local media bureaus become frustrated with a slower and less efficient authorization process.

On the other hand, the group may choose to be even more centralized and vigilant of its media production process. It may view the setbacks as the time to be careful and calculated as it waits for the chance for more favorable conditions to emerge in which it can resume its efforts. In this circumstance, we might also expect to see a reduced number of releases. It may be less due to capability and capacity and more a conscious choice by the media organization to wait for the 'right time.'

Regardless of how the organization changes, the Islamic State's media efforts have proven resilient in the past, and the group is very likely to continue to adapt and evolve in order to both maintain the brand that it has created as well as produce the products that are necessary to inspire individuals to take action on its behalf around the world. And, if these documents are any indication, that adaptation will be driven (or, at the very least, co-opted) by the central media organization.

Keeping Information Secure

Given how much the media organization was tasked with doing on a daily basis, media operatives were likely some of the most well-traveled and well-connected individuals within the Islamic State's territory. The recognition of this special access was not lost on the Media Monitoring Committee, which put together a pamphlet (dated approximately between October and November 2015) specifically for purposes of information security in which the following statement is made:

> "It is not hidden from you that the media bureau is a huge storage that contains information that not all of the individuals inside the group have."[53]

Of course, keeping this information secure was not just about preventing others in the group from

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52   A recent CTC study highlighted the fact that when it comes to official visual products released by the group (videos and photo reports), there had been a 94-percent decrease in the actual number of products released by the group. Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

53   "Information Security."

accessing it, but was likely much more focused on keeping the information from the group's enemies. This possibility is specifically mentioned in a document titled "Information Security" as one of the primary purposes of information security:

> "[Encryption] is an important step because the media material usually contains important information and data (events and faces of the brothers), which the enemy is keen to get."[54]

In general, the approach taken toward information security involved three general lines of effort: encryption, physical security of media information and locations, and the cautious use of social media by media operatives.

On the matter of encryption, there was a clear effort to both educate media operatives about the purpose of such applications and guide them toward particular applications that the group preferred to use. For example, this document includes straightforward descriptions about the importance of using encryption on media files at all stages of the production process. For purposes of encrypting files, there is also an indication of a preference for operatives to use TrueCrypt, even indicating that they have attached a description of TrueCrypt to this pamphlet.[55]

The use of encryption, of course, does not apply only to file storage and transfer. The documented "Information Security" also contains instructions regarding the importance of encryption in the communications of media operatives. In both this document as well at least one other, media operatives are encouraged to communicate using a variety of applications, including Pidgin, Telegram, and WhatsApp.[56]

The group also encouraged media operatives to make sure that their offices and the information with which they worked was either physically secure or otherwise inaccessible to intrusion from outsiders. For instance, when using portable media devices such as flash drives, the group's pamphlet offered descriptions of and encouraged the use of two pieces of software: Eraser and CCleaner.[57] The purpose of these efforts, in part, is to make sure that files deleted from hard drives, flash drives, or other electronic storage devices are not able to be easily recovered should the devices themselves be captured by the group's enemies.

Another way that the group sought to increase the physical security of the media offices was by not allowing the use of Wi-Fi, instructing the group to "remove Wi-Fi from the media office."[58] This same document contained directions to only connect a small number of devices inside the media office to the internet using a LAN cable, but it was very specific that encrypted files should never be opened on any of the computers that were connected to the internet. It appears that even though some of the computers could be connected to the internet, the local media office was told that the actual hardware that provided internet access should still be placed "away from the office."

Finally, the document titled "Information Security" emphasizes the importance of media personnel exercising care and diligence related to their social media activities. A focus on the online activities of the group's members is not new. Indeed, the Islamic State has long recognized the potential perils of its

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54 "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid."

55 TrueCrypt, while once a tool toward which Islamic State operatives were positively disposed, is no longer updated and does not appear to be recommended for use by jihadis. Instead, they have taken to creating their own products for encryption. Lily Hay Newman, "Mysterious 'MuslimCrypt' App Helps Jihadists Send Covert Messages," *Wired*, March 29, 2018. For more on the nature and innovation related to jihadi use of online security measures, see Aaron Brantly, "Innovation and Adaptation in Jihadist Digital Security," *Survival* 59:1 (2017): pp. 79-102.

56 "Information Security;" "General Guidance and Instructions."

57 "Information Security."

58 Ibid.

soldiers using social media.[59] However, given the nature of the media organization's work, there seems to be a justified amount of concern about instructing media operatives in their social media behavior.

The suggestions offered in this document are simple, but speak to some of the fears that the group had regarding its media operatives. Media operatives were encouraged to avoid discussion of their media work and to not represent themselves as officially connected to the organization to anyone outside of the group's territory in any social media communications. They were also told that they needed to be cautious regarding the names they used for themselves online, particularly if they were using a fake name that they had already used previously. All of these instructions indicate that the group was aware that its media personnel in particular were likely to be targets of counterterrorism efforts based on their online activities, and it consequently included instructions to warn them the danger inherent in their work.[60]

Conclusion

This report utilized internal documents, memorandums, and pamphlets captured by coalition forces in Afghanistan to shine light on the Islamic State's propaganda efforts and offer a more in-depth look than has previously been available at how the group managed its media operations. More specifically, this report identified four key points of interest from these documents related to the Islamic State's media organization and efforts.

First, Amaq News Agency, whether or not it was independent at some point, has been subsumed by the Islamic State's central media bureaucracy. Though this has never been officially confirmed by the group, its own memoranda, released on the CTC website together with this report, clearly place Amaq in a position of prominence among its other flagship products such as the weekly magazine Al-Naba.

Second, the Islamic State's media organization has spent a significant amount of time creating different products of varying themes. This fact has been readily apparent to even occasional observers of its products, but the memoranda released with this report offer more insight into the specific guidance that the Diwan of Central Media gave to local media bureaus in support of these efforts.

Third, the Islamic State's Diwan of Central Media has gone to great lengths to centralize the propaganda production and dissemination process. It has done so through written guidance, an evaluation system for both bureaus and products, and a quality-control process that provides near real-time interaction between itself and the local media bureaus.

Fourth, these documents show the group's recognition that its media organization, a vital component of its operations, also represented potentially one of the biggest vulnerabilities when it came to the leaking or loss of information critical to the group's security. In an effort to mitigate this vulnerability, the group emphasized the importance of information security especially by the individuals and within the offices that made up its media bureaus.

These four key points are not comprehensive in terms of all that can be learned from these documents. That is part of the reason the documents themselves are being released with this report. It is hoped that they will form an important part of continued research on the Islamic State's propaganda efforts.

Beyond these four points, the documents have also made a broader contribution to our understanding of how and why the Islamic State has managed to create, produce, and disseminate propaganda on

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59   As noted by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, the Islamic State's efforts to deal with social media activity goes back to 2014, when the group first began issuing guidance to limit the personal use of social media by members of the organization. See Specimens 11Q, 28L, and 34D on al-Tamimi's document archive. This issue was also addressed in Bryan Price and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "The Islamic State's Internal Rifts and Social Media Ban," *CTC Perspectives*, June 21, 2017.

60   As highlighted by recent research, the danger faced by media personnel was not hypothetical. See the discussion of media martyrs in Milton, pp. 6-7.

such a large scale for so many years. It is not the result of luck or due to the fact that the group has relied exclusively on a broader network of supporters and sympathizers to do the heavy lifting for the group. Instead, these documents reveal that the Islamic State created and maintained a large set of rules and processes related to the production of propaganda. It was this underlying structure that led to the unity of purpose across the group's local media bureaus, allowing the organization to create not just individual products, but a broader narrative of itself as a large and well-functioning caliphate.

Indeed, this initial look at the documents shows both the attention to detail that the group took in forming and guiding its media organization, as well as the value that the organization placed on its ability to shape the narrative it wanted about itself. Given that the Islamic State is likely to remain a threat for the foreseeable future, better understanding of how its media side functions, organizes itself, and trains its operatives will certainly be an important part of countering the group's future efforts to propagate its ideas and actions.

Finally, this work was only possible because of the availability of a small batch of documents related to the Islamic State's media organization. The insights discussed in the preceding pages are a testament to the value of using primary source documentation to better understand how covert organizations like the Islamic State address management issues, create policies and procedures, and attempt to instill order within their organization. Continued efforts to utilize such materials in the future will provide much needed insights on these organizations and hopefully assist those designing solutions to deal with them.