COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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DAESH PROPAGANDA, BEFORE AND AFTER ITS COLLAPSE

Countering Violent Extremism

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Abstract

This report compares two archives of official Daesh media that were compiled four years apart. It explores the nuances of the group's worldview and tracks how external and internal situational exigencies impacted them during its formative years as a caliphate. It finds that the organisation's media infrastructure was about one tenth as productive in mid-2019 as it was in mid-2015. The data also show that it was spending more time covering the pursuits of its global network in 2019 than in 2015. Finally, the data point towards a substantial thematic rearrangement in the organisation's overarching propaganda narrative that manifested in it shifting its story away from millenarian utopianism and towards military denialism. In sum, the data indicate that by 2019 Daesh's propagandists were far less productive and their aggregate product was more international and less focused on civilian issues. This shift points towards a new phase in the group's political marketing trajectory, one focused more on survival than on expansion.

Introduction

In 2019, Daesh's proto-state collapsed.[1] Having recently been ejected from most of Syria and Iraq, its beleaguered 'caliphate' started the year on the banks of the Euphrates River in Baghuz with thousands of fighters and their families surrounded on all sides. The group's encampments there were a far cry from the urban centres it had once presided over, and their decrepit state a near-perfect analogy for the group's

overall circumstances five years on from its caliphate declaration.[2]

For a brief moment between 2014 and 2016, Daesh's attempts at statehood looked as if they could be viable. In a matter of months, the group had expanded across Syria and Iraq. By autumn of 2014[3] they had seized control over a territory that was, by some accounts, bigger than the United Kingdom. However, this period of primacy was not to last. Indeed, if 2015 marked Daesh's territorial peak, 2016 was the beginning of its unravelling. In early summer of that year, the Iraqi Security Forces mounted a large-scale assault on the city of Fallujah, its most important holdout in central Iraq. After just a few weeks of fighting, it was forced to pull out of the city. This retreat marked the beginning of a sequence of setbacks that eventually culminated in Daesh being ousted from Mosul in 2017. Meanwhile in Syria, it faced similar pressures. A host of actors—some coalition-backed, others not—were steadily recapturing its territories in the north and south of the country before eventually routing its forces in Raqqa, Mayadin, and al-Bu Kamal in late 2017.

Daesh's 'Islamic state' disintegrated in the years running up to 2019. Although its governance structures unravelled, the group did not disappear as an insurgent organisation. Rather, it metamorphosed into a network of armed cadres charged with systematically destabilising its former territories.

To help guide its supporters through this overt-to-covert metamorphosis, the organisation relied on its strategic communicators—the people spearheading the rebranding of its image. This research paper explores their work, comparing two complete archives of Daesh media output compiled by the author four years apart. The first dataset comprises all official media releases published in the Islamic month of Shawwal in the year 1436 AH (17 July to 15 August 2015), when Daesh was at its most powerful.[4] The second comprises all official media releases published in the same month four years later—that is, Shawwal in the year 1440 AH (20 May to 20 June 2019)—just after its proto-state had collapsed. The qualitative and quantitative features of these two archives are reviewed here to demonstrate how profoundly Daesh changed as it was forced from territorial zenith to landless nadir.

The first section provides a brief review of the existing literature on Daesh's approach to strategic communications and describes the data collection methodology. The next section considers each of the archives in turn, first structurally, then geographically, and finally thematically. The main findings from both sections are reviewed as a whole in the conclusion with a view to equipping practitioners, policymakers, and interested readers with practicable insights into what Daesh's future may hold.

Research review

Daesh's approach to outreach is one of the most researched aspects of the organisation. Most recent analysis explores the group's activities in one of four areas. The first is genre-based content analysis dominated by explorations of Daesh's English-language magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, with some researchers also turning their attention to the Arabic-language equivalent, *al-Naba'*.[5] There have also been genre-specific analyses of other media used by the group including infographics, videos, and photo-essays.[67] The diversity of subject matter notwithstanding, these studies often reach similar conclusions regarding the presence of mainstream visual rhetoric and outreach motivations like audience and brand development.

The second area of research revolves around the communication dynamics of the organisation's support-base on social-networking and file-sharing platforms. Between 2014 and 2017 in particular, Daesh's networks on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube attracted a great deal of attention as researchers mapped their posts using a range of machine-assisted methodologies.[8] With a few exceptions,[9] most studies in this field track the decline of Daesh-related activity on the major social media platforms and note the Daesh adherents' increasing reliance on the newer, privacy-maximising service Telegram.[10]

The third area of research focuses on doctrine and deployment. Based on Daesh's own literature regarding strategic communications, as well as one drawn from in-theatre interviews with people living in Daesh territories, these accounts shed light on the strategic logic of the group's forays into outreach, both on- and offline, and, in so doing, provide a crucial grounding for understanding the full spectrum of its approach to propaganda.[11]

The fourth area of research, to which the present paper contributes, is the bulk analysis of Daesh propaganda.[12] Generally speaking, the findings of these studies are consistent with one another, each identifying a net decline in propaganda distributed by the organisation since 2015. It is worth noting that the consensus is not quite complete, with one account contending that there has been no such deceleration.[13] While a number of these bulk studies now exist, there has not yet been a comparison of the Daesh brand as it was in 2015 at the height of its proto-state ambitions and the Daesh brand as it is now in 2019, attempting to survive after a conventional defeat. This study fills that gap.

Methodology

Due to changes in Daesh's media distribution strategy over the last few years, the two archives were collected using different methodologies. In mid-2015, when the first dataset was compiled, Daesh disseminated all of its official media through Twitter, with one of its most important outlets, the A'maq News Agency, also publishing content through websites on Tumblr and Wordpress.[14] While many Daesh supporters attempted to broadcast the full extent of its media output through their accounts on Twitter, the platform's increasingly strict suspension policy meant that it was not possible to rely on any one of them for complete data collection. For that reason, the archive was compiled daily by sifting through the hashtags Daesh associated with each of its official media outlets.

In the years that followed, Daesh transformed its online presence as platform algorithms grew better at undermining its efforts.[15] Twitter became hostile territory, not only for the group's official media disseminators, but also for their audiences. The story was similar on Facebook and YouTube. In this context of rising online inhospitality, the Russian-owned messaging platform Telegram came to the fore. At the time of writing, it remains the single most important platform for Daesh's communications.[16] It was from Telegram that the second archive, compiled in mid-2019, was drawn. During the month in question, two official outlets were charged with distributing the entirety of Daesh's online communications. One was Nashir, which translates from Arabic to English as 'Publisher', and the other was the A'maq News Agency, the aforementioned Daesh newswire. Operating alongside these, a supporter-run dissemination network called the Nashir News Agency aggregated posts from both Nashir and A'maq on a minute-by-minute basis and published them simultaneously all in one place. It was from this network that the second dataset was collected. To ensure completeness, all data were cross-referenced with output from the Nashir and A'maq News Agency channels on Telegram.

Both archives were coded using the same nine variables—date, type, state, location, media production unit, theme, sub-theme, title, and language—and each of the items was assigned a unique identification code. To avoid repetition and subsequent skewing of the data, operation claims, which are always aggregated in news bulletins and newspapers, were not counted in either archive.

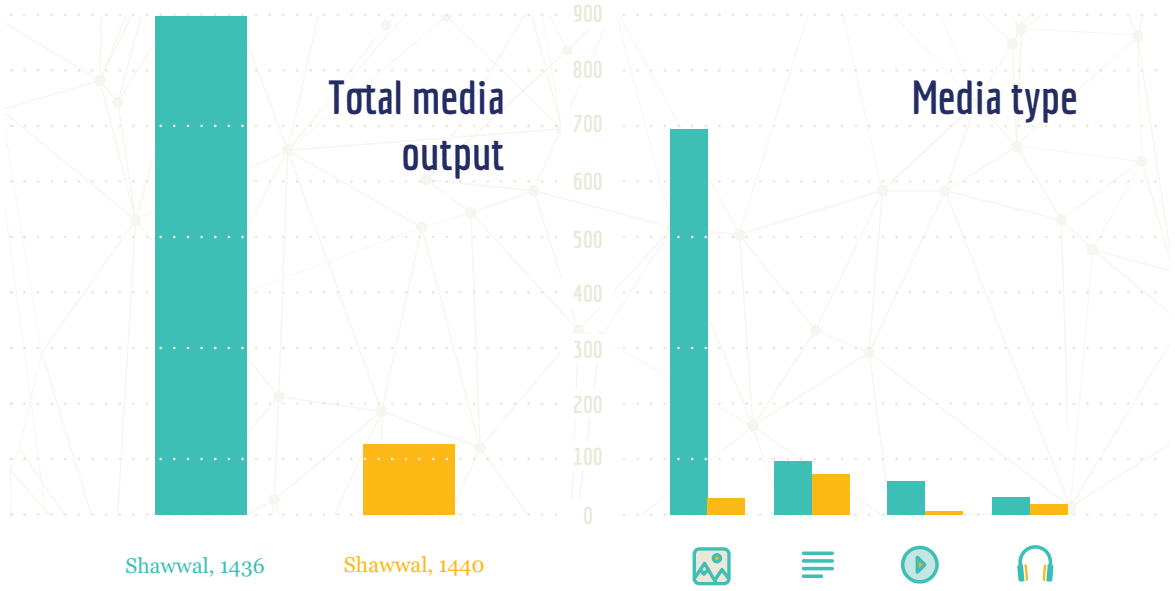
The data

In this section, the archives are analysed and compared. First, a structural analysis of the data focuses on trends in the kinds of media distributed by Daesh during each period. Next, the origins of the content are determined through a geographical analysis. And finally, there is a thematic analysis subsection, which shows how Daesh's branding priorities transformed between 2015 and 2019.

Structural trends

The most striking discrepancy between the two archives has to do with their respective sizes. The first dataset, gathered when Daesh was at its strongest, contains 892 unique items. By way of contrast, the second dataset contains only 127 unique items. In the summer of 2015 Daesh published an average of 30 items of propaganda per day, but in the summer of 2019 only 4 items per day—a decrease of no less than 86 per cent.

There are also significant differences in the structural composition of the datasets.



During the month of Shawwal 1436 (17 July to 15 August 2015), Daesh's propaganda output was dominated by photo-essays—mono-thematic sets of still images compiled by its provincial media offices. These made up 78 per cent of the archive. Written materials comprised eleven per cent—anything from Bayan news readouts and current affairs articles to pieces from magazines such as *Dar al-Islam* and *Konstantiniyye*. A further seven per cent was devoted to video propaganda, with the remaining four per cent comprising audio materials—primarily radio-broadcast news bulletins and *anashid*.

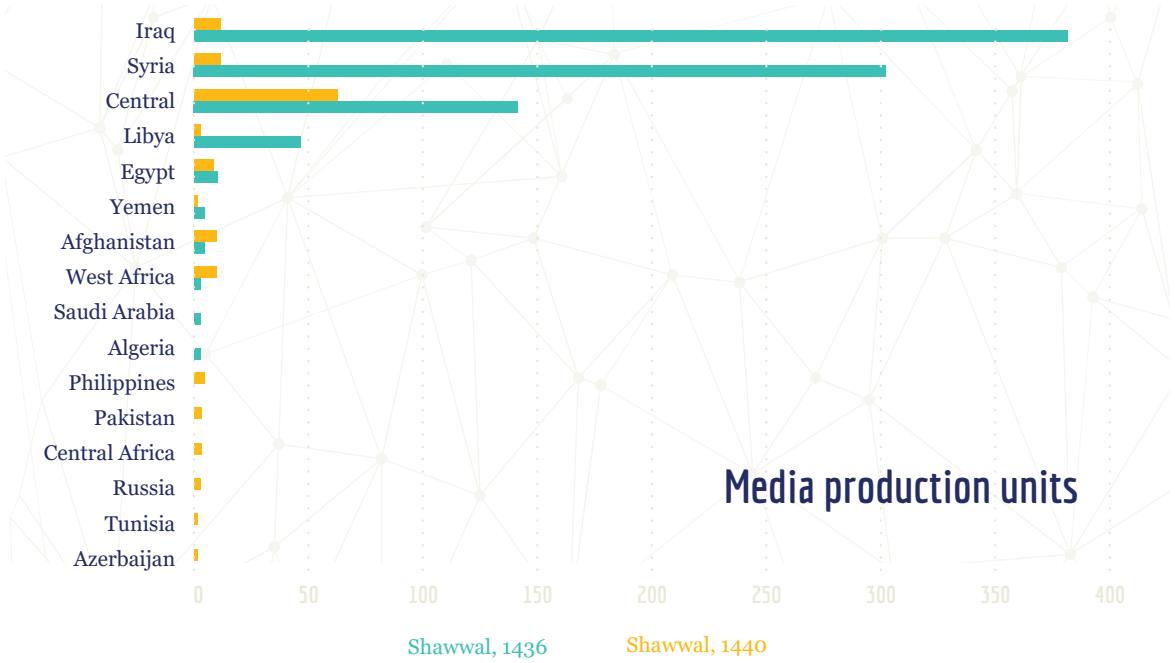
Four years later, the situation is very different. Photo-essays make up just 15 per cent of the archive and written materials now comprise the largest proportion at 55 per cent. There were just nine videos (eight per cent) and 29 audio news bulletins (22 per cent). In other words, not only was there a much smaller output, there was far less variety, too.

Two factors are likely to have influenced this decline. The first is that by 2019 Daesh no longer enjoyed the advantages it had when it started its propaganda production. In 2015 the group was in a much better position to produce, edit, and distribute propaganda; it controlled a number of major cities in Syria and Iraq and enjoyed a steady intake of new human capital.[17] Moreover, due to its highly centralised, innovation-privileging media infrastructure, its communications teams were able to benefit from economies of scale, sharing everything from skills and expertise to technologies and techniques. In this situation Daesh could professionalise, even industrialise, its outreach operations, which fostered the emergence of a systematic communications architecture characterised by ambition, innovation, and productivity.[18]

While the bare bones of this infrastructure survived its kinetic demise, Daesh has been unable to maintain its 2015 levels of productivity.[19] As the group lost access to safe havens, communications networks, and media experts, its branding ambitions became more modest. It produced far less material and its previously high quality control standards were relaxed.[20] This is one of the reasons the rate of Daesh propaganda output steadily decreased between 2015 and late 2017 before plateauing at between 100 and 150 unique items a month—which continues to be the case at the time of writing.[21]

A second reason is that once its state ambitions had crumbled, Daesh's communications priorities shifted and it no longer made sense to publicise its insurgency as comprehensively as before. Indeed, by 2019, the utility of showcasing seemingly every facet of its war had become marginal and at times even detrimental. As the group's operations were increasingly covert, its strategists needed to start privileging operational security over communicative effect. They gradually reduced daily coverage, cutting back on photo-essays and video clips in particular, which were now a security liability, even when edited with the most stringent eye for detail.

Geographic trends



When one considers the two archives from a geographical perspective, they are again profoundly different. Whereas in 2015 Daesh's brand was anchored to Iraq and Syria, with more than three quarters of its media output originating in one of those states, by 2019 it was almost entirely untethered from the territories it once occupied. The group now draws support from affiliates wherever they can be found around the globe, from West Africa to Southeast Asia.

In the summer of 2015, 76 per cent of Daesh's total media output came from Iraq and Syria, with a further 16 per cent produced by its central outlets, which were likely to be based in Syria at the time. Productivity was especially high in places where Daesh had its deepest operational and administrative roots. It peaked in Nineveh Province, where Mosul is located, and in Aleppo Province, home to a number of towns that had long been Daesh strongholds. Outside of Syria and Iraq, the next most productive location for Daesh propaganda was Libya, where three official affiliates published 46 unique items. Only a few items emerged elsewhere—a tiny proportion in relative terms—ten from Egypt,

four from Afghanistan, four from Yemen, two from Nigeria, two from Saudi Arabia, and two from Algeria.

Now, in 2019, the geographical composition of Daesh's output has significantly transformed. Productivity in Iraq and Syria has collapsed— just 22 items emerged from both states combined. This drawdown of Iraq- and Syria-related materials has been countered by an uptick in media output globally. Proportionately more content has been emerging from Egypt, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, and a new roster of media outlets have joined the fray, publishing unprecedented video content documenting support for Daesh from such far-flung places as Azerbaijan, Tunisia, Russia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, and the Philippines.[22]

This pivot *away* from Syria and Iraq marks the culmination of a long-running trend for Daesh, which was to be expected. While, at the time of writing, the two states continue to be central loci for Daesh activity—a status they will likely retain for years to come—in recent years they have become especially hostile environments for both propagandists and fighters. For this reason, Daesh coverage from Syria and Iraq is now almost exclusively limited to low-risk, text-based operation claims.

Similarly, Daesh's pivot *towards* its global affiliates was also to be expected. Indeed, it has been in the cards for some time. In 2018, the organisation's global network was given a makeover. Iraq and Syria, which were previously divided into 22 individual *wilayat* ('provinces'), were condensed into just two *wilayat*—Wilayat al-'Iraq and Wilayat al-Sham—with 22 active *minatiq* ('areas').[23] Libya and Yemen, once also home to multiple *wilayat*, were also reduced to two, becoming Wilayat Libiyya and Wilayat al-Yaman. On top of this, Daesh's supporters in Southeast Asia and Somalia started to be referred to as Wilayat Sharq Asiyya and Wilayyat al-Sumal. Just under a year later, a slew of new *wilayat* were established—one for Central Africa (Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya), one for Turkey (Wilayat Turkiyya), and one for India (Wilayat al-Hind)—with Wilayat Khurasan being split into two: Wilayat Khurasan in Afghanistan and Wilayat Bakistan in Pakistan.

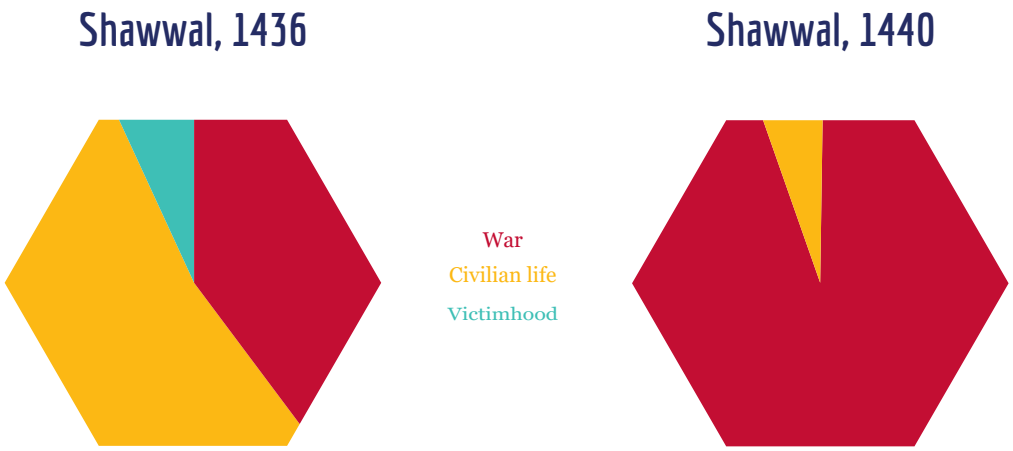
This shift is more than merely a regrouping. By reducing the number of provinces in Iraq and Syria, consolidating the supporters who remain under two new umbrella *wilayat*, Daesh has closed the book on its proto-state ambitions—at least for the time being. Instead, it has now shifted focus to restructuring its global network of affiliates, making a concerted effort to untether its brand from the Middle East. This untethering marks the beginning of a new operational phase for Daesh, one that relies less on its ability to achieve material victories in Syria and Iraq and more on reputational advances among its supporters globally.

Thematic trends

A thematic analysis of the archives points to a third tectonic shift in the Daesh brand. In 2015, the group's overarching narrative was implicitly optimistic. More often than not, news focused on civilian life in its 'Islamic state.' Four years later, few traces of that utopianism remain. Instead, the 'caliphate' narrative revolves around war, and the few quasi-utopian scenes that do emerge have an overtly militaristic slant.

In the 2015 dataset (comprising 892 items) no less than 53 per cent of Daesh's propaganda output focused on civilian matters.[24] Of those 477 items, twenty-six per cent showcased economic and agricultural activities,[25] nineteen per cent revolved around municipal governance and 'state' education,[26] nine per cent showed Daesh's justice system in action, documenting anything from executions to hand amputations,[27] with a further eight per cent covering religious festivities.[28] Together these publications created an idealised picture of day-to-day life in the caliphate.

Daesh's war effort in Iraq and Syria, and, on a smaller scale, in Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan was documented by thirty-nine percent of that same dataset, or 354 items. Thirty-seven percent of those focused on offensive operations,[29] with the rest devoted to eulogising dead fighters (fourteen per cent),[30] showing off loot and captured munitions (ten per cent),[31] following training activities (nine per cent),[32] publicising the executions of spies and prisoners of war (two per cent),[33] and covering defensive operations (two per cent).[34] In sum, Daesh propaganda in 2015 had a full-spectrum approach towards publicising the insurgency. The final thematic prong of the 2015 archive—victimhood—appeared just seven per cent of the time. Although this



theme was less prominent than the other two, it was still critically important to the story Daesh was promoting. From images of bombsites[35] to shots of children lying prone in the street,[36] these materials had an atmospheric presence across all 30 days of the data collection period. The logic behind their inclusion was simple—by documenting the crimes perpetrated by its enemies Daesh strengthened the rationale for its existence as a protective force.

Four years later the Daesh brand has made an about-turn. Instead of prioritising scenes of civilian bliss, its propaganda is now dominated by war-related materials. The second dataset contained only seven items that might potentially be classed as utopian—photo-essays documenting small groups of fighters celebrating '*id* together.[37] None bore any relation to civilian life. War-related materials are overwhelmingly focused on offensive pursuits (32 percent),[38] with just five per cent comprising martyrdom eulogies,[39] four per cent showing loot and captured munitions,[40] one per cent regarding executions,[41] and one percent defensive operations.[42] Over the course of the entire month, no victimhood propaganda emerged.

It should come as no surprise that the Daesh metanarrative in 2019 is strikingly different from its 2015 metanarrative. Over the course of those four years, the group's insurgent prospects and priorities transformed; instead of engaging in a sophisticated experiment in rebel governance, the organisation had to batten down its operational hatches and transition from an overt administrative government into a covert asymmetric army. The group has been making use of strategic communications to navigate this transition smoothly and to ease its supporters onto a new strategic trajectory. It is important to keep in mind that, while the changes described above did not come about immediately. This has been a gradual evolution, one that has taken years, not months. In any case, the resulting differences are profound.

Conclusion

This report has compared two archives of official Daesh media that were compiled four years apart—one at the zenith of its proto-state ambitions, the other at its nadir. The study analysed how external and internal situational exigencies impacted the group's communication priorities, demonstrating that Daesh's media infrastructure in mid-2019 was about one tenth as productive as it was in mid-2015. Moreover, now in 2019, Daesh is focusing a much larger proportion of its efforts on covering the pursuits of its global network than it was in 2015. Perhaps most importantly, the data point to a significant thematic shift in the organisation's overarching narrative—away from civilian utopianism and towards military denialism.

In addition to providing an account of how Daesh has changed as an organisation during the four years in question, this analysis demonstrates the inherent plasticity of its strategic narratives. When the going first got tough in 2016, Daesh's initial course of action was to publish denialist propaganda in an attempt to soften, in the eyes of its supporters, the territorial blows it was receiving. However, as the group continued to experience setbacks in Syria and Iraq, it modified its brand more readily.[43] The losses of Mosul and Raqqah in 2017 were a further impetus for a change in strategy. The material reality of the 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq was in tatters and by 2018 Daesh media outlets no longer tried to claim otherwise. Instead, the organisation changed direction, untethering the brand from the Middle East and focusing on its network of global affiliates. This trend grew more pronounced over time. By mid-2019, when the second archive was compiled, the story that Daesh was telling its supporters, both in-theatre and online, had transformed substantially. Triumphalist claims were replaced with a story of embattled resistance—a narrative that is no less appealing to true believers.

This transformation matters to practitioners of strategic communications for a number of reasons, the most important being that the implications here are not restricted to Daesh. Regardless of ideology, insurgent groups are always looking to learn from one another to improve their asymmetric prospects. Because of Daesh's proclivity to adaptation, its tactical and strategic innovations in outreach are guaranteed to spread far and wide. Hence, even if the threat from Daesh had disintegrated entirely upon its defeat at Baghuz—a notion the attacks in Sri Lanka resoundingly refuted—it would still be necessary to understand the group's use of strategic communications to navigate the transformation it has undergone over the last few years because other groups, both followers and rivals, will likely be following in its footsteps before long.[44]

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