



Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare

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Executive Summary

Context

- Weeks after its capture of Mosul in 2014, the Islamic State set about transforming its strategic trajectory. Through an avalanche of media products, it worked to aggressively insert itself into the global public discourse and, in turn, popularise its brand, polarise adversary populations and drive rivals into the ideological side-lines. This research paper presents new, empirical insight into this troubling phenomenon, which has set a benchmark for insurgent strategic communications the world over. **Comprising the translation and analysis of a 55-page document compiled and published by the Islamic State in 2016, it offers a unique window into the mind-set of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's propagandists.**

Aims

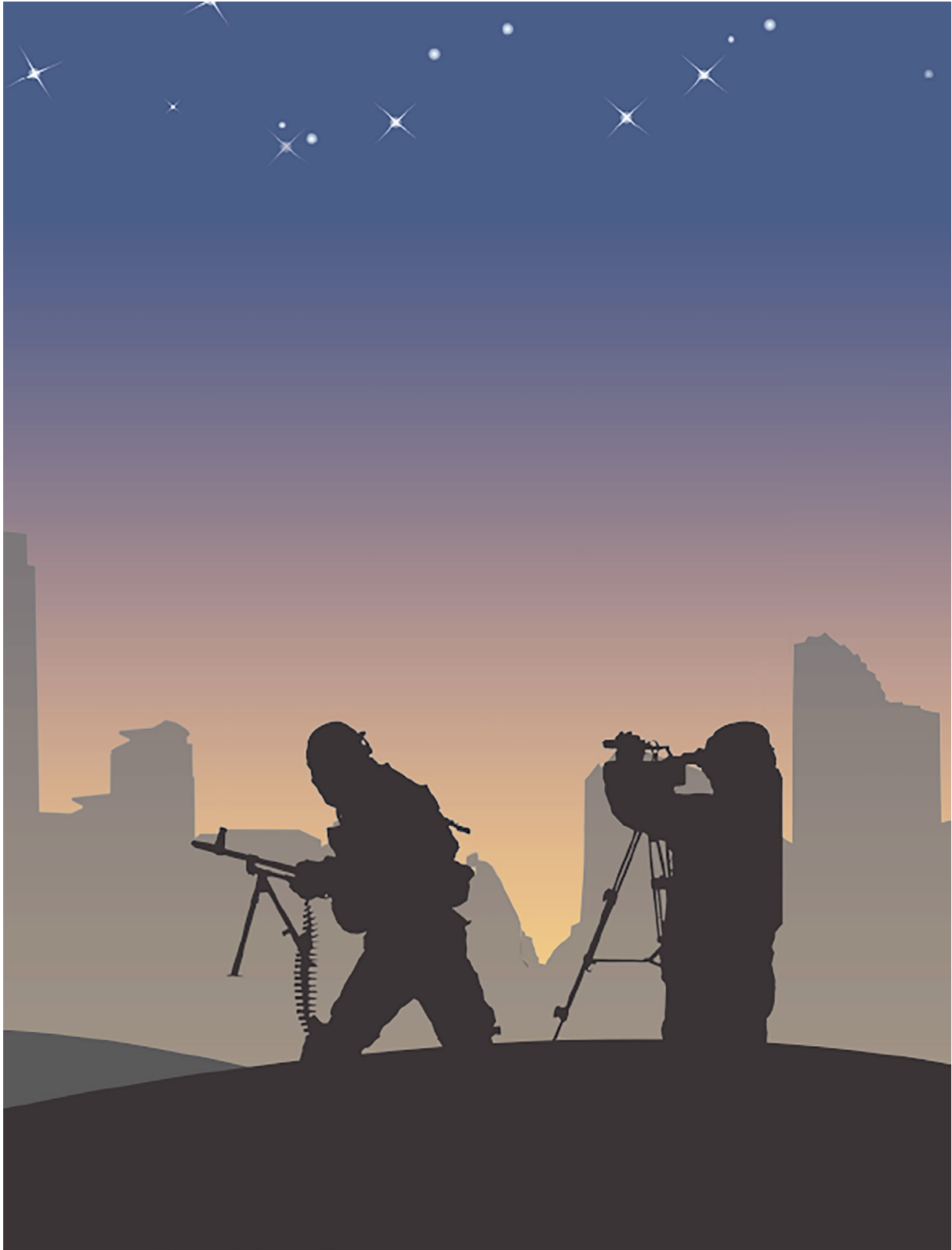
- Due to the secrecy in which the Islamic State shrouds its information operations, our understanding of their underpinnings is limited. **This paper seeks to close this persistent knowledge gap and shed light on the thinking behind its media strategy.**

Findings

- The caliphate brand is entirely unspontaneous. Fluctuating in response to directives issued by the central media office, it revolves around three axes – **a coherent narrative that is at once positive and alternative; comprehensive, rejection-based counterspeech operations; and the launching of occasional, carefully calibrated media “projectiles.”**
- **For the Islamic State, the mainstream media is considered to be an effective weapon** that, if leveraged correctly, has “far-reaching” power that can exceed that of the most powerful bombs.
- The Islamic State sustainably incites activism, whether from offline operatives or online volunteers, by venerating information warfare in a manner unparalleled by any other salafi-jihadist actor. As the document attests, in its eyes, **propaganda production and dissemination is at times considered to be even more important than military *jihad*.**
- **Islamic State media activists are artificially absorbed into a symbolic system of barter that is proactively nurtured and fertilised by the central media office.** The cocktail of emotional, theological and ideological appeals delivered in the document is a potent derivation of this system, which is sufficient to keep volunteers active and interested indefinitely.
- Central to the Islamic State's outreach success is its flexible definition of what constitutes a “media operative.” As the document attests, **the line between official and unofficial activism is deliberately blurred, something that renders the organisation's offer of participation all the more alluring.**

Recommendations

- Observers must not misdiagnose the problem. The Islamic State is where it is today because of strategic, innovative thinking, not just technological advances. **The international community must be equally as creative and strategic-minded in its approach towards counter-communications.**
- Like the Islamic State, practitioners and activists must recognise that **audiences, whether enemies or supporters, are heterogeneous and best accessed through a range of channels.**
- **Counter-strategic communications *must* rest upon implicitly positive foundations and avoid targeting the Islamic State alone.** Moreover, refuting salafi-jihadists' claims to legitimacy is not enough – and will never be enough – to degrade the brand.
- The Islamic State champions the offensive use of information to “infuriate the unbelievers.” With this in mind, **media organisations must resist the production of nuance-less ‘clickbait’ articles derived from the Islamic State’s propaganda.** If they do not, they run the risk of becoming unwitting instruments of its media strategists.



Front Cover of *Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too*

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Introduction

In the years that followed its 2014 capture of Mosul, the Islamic State muscled its way, with seeming ease, to the pinnacle of global jihadist infamy. Its propagandists weaponised the Internet, using social networking platforms and the global news industry to project their brutality and insert their bastardisation of religion into mainstream public discourse. This aggressive approach to outreach caught the world off guard – the self-proclaimed caliphate's communications, tailored as they were for swift memetic dissemination and capable of transcending both identity and culture, enabled the group to popularise its war in a manner unparalleled by any other insurgent actor, past or present. Crucially, this was not a product of coincidence. Rather, it was the outcome of innovative thinking, trial and error-based learning and meticulous strategising – processes about which we currently know little due to the group's operational opacity.¹

With the following research paper, I intend to contribute towards a better understanding of this troubling phenomenon. Basing my analysis on an official document about 'media *jihad*' that was published online by the Islamic State in April 2016, I explore how the organisation frames its information war and entices activists to propagandise on its behalf. To this end, after a brief synopsis of the 55-page-long Arabic text, which I translated in its entirety, the paper proceeds in two parts. In the first section, I examine the symbolic currencies with which the Islamic State remunerates both formal and informal media activists, each of which is alluded to within the document. I contend that its outreach puppeteers offer their audience a carefully constructed cocktail of ideological, religious and emotional rewards that, together, form a potent and absorbing system of belief. In the second section, I identify the three central messaging components that make up the caliphate's marketing strategy – a positive narrative, counterspeech and media 'weapons.' It is a tripartite information arsenal that has, over the last few years, enabled the Islamic State to forcibly inject itself into the global collective consciousness. I conclude by looking ahead, briefly summing up before offering some recommendations about how the international community can better calibrate its response – at both a government and civil society level.

Before proceeding any further, though, it is important to first establish that the creative use of strategic communications by salafi-jihadists is not new. Indeed, audiovisual media have always branded their operations, transforming over the last five decades to reflect shifts in both the conflict paradigm and technology – the most notable being the advent of the Internet.² In the 1980s, the Afghan *mujahidin* used printed journals, audio cassettes and videotapes to attract fighters and secure donations; in the 1990s, this smattering of propaganda transformed into a global cottage industry, with the emergence of battlefield films from Bosnia, audio wills from Kashmir and pamphlets on the plight

1 For an example of the Islamic State's communications secrecy, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's archive of administrative documents, most notably: "Specimen 11Q: Further Notice on Media Production," *General Supervisory Committee*, 26 September 2015; and "Specimen 13L: Notification for the Media Office," *Cyrenaica Province*, Undated.

2 This decades-long phenomenon can be traced using the University of Oslo's *Jihadi Document Repository*, which hosts hundreds of examples of militant Islamist magazines and documents in English, Arabic and Urdu from as far back as the 1970s.

of the Rohingya; in the 2000s, salafi-jihadist messaging finally met mass media, becoming characterised by grainy clips disseminated on Internet forums showing gory beheadings, suicide bombings and stultifying statements from senior ideologues.³ It was not, however, until the 2010s and the rise of the Islamic State that the salafi-jihadist brand went truly mainstream, a result of the fact that, for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate, propaganda is not just important – it is intrinsic to its *jihad*.

With this seemingly inexorable communications evolution in mind, it is worth noting that, while this paper focuses on the Islamic State's media strategy in particular, its contents are relevant to Islamist militancy in general. After all, most insurgent groups are inherently imitative, always looking to learn from one another – even their rivals – in an effort to improve their asymmetric prospects.⁴ Specifically because of this proclivity to adaptation, tactical innovations spread rapidly, occasionally even transcending ideologies.⁵ Hence, even if the Islamic State movement was to unexpectedly evaporate one day – something that, needless to say, will not happen – the benchmarks it has already established in strategic communications will long outlive it. For that reason, understanding the group's approach to information warfare today is a requisite step towards preparing for its replicative manifestations in the future.

3 For a good account of this progression, see Jason Burke, "The Age of Selfie Jihad: How Evolving Media Technology Is Changing Terrorism," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, Issue 11, November/December 2016, p. 16-23.

4 See, for example, Michael C. Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, 2010, p. 33-64.

5 To be sure, terrorist and insurgent innovation is a relatively understudied area. However, a number of important forays have been made into it, including, but not limited to, Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics, and Global Trends*, New York: Routledge, 2007; Maria J. Rasmussen and Mohamed M. Hafez (ed.), *Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Destruction: Preconditions, Causes, and Predictive Indicators*, Ft. Belvoir: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2010; and Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: *Metis*, *Techne*, and the Limitations of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, 2010, p. 177-197.

The Document

Propaganda is essential to the Islamic State's survival, both as a group and as an idea; it has been an invaluable mechanism with which to enforce acquiescence in its proto-state and a penetrating weapon with which to assert its terrorist hegemony abroad.⁶ What is more, in years to come, it will likely serve as a flag around which true believers in the caliphate project nostalgically rally, even after the group's territorial 'state' is no more. Given their strategic centrality, it is unsurprising that the secrets of the Islamic State's media operations are closely guarded.⁷ Indeed, the group has almost entirely refrained from publicly discussing its media strategy.⁸ As a result, knowledge of what motivates it is limited, aside from a few important contributions.⁹

For that reason, it was a significant moment when, in April 2016, the Islamic State's official propaganda channel on social networking platform Telegram circulated a document entitled *Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too*, a "revised and updated" edition of an al-Himma Library booklet that first appeared in a video produced by the Islamic State the year before.¹⁰ Straddling the middle ground between what Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer describe as "jihadi strategic studies" and more stereotypically exhortative propaganda, it is replete with insights into the Islamic State's chief information concerns.¹¹

At first glance, it appears that the document – henceforth referred to simply as *Media Operative* – was conceived as a way to set out the importance of propaganda and eschew the concerns of on-ground media workers who were worried that they, as Islamic State cameramen not gunmen, were participating in a watered-down version of its *jihad*. Reflecting this, the document's simple structure, relative brevity and concise argumentation appear geared towards its use as a reference guide for embedded 'journalists.' Its online publication almost a year later was presumably part of an effort to re-energise the virtual supporter community, too.

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- 6 See Charlie Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *The Quilliam Foundation*, July 2015; Charlie Winter, "Totalitarianism 101: The Islamic State's Offline Propaganda Strategy," *Lawfare*, March 2016.
- 7 A notable exception to this is Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet's interviews-based article, which gives rare logistical insight into the operation. See Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, "Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine," *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2015.
- 8 Besides the document that forms the basis of this paper, information regarding the Islamic State's propaganda operations has been limited to photo essays showing media distribution and an essay in *al-Naba'* newspaper about media kiosks. See "The Media Kiosk: A Window into the Media of the Islamic State," *al-Naba'* #22, February 2016.
- 9 J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census," *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, No. 20, March 2015; Alberto Fernandez, "Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks," *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, October 2015; Henrik Gratrud, "Islamic State *Nasheeds* as Messaging Tools," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 39, Issue 12, 2016, p. 1-20; Haroro J. Ingram, "An Analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2016, p. 1-19; Daniel Milton, "Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2016; Jacob Olidort, "Inside the Caliphate's Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, No. 147, August 2016; Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *The International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, November 2016; Carol Winkler, Kareem El Damannhoury, Aaron Dicker and Anthony F. Lemieux, "The Medium Is Terrorism: Transformation of the About to Die Trope in *Dabiq*," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, p. 1050-1070; Charlie Winter, "Documenting the Virtual Caliphate," *The Quilliam Foundation*, October 2015; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2015; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, No. 29, January 2016.
- 10 "Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too," *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, May 2015.
- 11 Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, Issue 5, 2004, p. 355-375.

First and foremost, then, the document is a piece of motivational literature intended to inspire the media operative in his (or her) work. It explains, in typical salafi-jihadist patois, the reasons why media matters to the Islamic State *jihad* and, to this end, contains much in the way of exaggeration and hyperbole. However, when one looks beyond the document's more superficial features – the 'real-life' tales of propagandistic heroism and dense ruminations on the cruelty of the 'Crusader' enemy – its true value can be better discerned.¹² Indeed, when closely analysed in this manner, it offers unparalleled insight into a number of issues about which one could previously only speculate.

Prior to embarking on the main analysis, it is first worth examining what precisely the Islamic State means by the term 'media operative.' Crucially, the group uses it with extreme flexibility – indeed, the moniker refers as much to frontline cameramen as it does to self-appointed social media disseminators. "Everyone," the document's authors hold, "that participate[s] in the production and delivery" of propaganda should be regarded as one of the Islamic State's "media *mujahidin*."¹³ This nebulous definition not only invites participation from disengaged onlookers, but places the burden of classification upon them too, thereby allowing supporters to self-identify as 'operatives' regardless of the extent of their activism.

By this logic, the goalposts for Islamic State media operations are moved and the distinction between 'support' and 'membership' is blurred. Operating in this manner – without clear differentiation between officialdom and un-officialdom – enables the Islamic State to empower its diffuse supporters with minimal effort, furnishing them with ideological, theological and emotional rewards in the place of material compensation. Among other things, this gives it an efficient way to 'hook' curious onlookers and proactively foster the absorption of would-be supporters into the pro-Islamic State echo chamber.¹⁴ As has become clear in recent years, this promise of active, lower-risk participation in *jihad* has proven to be an intoxicating idea for many thousands of individuals around the world.¹⁵

Whatever the case, in this sense, while on-ground media operatives are unquestionably the primary audience for the document, its contents are almost equally relevant to their online counterparts.

¹² *Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too*, *Himma Library*, April 2016, 29; *Ibid*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹⁴ See J.M. Berger, "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, Issue 10, October 2015, p. 19-23.

¹⁵ In 2015, Berger and Morgan made a "conservative estimate" that there were some 46,000 pro-Islamic State Twitter accounts operating between September and December 2014. See "Twitter Census," p. 9.

1. The Tripartite Appeal of Participation

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the ideas below are not, individually, novel concepts when it comes to salafi-jihadist outreach, nor are they mutually exclusive. Indeed, extremist Islamist propagandists have long leveraged ideological, theological and emotional rewards as a way to entice and remunerate their volunteer supporters. Notwithstanding this, the Islamic State's grasp of these rewards is particularly sophisticated; as this section demonstrates, this sophistication is laid bare by the document in question.

Ideological Appeals

A fundamental goal of *Media Operative* is to brand the Islamic State's propaganda strategy as an evolutionary progression in the global *jihad*, not a revolutionary adaptation. To this end, the authors frame its approach to media as the continuation of a legacy already established by their forebears, quoting a number of salafi-jihadist heavyweights throughout. The objective here is to entice would-be supporters to participate in the Islamic State's outreach with the promise that they would not only assist its caliphate project, but become part of the broader movement it was borne of, too. This adds to the ideological allure of volunteering and simultaneously helps substantiate the propagandists' constant efforts to repudiate derisive claims that theirs is an 'upstart' organisation.

To this end, the first few pages of the document focus solely on contextualising the 'media *jihad*' by drawing on the work of a number of established ideologues that are, crucially, not venerated exclusively by supporters of the Islamic State. Indeed, opening with a quotation from a 2002 statement by Usama bin Ladin, the authors set the scene by declaring that:

*"There is a group of media operatives and companions of the pen that has a prominent and important role in steering the war, shattering the morale of the enemy and raising the spirits of the ummah."*¹⁶

Then, to emphasise this idea, they stress that bin Ladin shared their view that information warfare is one of the most important components of the "Crusader campaign" against Islam; an onslaught to which salafi-jihadist media activists were obligated to respond with such vigour that the "enemy does not differentiate between this group [media operatives] and any other [militants]."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Media Operative*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

To reiterate this, the authors then quote the late Saudi cleric Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaybi, who argued that:

*“The media offers a fine way to spread news of Muslim victories over the enemy, support the mujahidin, demonstrate their courage and extoll their virtues. These matters are critical in terms of their potency for sustaining the mujahidin’s steadfast pursuit of victory for the Muslims and defeat for their enemies.”*¹⁸

In this manner, the authors brashly tout the Islamic State’s ideological pedigree throughout the document. However, when it came to some of the most famous words on the topic of *media jihad* – that is, “we are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media” – they stop short of attribution. Although the phrase is referenced in this document to emphasise the offensive potential of information warfare, its original context is obscured; the quote derives from a 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the erstwhile leader of al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State’s most important ideologue, from al-Qaida Central’s current *amir*, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In the letter, al-Zawahiri castigates al-Zarqawi for his excessive brutality and requests that he tone down his headline-grabbing ultraviolence.^{19,20} Despite this discrepancy in the phrase’s meaning, the *Media Operative* authors still opted to paraphrase it prominently in the introduction.²¹

In any case, the authors go to great lengths to brand the Islamic State’s information warfare as a legitimate, logical part of the salafi-jihadist establishment. As well as assuring prospective and current media operatives that they are on the “right path,” this allows them to surreptitiously push back against anti-Islamic State critiques.²² In so doing, their call to communicative arms is lent additional gravitas and would-be activists are promised a ticket into what has “always” been one of the greatest “forms of the rite of *jihad*.”²³

Theological Entreaties

The document also attempts to contextualise information operations within an ‘Islamic’ context, even going so far as to champion the production and dissemination of propaganda as a form of worship. It contends that media has, quite literally, always been central to the expansion of the *ummah* and that ‘Islamic’ information warfare can be traced as far back as the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Through this rhetorical construct, the document elevates Islamic State strategic communications to a new plane, one upon which they are bestowed deep religious significance.

Broadly speaking, the authors construct their religious appeals using three jurisprudential mechanisms – first, they engage in clumsy strategic communications-focused exegesis of the Quran; second, they analogise the hadith and Sunnah; and, third, they cherry-pick from other ideologues’ work.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” *CTC Library*, 2005.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

²¹ Ibid, p. 11.

²² Ibid, p. 9.

²³ Ibid, p. 9.

It is evident that the authors are propagandists, not theologians, despite their liberal references to Islam's canonical sources – most notably two hadiths, “strive against the polytheists with your money, your bodies and your tongues” and “satire is more grievous to them than the hurt of an arrow.”²⁴ Indeed, much of the time they seem ill-equipped to make original contributions as to why media activism is a legitimate form of *jihad*. As such, they frequently draw upon the works of other more established thinkers to substantiate their assertions. Early on, for example, they feature an excerpt from a speech of Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, formerly War and Prime Minister to the Islamic State of Iraq, who contended that:

*“The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon Him) used to employ the most influential type of media in His time that had the greatest impact on the spirits of His enemies, which is poetry. He (peace be upon Him) also employed a preacher to defend Islam and the Muslims, Thabit bin Qays bin Shammas (who was promised heaven).”*²⁵

To the same end, they also quote al-Shuaybi making a similar assertion:

*“The Messenger (peace be upon Him) was concerned with this type of jihad (media) – he commanded Muslim poets like Hassan, Abdullah bin Rawaha and Kaab bin Malik (may Allah be pleased with them) to satirise His unbeliever opponents.”*²⁶

Whether direct or indirect, the inclusion of Islam's canonical sources is, first and foremost, a rhetorical mechanism with which to lend the document theological authority. Indeed, the authors' constant framing elevates the words of *Media Operative* beyond simple exhortation. This is to be expected, especially in the Islamic State context. After all, one of the group's chief propagandistic tropes is religious self-mythologisation – i.e. the reframing of its actions through an early Islamic lens, a practice that is, among other things, geared towards presenting the self-proclaimed caliphate as the *sole* legitimate progeny of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁷

Emotional Rewards

The *Media Operative* document is also replete with emotional appeals designed, on the one hand, to make propagandistic activism an aspirational act and, on the other, to shame sympathetic onlookers into participation. To this end, there is constant emphasis on the “steadfastness” of media operatives – whether they are waging *jihad* in the offline or online “trench.”²⁸ The document lionises them as “unknown soldiers” whose roles must not be “belittled or underestimated,” especially given the fact that the media battle is equally as “fierce” and easily as “perilous” as the “material war.”²⁹

The Islamic State is set apart from rivals by the lengths to which it goes in glorifying information warfare. While other, similarly inclined organisations are likewise keen propagandists, none are as enthusiastic as the Islamic State. This is something that the *Media Operative*

²⁴ Ibid, p. 13; Ibid, p. 7; Ibid, p. 27.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 5.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

²⁷ For an excellent discussion of this mechanism, see Nibras Kazimi's Westminster Institute talk, “How Jihadists Weaponize Islamic History and How to De-Weaponize It,” June 2016.

²⁸ *Media Operative*, p. 18.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 47; Ibid, p. 3; Ibid, p. 9.

authors render starkly apparent from the outset – their opening words stress that creating and disseminating media should be viewed as tantamount to fighting in the caliphate's army or conducting terrorism in its name:

“To every media operative brother in the Islamic State, you should know and be convinced of the following fact, [that] the media is a jihad in the way of Allah [and that] you, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid in the way of Allah.”³⁰

Continuing in this vein, the authors later declare their intention to “repudiate the mistaken view that engagement in *jihad* is confined to the literal understanding of fighting with material weapons alone.”³¹ Indeed, they hold, “the media *jihad* against the enemy is no less important than the material fight against it.”³² As this excerpt suggests, their tone is mostly defensive, hinting that they are directly responding to, and attempting to mitigate, indications of demoralisation in the media operative ranks. Seemingly confirming this, at one point they note that “some criticise media operatives for engaging in verbal *jihad* whilst sat on sofas in beautiful houses,” an assertion that they counter at length with:³³

“[On the contrary, media operatives] are at the forefront of the conflict, in the heart of the war, within the furnace of its battles. They participate alongside their brothers, fighting against the enemies of Allah on the Earth and raising aloft the flag of jihad. They share their daily bread and wander the land with them, sleeping rough alongside them... They are great.

[And, lest it be forgotten,] like their soldier brothers, their pure blood flowed, they tasted the ills of imprisonment in Crusader-apostate jails, they emigrated, supported and strove until the enemy recognised their clout.

[Indeed,] it is no exaggeration to say that the media operative is a martyrdom-seeker without a belt. This decoration is well-deserved.

Have you not seen the photographer, how he carries a camera instead of a Kalashnikov and races before the soldiers in raids, welcoming bullets in his chest with open arms?! Have you not seen the brigades that disseminate videos and pamphlets? How they enter into the most dangerous and fortified areas to circulate the mujahidin's productions in the heart of the hypocrites' den?! Have you not seen how dedicated the media operative is in gathering intelligence on the enemy's movements and following the work of the brothers as they monitor the news of the enemy?!”³⁴

As mentioned, these appeals do not stop at rhetorical attempts to transform media activism into an aspirational act. Rather, on occasion, the authors also attempt to shame readers – whether offline or online – into media activism. To this end, they contend that it is “stipulated upon those” who are unable to fight, regardless of any “extenuating circumstances,” to propagandise on behalf of the caliphate.³⁵ For the Islamic State, they note, *jihad* is an individual obligation for everyone

³⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

³¹ Ibid, p. 11.

³² Ibid, p. 9.

³³ Ibid, p. 17.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 17-18.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 24.

and, if fighting is an impossibility, supporters are expected to volunteer for media work. Indeed, they assert:

“Inciting others to join the jihad is tantamount to engaging in the jihad oneself, as is steering others towards it and opening their eyes to it. The one who incites is a mujahid in the way of Allah the Almighty.”³⁶

There are profound implications in the document's claim that sometimes “verbal *jihad* is more important than *jihad* of the sword.”³⁷ It promises onlookers a sort of ‘*jihad-lite*’ for which one can receive the greatest of rewards while taking the lowest of risks, in relative terms. This concept, perhaps more importantly, places the burden of determining what constitutes ‘verbal *jihad*’ upon them, the prospective volunteers. As such, the idea of pro-Islamic State activism becomes even more appealing to tacit supporters, a quirk of the caliphate's outreach that works to ensure sustained interest and lasting engagement.

To cynical opponents of the Islamic State, it is easy to discount the above appeals. However, through constant reiteration, combination and repetition, they become resilient tools with which to mobilise and energise supporters. Crucially, though, none of this is just rhetoric – as demonstrated in the next section, media activism is as instrumental to the Islamic State's war as the authors claim.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 25.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

2. Communicating the Caliphate Brand

As mentioned, besides inciting readers into propaganda activism, the *Media Operative* document also offers insight into how the Islamic State actually constructs its strategic narrative. Over the course of the text, the authors ruminate at length about the minutiae of the story they want to tell and, in so doing, set out the Islamic State's tripartite approach to marketing *jihad*. First and foremost, they assert, everything must rest upon positive foundations; secondly, media operatives must conduct counterspeech operations; and, thirdly, they must go on the offensive by weaponising propaganda products.

A Positive Narrative

According to the authors, a fundamental task of the Islamic State media operative is to offer – or help offer – something positive: “the Islamic *ummah* today,” they write, “is waiting for you to lead it by its hands to the *sharia* and rid it of the inferiority and injustice from which it suffers.”³⁸ If presented with the ‘right’ information and the ‘correct’ narrative, they contend, Muslims everywhere will inevitably end up rallying around the caliphate banner. Hence, while media operatives must not ignore the “injustice and corruption” faced by Muslims around the world, it would be wrong for them to give undue focus to such negative aspects of life.³⁹ Ultimately, the Islamic State media team is looking to offer an alternative to the status quo, not just criticism of it.

Accordingly, the authors refer throughout to the need to broadcast the Islamic State “Truth.”⁴⁰ In this context, they are not calling upon media operatives to speak the ‘Truth’ specifically to counteract ‘Crusader’ lies. Rather, they are encouraging them to “steer” their audiences and “open their eyes” to the Islamic State’s alternative offer of existence. The authors give particular attention to this concept in a section entitled “Giving Glad Tidings to the Believers,” in which they explain how the “Truth” – an overtly positive message – brings “pleasure” and “delight” to any of those who “read the pamphlets and books of the Islamic State” and listen to its “audio materials.”⁴¹ With this in mind, “by clarifying their Creed, methodology and intentions,” the organisation’s propagandists hope to offer an appealing brand – a lifestyle, even – and thereby establish a system of belief that “bridges the intellectual gap” between it and would-be supporters.⁴²

Crucially, they also note, this positive message must have a generalisable appeal. For that reason, media operatives must “be cognisant of the need for people in general and the *mujahidin* in particular to be aware of the issues facing [the whole of] the Islamic *ummah*.”⁴³ There must be, the authors hold, something for everyone in the collective caliphate narrative; it is not enough for its propaganda

³⁸ Ibid, p. 49.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 39.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 34.

⁴² Ibid, p. 14.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 37.

to focus on aspects or issues that only make sense in the Islamic State context. Rather, media must draw in sympathetic audiences by making an offer of a participatory identity, one that reinforces the caliphate's claim to be representative of all Sunni Muslims. To this end, the authors repeatedly call upon media operatives to transmit "to the simple people a true picture of the battle without exaggeration and with no lies," to "paint a brighter picture" of the *jihad* without dwelling on any one issue, arguing that propaganda must, at one and the same time, address and water down the negative aspects of living under the Islamic State, while also conveying a rose-tinted image of its positive facets.⁴⁴

In this sense, the Islamic State's foundational appeal is not rejection of the status quo or defiance in the face of tyranny. Rather, it is an offer of a positive alternative – a brand that presents a comprehensive solution without dwelling too much on the problem. This represents something of a shift in salafi-jihadist outreach and is the Islamic State's single most important innovation in the realm of strategic communications, a qualitative advance that already forms a baseline for information operations across the Islamist insurgent spectrum.

Counterspeech

The next component of the Islamic State's tripartite approach to communication consists of propaganda that directly "responds to the frenzied media campaign" and "deceptive ways" of the "enemy," and "exposes the deviances of secularists and hypocrites, responding to those who dishearten, alarm or discourage the Muslims [and] call for tolerance and coexistence with the unbelievers."⁴⁵ In short, it is counterspeech. The authors note that, while a positive central narrative is a necessary foundation upon which to build the caliphate brand, counterspeech is an "especially critical" complement to it "given the rise and acceleration of the propaganda war that the Crusaders – led by America and its allies – are waging against the Islamic State today."⁴⁶

In order to substantiate this oft-repeated argument, the authors construct an existential crisis in the document that can only be resolved through the hard work of Islamic State media operatives.⁴⁷ In accordance with this, they state that the *ummah* is currently facing "the mightiest onslaught ever known in the history of the Crusader and Safavid wars"; one that risks irreversibly "corrupting the identity of many of the [Muslims], distorting their ideas, inverting their concepts, substituting their traditions, drying the headwaters of their faith and deadening their zeal."⁴⁸ As a result, media operatives are obligated to work fervently to form an intellectual reservoir with which to ensure that the knowledge and ways of the Islamic State can live on.⁴⁹ If such an effort is not made, the consequences would be catastrophic:

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 40; Ibid, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 15; Ibid, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁷ For an excellent theoretical discussion on the crisis and solution constructs employed by salafi-jihadist propagandists, see Haroro J. Ingram, "A Linkage-Based Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," *The International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, November 2016.

⁴⁸ *Media Operative*, p. 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 44.

“Ignorance will take root among the people and it would be but a few decades before this generation of fighters in the name of Allah the Almighty would be lost and you would not be able to find anyone to continue the journey. Even if you found some left, they would not be of the level required to manage the global conflict with the evil states of unbelief.”⁵⁰

With that in mind, the “monotheist media operative,” who “says what is just and true in an era in which there are few companions of the truth and even fewer sincere ones,” is on the intellectual frontline, charged with working constantly to counter the “daily lies and professionalised falsification” of the modern mainstream media.⁵¹

Noting that “enemy media operatives are contented to be the bugles of unbelief, immorality and fraud,” the authors wax lyrical on this matter, reiterating the traditional salafi-jihadist position that modern civilisation and, by default, most mainstream media coverage, is actually part of a concerted offensive, an “intellectual invasion” by the enemy that is at once “more deadly and more dangerous to the *ummah* and its men than the projectiles that are shot from planes.”⁵² Driving home this crisis construct, they emphasise its urgency, contending that the “invasion” is advanced and sophisticated, a malevolent strategy borne of the fact that “the primeval enemies of the Muslims – the Crusaders, the Jews, the Safavids and the Secularists – understand that colonising the heart is even more successful than colonising the land.”⁵³

The document concludes with a rhetorical question that calls readers to arms – “who in your opinion – o media *mujahidin* – will repel this media invasion?!” Thus, it serves as the final brushstroke on their painting of this dire situation, a carefully constructed image of the *ummah* in existential crisis that serves not only to establish and justify the need for counterspeech, but to encourage participation, too.⁵⁴

Media, Weaponised

The final prong of the Islamic State's communications strategy – the media ‘weapon’ – is regularly alluded to in the document. While this is partially motivated by the authors' desire to positively frame the work of media operatives, it must not be dismissed as simple hyperbole. Offensive, propaganda-based information warfare is a central part of the Islamic State's *jihad*, something to which the authors devote an entire chapter. Opening, once again, with a quotation from al-Shuaybi, who held that “everything that angers the enemies of Allah, be it speech or deed – anything at all – is a form of *jihad*,” the authors go on, stating that:⁵⁵

“Anyone who knows the Crusaders of today and keeps track of that which infuriates them understands how they are angered and terrorised by jihadi media. They – the curse of Allah the Almighty be on them – know its importance, impact and significance more than any others!”⁵⁶

50 Ibid, p. 37.

51 Ibid, p. 42.

52 Ibid, p. 44; Ibid, p. 4.

53 Ibid, p. 45.

54 Ibid, p. 46.

55 Ibid, p. 26.

56 Ibid, p. 28.

Then, they proceed to explain how the media can be a powerful psychological weapon – if manipulated correctly. Building on the contention that it offers a way to “shatter the morale of the enemy,” they note that a well-conceived media “missile” has the power to complement – and sometimes even substitute – military and terrorist operations.⁵⁷ If launched effectively, they assert, “media weapons [can] actually be more potent than atomic bombs” and impart “the greatest impact on the spirits of His enemies.”⁵⁸ Reiterating this, they note that, while the physical military aspect of *jihad* is important, the media *jihad* has “far-reaching potential to change the balance in respect to the war between the Muslims and their enemies” and, for that reason, “is no less important than the material fight.”⁵⁹ Not only does it offer a way to “intimidate and threaten the enemy with violence,” it can make adversaries act irrationally by “infuriating them” and ensnaring policymakers into ill-conceived knee-jerk politics.⁶⁰

To this end, the Islamic State uses offensive information warfare to attack not only military targets, but civilian ones, too. In its eyes, there is no such thing as civilian status beyond the caliphate's boundaries.⁶¹ Thus, media weapons are calibrated with a view to attacking disengaged publics as much as they are geared towards hitting engaged militaries. This form of turbocharged, narrative-led terrorism – in which the Islamic State's propaganda response to operations carried out in its name can be more impactful than the attacks themselves – has emerged as the foremost component of its asymmetric arsenal.⁶² Through it, portions of the global media and even some within the analyst community unwittingly end up being used as a conduit for the transmission of its media weapons.

As demonstrated above, the *Media Operative* document does not just illuminate the reader as to how the Islamic State encourages and incites its official and unofficial propagandists – it indicates the strategic means by which it structures its messaging, too. None of the three foundational elements of its approach to information warfare is, in isolation of the others, unprecedented. However, when leveraged together as the Islamic State has done, the collective offensive and defensive potency of these three elements is formidable indeed. As such, it has had a transformative effect upon the long-term prospects of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 14; Ibid, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 11; Ibid, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 13; Ibid, p. 26.

⁶¹ The group has written at length about its intention to divide the world into “Crusaders” and “Muslims,” thereby eliminating any sense of their being a “gray zone.” See “Dabiq #7: From Hypocrisy to Apostasy, the Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Al-Hayat Media Centre*, November 2015.

⁶² For more on the concept of narrative-led strategy, see Thomas Elkjer Nissen, “Narrative Led Operations: Put the Narrative First,” *Small Wars Journal*, October 2012.

Conclusion

By stripping away the *Media Operative* document's exhortative veneer, it has been possible to derive a number of important insights into the strategic underpinnings of the Islamic State's staggering outreach success, both in terms of the group's ability to animate its many thousands of diffuse supporters and its multifaceted approach to strategic messaging.

As the document sets out in lucid detail, the organisation expends much symbolic energy in nurturing its propagandists' egos, whether they are operating offline and formally, or online and informally. Utterly absorbed in its self-gratifying system of mutually reinforcing appeals, Islamic State media activists – which, lest we forget, are able to designate *themselves* as 'media operatives' without needing formal blessing from the organisation – are furnished with a way to raise morale even in times of crisis, enshrouded in the artificial belief that they are crucial participants and central protagonists in the Islamic State's theo-political project. The sum of this is a rewarding system of symbolic barter that is, if not invulnerable, highly resilient.

Along with the above, the document sheds light on the three fundamental components of Islamic State strategic communications – a coherent narrative that is positive *and* alternative; comprehensive, rejection-based counterspeech efforts; and media 'weapons.' Expertly leveraging each of these components together, the group's official media houses work to encase the caliphate idea in a protective atmosphere of propaganda, while at the same time regularly pumping out tactical media 'projectiles' geared towards psychologically attacking combatants *and* non-combatants. It is evident from even a superficial reading of the document that the Islamic State's media strategists understand that it is not enough to interact with sympathisers alone and, therefore, its propaganda seeks out both friend and foe in almost equal measure. Notwithstanding this aggressive ingenuity, though, the most important component of the Islamic State brand is its implicitly positive foundation, the girders of which run beneath the surface of all its storytelling.

Whatever the case, while many have interpreted the group's dwindling territorial prospects, diminished intake of new members and disintegrating leadership as indicators of its impending demise, it is wrong to imagine a "post-Islamic State" world at this time. The organisation has used propaganda to cultivate digital strategic depth and, due to this effort, the caliphate *idea* will exist long beyond its proto-state. If compelled to, the group's true believers will simply retreat into the virtual world, where they will use the vast archive of propaganda assembled by the group over these past few years to keep themselves buoyant with nostalgia. In years to come, this resilience will enable it to perpetuate – and perhaps worsen – the terrorist menace it already presents.

For that reason, moving forward, activists and officials alike must redouble their efforts to undermine the salafi-jihadist narrative through meaningful strategic communications. First, they must recognise that audiences, whether adverse or supportive, are heterogeneous

and best accessed through a range of channels (i.e. not just over the Internet). Second, they must note that successful outreach cannot start and finish with in-house media – rather, a whole host of actors must be incorporated into the narrative space, their production and dissemination efforts fostered and catalysed. Third, counter-information operations *must* rest upon positive foundations – refuting the Islamic State's claims to legitimacy is not enough – and will never be enough – to degrade its brand.

Aside from the above, which is relevant to everyone engaging in this space, the *Media Operative* document brings to mind more specific recommendations, too. First, at a government level, stakeholders should learn from the way in which the Islamic State galvanises and sustains voluntary activism in its name. By decentralising their message and basing it upon implicitly positive foundations, policymakers will be better equipped to indirectly undercut not just the Islamic State's claims, but also those of other, similarly orientated organisations.

Second and perhaps more urgent, is the fact that the mainstream news industry must recognise that the Islamic State deliberately weaponises media coverage. Whether they consist of video executions or vague statements in the wake of terrorist operations, the Islamic State's media 'projectiles' enable it to dictate its own story, quite literally in its own words, to a captive audience of millions. The *Media Operative* document makes it unambiguously clear that the caliphal propagandists are well aware of this – indeed, much of what they do is geared towards benefiting from this exact state of affairs. Hence, it is of the utmost importance that media organisations resist the inherent 'clickability' of the group's propaganda and take none of its messaging at its word, let alone broadcast its contents without accompanying them with nuanced analysis. If such measures are not taken immediately, media organisations run the risk of becoming unwitting instruments of the Islamic State's propagandists.

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