

Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks

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In 2015, we returned to Doha for the 12th annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum. Co-convened annually by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and the State of Qatar, the Forum is the premier international gathering of leaders in government, civil society, academia, business, religion, and the media to foster frank dialogue on important issues facing the United States and Muslim communities around the world.

The 2015 Forum included a variety of formats for constructive engagement, including televised and webcast plenary sessions to explore major developments, transitions, and crises, and working and action groups that brought together practitioners and experts to develop initiatives and policy recommendations.

This year, we convened a group to discuss how to improve countering violent extremism efforts in the United States. We also deliberated on strategic priorities for the United States and the Middle East, discussed the shifts within mainstream Islamist groups, and examined strategies for countering Islamic State propaganda. These deliberations were captured in papers to be shared with policymakers and the broader public. (For detailed proceedings of the Forum, including photographs, video coverage, and transcripts, please visit our website at <http://www.brookings.edu/islamic-world>.)

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We would like to take this opportunity to thank the State of Qatar for its support in convening the Forum with us. In particular, we are grateful to His Highness the Emir for his generosity in enabling us to come together for these three days of candid discussion. We would also like to thank the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support. We would especially like to recognize H.E. Mr. Rashid Bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the Minister's Assistant for Services and Follow-up, H.E. Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, the Minister's Assistant for International Cooperation Affairs, Ambassador Abdulla Fakhroo, the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences' Chief Executive Officer, and the Permanent Committee's entire staff for their support.

Sincerely,



William McCants
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Abstract

Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks

Convener:

Alberto M. Fernandez

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) uses social media in unprecedented ways to enlist new members to its ranks. This Working Group paper analyzes ISIS's propaganda in an effort to understand why recent counter-messaging efforts have failed and how they can be improved moving forward. The paper explores the propaganda history of al-Qaida and ISIS, examining how jihadist propaganda evolved from 2006 to 2014 and leading up to ISIS's June 2014 declaration of the Caliphate. The author identifies key themes in the ISIS "brand" of propaganda and explains why ISIS messaging is unique. The paper also analyzes the various approaches that different regional and international actors have taken to counter ISIS messaging, and explains why such approaches have proven ineffective thus far. Finally, the author suggests new ways of thinking about counter-messaging and recommends a more effective and comprehensive counter-messaging strategy.

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Table of contents

1. Introduction
2. Al-Qaida's ceaseless efforts to communicate
3. Confronting Iraq: Islamic State propaganda from 2006 to 2013
6. The ISIS brand emerges
8. Confronting the world: Islamic State propaganda from 2014
11. Themes in Islamic State messaging
13. Responding to the social media storm
17. It's the foreign policy, stupid!
19. Volume to match volume
20. A handmade approach to western audiences
21. Content over coordination
23. Better policing of social media
25. Conclusion
26. About the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World
27. The Center for Middle East Policy

Introduction

“The war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm, and knives”

–Omar Hammami (Abu Mansur al-Amriki)¹

As of early 2015, jihadi groups in Syria have recruited over 20,000 foreign fighters to their cause, the overwhelming majority of who have joined the ranks of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).² A major reason for the group’s recruiting success has been its deft use of propaganda and social media, expanding its scope from the more esoteric conflict in Iraq and Syria to a worldwide appeal. Efforts to blunt ISIS propaganda have been tentative and ineffective, despite major efforts by countries like Saudi Arabia, the United States and the United Kingdom, and even al-Qaida. Counter-messaging efforts, such as those by the U.S. Department of State’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), have been dwarfed by the sheer size of the ISIS footprint. No effort to date has matched the tailored nature, the scope, nor the electrifying content of the Islamic State’s material.

To counter the Islamic State’s propaganda, governments should focus more on the content of counter-messages rather than their dissemination. Let private citizens circulate content they find effective. If governments want to facilitate the circulation of counter-messages, they should collaborate with pri-

vate citizens by making it easier for them to find such content. As for social media companies, they should be shamed into truly enforcing their terms of service to stop the Islamic State and its supporters from distributing their propaganda so easily.

Better counter-messaging techniques will only go so far.³ Governments need to develop policies that will change the conditions which make propaganda effective in the first place. ISIS propaganda and its effectiveness derive from the reality on the ground in Syria, Iraq, and other countries where the organization has planted its flag, not the other way around.

1. Omar Hammami, *The Story of an American Jihadi* (Abu Muhammad As-somaali, 2012), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93732117/The-Story-of-an-American-Jihaadi#scribd>.

2. Peter Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,” *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>.

3. Muhammad Abu Rumman, *Ana Salafi* (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2014), 262.

Al-Qaida's ceaseless efforts to communicate

The propaganda history of al-Qaida and of ISIS has yet to be written. Despite al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri's adage, "we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media...we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our *umma*,"⁴ governments have failed to expend a sufficient number of resources on counter-messaging efforts. Zawahri's "media battle" has also failed to gain significant scholarly attention, although subject matter experts have now begun to produce important new studies.⁵

To be sure, al-Qaida itself has not been able to follow through on Zawahri's words, and its various franchises have differed greatly in the quality and quantity of their messaging. Al-Qaida's senior leadership (sometimes referred to as al-Qaida Core or al-Qaida Central), which so effectively used pan-Arab broadcast media in its infancy, has been hamstrung in recent years by the need to protect its physical security on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, resulting in its inability to produce timely communications. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the runt of the litter, in terms of its media's quantity, quality, and impact in the West. Al-Qaida's other African branch, the Somali al-Shabab, was an early adopter of social media and of messaging in

English. However, that early momentum has not been maintained despite spectacular bloodletting in attacks on civilian targets in Kenya.⁶

Although the al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front in Syria operates in a priority area for the movement, it has also underperformed in the amount and the impact of much of its media products. However, it has made effective use of a traditional outlet, pan-Arab broadcast media, after recent advances in Syria.⁷ Until the rise of ISIS, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) would have been considered the most effective and expansive communicator of the local al-Qaida franchises. AQAP pioneered English language messaging with its *Inspire* magazine under the influence of the late Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, who encouraged high-profile lone wolf attacks in the West. But both the quality and quantity of AQAP's media products dipped after it was expelled from major safe havens in the summer of 2012 by the Yemeni Army. Even the attacks in January 2015 against individuals at *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and a kosher supermarket in Paris were not accompanied by any sort of prominent media package from the very organization that had nurtured the operations. Yemen's more recent descent into anarchy and war has yet to translate into new opportunities for AQAP to produce more and better media products.

4. Ayman Al-Zawahri, "Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi," *Global Security*, October 11, 2005, http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm.

5. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015).

6. Will Oremus, "Twitter of Terror: Somalia's Al-Shabaab unveils a new social media strategy for militants," *Slate Magazine*, December 23, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technocracy/2011/12/al_shabaab_twitter_a_somali_militant_group_unveils_a_new_social_media_strategy_for_terrorists_.html.

7. Ahmad Zaidan, "Nusra Front's quest for a united Syria," *Al Jazeera*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/06/nusra-front-quest-united-syria-150602050740867.html>.

Confronting Iraq: Islamic State propaganda from 2006 to 2013

Al-Zawahri's 2005 comments on the importance of media were directed to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who at the time headed al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, based in Iraq. Only a year later, after Zarqawi's death, the organization rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader. The first lesson we can take from the international media coverage of ISIS is that there is almost nothing in this organization's actions, doctrine, and propaganda content that we have not seen before.

The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was announced in October 2006 and Baghdadi, also described as a Qurashi, a Hashemi, and a descendant of al-Hussein Ibn Ali, was announced as *Amir al-Mu'mineen* (Commander of the Faithful). As Nibras Kazimi sagely pointed out in 2008, the announcement of ISI and its leadership in October 2006 was very much an "attempted caliphate," as Baghdadi's title indicates, and can be seen as a dry run for the ISIS of today.⁸ All the tropes we see today were there nine years ago: the focus on targeting and destroying Iraq's minorities (especially groups like Yazidis and Christians), the overarching Shiite threat, the claim to universal rule, the emphasis on violent brutality, and the zeal for enforcing morality. Despite their deep hatred of the Shiites, whom they call *rafi-dah* (meaning rejecters of the first three Caliphs),

there is an interesting apocalyptic dimension to their ideology which was likely influenced by the strong eschatological world view found in some strands of Iraqi Shiite Islam.

In a 2007 speech, and using language almost echoing that of Saddam Hussein, Baghdadi offered to temporarily resettle Palestinians in Shiite-free areas of Iraq until the Islamic State could destroy Israel. He went on to compare his state to that of the first of the counter-crusaders, the 12th century Nurideen Zengi Atabeg of Aleppo and Mosul, and added that he hoped the Islamic State of Iraq "would be the cornerstone for the return of Jerusalem. The Jews and the Americans have realized that and have tried to thwart us by any means from advancing towards that goal and the vicious campaign in Anbar...is due to their knowledge that it is easy to fire medium-range missiles against Israel from some parts (of Anbar) as was done by Saddam..."⁹ Despite these trappings (and this promise of direct action against Israel), ISIS today does not differ from al-Qaida in ideology; it does, however, differ in practice and in the order of priorities. The establishment of a flourishing Islamic State is its greatest priority over other objectives.¹⁰ In a sense, Baghdadi mostly plays the role of an Islamist Stalin, prioritizing the doctrine of "jihadism in one country," albeit a new and multi-ethnic one, over the calls for the global jihad that al-Qaida has preached.

8. Nibras Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted," *Hudson Institute*, July 21, 2008, http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1137/20080701_kazimicaliphateattempted.pdf.

9. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, "Religion is Advice," February 14, 2008, accessed via *Talisman Gate*, "Back to Al-Baghdadi's Speeches," April 18, 2008, <http://talismangate.blogspot.com/2008/04/back-to-al-baghdadis-speeches.html>.

10. Eric Heyl, "The pathology of ISIS," *TRIB (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review)*, February 21, 2015, <http://triblive.com/opinion/qaida/7773945-74/isis-west-qaida>.

Most of ISIS's actions and worldviews were in place nine years ago, having been influenced by ISI. ISIS's ambitions were temporarily blunted by the U.S.-led surge in 2007, which catalyzed the "Sons of Iraq" (or Awakening) movement among Iraqi Sunnis. Joint raids against ISI leadership eventually led to the death of Baghdadi in April 2010. A careful study of ISIS propaganda between 2012 and 2014, before and up to the declaration of the Caliphate, is useful for identifying the key elements of ISIS propaganda and the evolution of ISIS messaging. It also helps to explain the enduring appeal of its message, thereby touching on the "cultural-emotional dimension" of jihadi mobilization.¹¹ We can see that what began as an Iraq-centric propaganda campaign came to include the conflict in Syria, and eventually evolved into a worldwide call to Muslims everywhere.

The first key media product produced by the Islamic State of Iraq in 2012 was a 36-minute video titled "The Expedition of the Prisoners, #1," released in January by the group's Al-Furqan media outlet.¹² The video is a mashup of clips of varying technical quality from Arab and Western broadcast media and is clearly intended for an Iraqi Sunni audience. It begins with the American "crusaders" handing over Iraq to the Iranian Shiites and features bits of interviews with United States Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi (identified as "Vice-President of the Baghdad Green Zone"), and Sunni politician Salih al-Mutlaq, all bemoaning the Iranian takeover and (in the case of the Iraqi politicians) their powerlessness to stop it. The video also includes extensive coverage of Abu Ghraib and abuse of prisoners by

both the American and Iraqi military. For example, the infamous 2005 Al-Jadriyah Bunker incident, in which a secret prison belonging to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) was discovered and found to be holding 168 (mostly Sunni) abused detainees, is detailed in the video along with allegations that MOI guards beheaded Sunni prisoners.¹³

Particular scorn is reserved for Iraqi Interior Minister (and subsequent Finance Minister) Bayan Jabr Solagh, who, with the use of interview footage taken from a 2007 CNN documentary, is criticized for both his corruption and his promotion of sectarian violence against Sunnis. Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari is described as "well known for his ties to the Jews." Among the ISI voices in the video is an audio clip of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi denouncing the Shiites, and two clips from ISI Minister of War Abu Hamza al-Muhajir who says of the Iraqi Shiites, "kill them, crucify them, and cut off their limbs." The last segment of the video, which relies on footage from a 2010 BBC exposé, focuses on the ADE 651, a fake bomb detector that Iraqi officials spent \$85 million to acquire, and mocks Iraqi Police Major General Jihad al-Jabiri, who doggedly defended the worthless devices before a disbelieving audience.¹⁴

The video is not unique in its display of Sunni suffering at the hands of a brutal and incompetent sectarian Iraqi regime. The video's argument is mostly political, not emotional or even particularly religious. Part of what makes the video so convincing is its use of non-jihadi sources (such as American, British, and pan-Arab media) to make its overall point. It is not ISI alone describing the Iraqi Government in this hostile fashion; Western media is too.

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11. Mark Wilbanks and Efraim Karsh, "How the 'Sons of Iraq' Stabilized Iraq," *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2010): 57-70, <http://www.meforum.org/2788/sons-of-iraq>; Thomas Hegghammer, "Seven Assumptions Shaken by the Arab Spring," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, February 3, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/02/03/jihadism-seven-assumptions-shaken-by-the-arab-spring/>.
 12. Aaron Y. Zelin, "Anṣār al-Mujāhidīn English Forum presents an English translation of al-Furqān Media's video release from the Islamic State of Iraq: 'The Expedition of the Prisoners #1'," *Jihadology*, January 31, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/01/31/an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-mujahidin-english-forum-presents-an-english-translation-of-al-furqan-medias-video-release-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-the-expedition-of-the-prisoners-1/>.
 13. Liz Sly, "Discovery ties Iraqi police to routine torture," *Chicago Tribune*, November 16, 2005, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-11-16/news/0511160302_1_detainees-interrogators-iraqi-prime-minister-ibrahim.
 14. Suadad Al-Salhy, "Iraq police official charged in bomb device scandal," *Reuters, UK Edition*, February 17, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/uk-iraq-britain-explosives-idUKTRE71G3H120110217>.

Six months later, in June 2012, Al-Furqan launched a more pointed, polished, and lengthy version of the same argument with a 63-minute spectacular titled, “Clanging of the Swords, Part One.”¹⁵ The video features better quality footage and intensified sectarian content. Zarqawi is quoted as saying that the Shiites have “moved the *qibla* from Mecca and Medina to Karbala and Najaf,” intimating that they are taking over the Middle East. Footage of American troops and drones segues into footage of Shiite religious events and images of Muqtada al-Sadr and Prime Minister Al-Maliki with Iranian President Ahmedinajad. Once again ISI relies on the testimony of others, showing a series of Iraqi Sunni politicians denouncing the Iraqi Government and especially its fraught relationship with the Sunni Arab “Awakening” groups (*sahawat*), who are portrayed as fostered, and then abandoned, by the Americans.

The video then moves to high quality images of ISI fighters making bread, preparing to go on suicide operations, giving their personal testimonies, and participating in operations. ISI then explains itself: it wants to defend the Sunnis and understands the pressure the Awakening tribes have been under to work with the government. ISI opens its arms to tribesmen who wish to change sides. Next, night vision footage shows ISI members going door to door in Sunni areas handing out statements and videos. Footage of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) abusing prisoners is then juxtaposed with video of traitors and spies being executed by a shot to the head.

Once again, this is traditional insurgent propaganda focused on the all-important local host population and underscoring local and national grievances. Though the footage contained in the video is of better quality, the content is not new. A shorter, 7:37-minute musical version of the video using

some of the same images appears in October 2012 with the memorable *nasheed*, or anthem, “Dawlatna Mansura” (“Our State is Victorious”).¹⁶ This is accompanied by footage of battles, IEDs, the execution of prisoners by shooting, the training of fighters, and American troops surrendering command to the Iraqis. Here the appeal is not intellectual—there is no footage of talking heads—but emotional, bolstered by stirring music and images of righteous, avenging carnage.

In January 2013 the Syrian-born ISI spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani widened the scope of his target audience in an audio message called “Seven Facts,” released in Arabic and English. While the message is still mostly Iraq-focused Adnani makes several references to the violence in Syria. Adnani explains that the “blessed rebellion” is the beginning of the end of the “Safavid” regime in Iraq and describes the Iraqi Sunni politicians as worthless, unable and unwilling to protect Sunnis from Shiites. He claims that the goal of the Shiites is the destruction of Sunnis, and that what is happening in Syria and Iraq are part of the same struggle. Adnani finishes by asserting that the complaints being raised by Iraqi Sunnis were being raised for many years by the *mujahedeen*, and “only by the barrage of bullets and the spilling of blood” will the injustice and humiliation come to an end.

15. Aaron Y. Zelin, “al-Furqān Media presents a new video message from the Islamic State of Iraq: “Clanging of the Swords, Part 1,” *Jihadology*, June 30, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/06/30/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-clang-of-the-swords-part-1/>.

16. Inshallah Shaheed, “Dawlatna Mansura – Nasheed,” YouTube video, 7:06, April 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59GAgEOjKZg>; Kamodo999, “Nasheed Dawlatna Mansoorā*NEW*,” YouTube video, 6:36, November 13, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbmQOXF4sMQ>; AbdulMalikLovesAllah, “Dawlatna Mansura – Nasheed,” YouTube video, 7:07, June 5, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niCa_wILCOM. As of writing, these songs praising ISIS are widely available on YouTube (taken directly from this ISI video).

The ISIS brand emerges

ISI propaganda underwent a transformation in the year 2013 as the Syrian civil war escalated and ISI became ISIS. The major elements of what would become the ISIS brand of propaganda, including a focus on Syria, high quality production values, an emphasis on social media networks and an appeal to a wider, pan-Islamic and non-Arabic speaking audience, all become more salient. This period between April 2013 (when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally announced that Nusra Front was a branch of the Islamic State and was quickly rebuffed by Nusra's Amir Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani) and February 2014 (when ISIS was expelled from al-Qaida) roughly corresponds with the production cycle of the long-running video series called "Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles." The reference to "epic battles," or *malahim* in Arabic, is redolent of Islamic apocalyptic literature.¹⁷

The production quality of the series is top notch. The videos no longer contain mashups of borrowed footage, but are made up of 100% original material filmed by ISIS. While the technical quality of the videos is consistently exemplary, the content varies according to circumstances. The "Windows" series is an intermediate step towards the more mature ISIS imagery that emerged, like Athena full-formed, in June and July 2014 with the fall of Mosul and the announcement of the Baghdadi Caliphate. While the series is representative of the scope and evolution of ISIS messaging, the 49 episodes were only one part of a much larger ISIS media ef-

fort, which included standalone products and lower quality material produced by local outlets and battlefield leaders publicizing beheadings.¹⁸

The 13-minute long "Windows" episode 1 (originally called "Messages from the Land of Epic Battles") was released in the summer of 2013 following the siege of the Menagh Airbase in Syria. The video features an interview with a 75-year old fighter, Abu Omar al-Ansari, who talks emotionally about his family and the sacrifice he and his sons have made for jihad. He describes jihad as an individual responsibility (*fard ain*) for all Muslims, and insists that the fighting and killing in the eternal battle between unbelief and belief will continue until judgment day. Syria, Iraq, Mali, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Pakistan are among the battlefields Ansari mentions as places where the infidels are to be fought.

The series generally hewed to a set formula consisting of an interview or footage of a specific topic and almost always ending with some action-oriented material, usually consisting of drive-by shootings, IEDs, suicide bombings, or combat camera coverage. While the first part of the videos were almost always set in Syria, much of the action sequences took place in Iraq with sites identified as Nineveh, Kirkuk, Anbar, or Salahudin provinces.

Some of the earliest episodes of the series feature ISIS fighters destroying hashish crops and attacking Kurdish forces from the PKK and PYD. The

17. Muhammad Shawqi Amin, "al-Malahim bayna al-lugha wa-al-adab," *Alam al fikr* 16 (1985): 227-30.

18. "Another video posted on ISIS channel showing the beheading of the captain Shadi Suleiman," *Liveleak* video, 1:53, August 6, 2014, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=5f6_1407367840&comments=1.

two part video featuring Saudi ISIS fighters aims at encouraging men to join the jihad in Syria or take action back home, and welcomes *muhajirs* (immigrants) from Kazakhstan. Windows episode 8 is a 30-minute vignette on military operations in eastern Hama province in Syria, and prominently features Chechen commander Abu Omar al-Shishani. Episode 9 focuses on Syria's Bedouin tribes giving their allegiance to ISIS. Episode 11 features the liberation of Iraqi prisoners from Abu Ghraib prison, the nighttime round up of Iraqi security personnel and their execution.

Other videos show the "soft side" of the Islamic State: Eid al-Adha celebrations with children (who are almost always boys), a fighter offering his friends some fresh pomegranates, ISIS personnel delivering food baskets door to door, earnest young boys learning to pray, and a laughing, swimming individual who becomes a suicide bomber.

Aside from the Chechens (appearing in episodes 8, 15, 25, and 43) and the aforementioned Kazakh emigrants, other non-Arabs make increasingly prominent appearances. While an interview with an ancient, gap-toothed Albanian in episode 19 seems relatively lackluster, episode 26 of the series is entirely in Kurdish and features a Kurdish ISIS fighter sending a message "to all the apostates in the KDP and PUK that we are coming to Erbil and Suleimaniya." The video ends with a suicide bombing at a PKK checkpoint near Qamishli, Syria. Episode 32 (running almost 10 minutes long) is entirely in German with Arabic sub-titles and spotlights a German jihadi in Syria, Abu Osama, who talks directly into the camera and calls on German Muslims to join the jihad. This video, which was released in November 2013, ends with an unrelated attack on a police station in Kirkuk.

Even more consequential are visual material released in early 2014 addressing the growing split with al-

Qaida/Nusra Front and confrontation with Free Syrian Army (FSA), especially rival Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham or the Islamic Front umbrella grouping of anti-ISIS Islamists (usually dubbed *sahawat* by ISIS in an effort to link them to the Iraqi Sunni tribal opposition to ISI). Windows episode 38 features an ISIS member of Saudi nationality criticizing other Islamist groups and claiming that "the ethics and morals" of the ISIS fighters are the best. Episode 42 contains an interview with two fighters (one of whom is Tunisian) who had been detained and abused in Aleppo by the anti-ISIS *sahawat*. Episode 43 depicts the seizure of Al-Bab from the "corrupt *sahawat* and traitors." In the video, Al-Shishani demands that the *sahawat* repent and surrender their weapons to ISIS, while another fighter accuses the *sahawat* of being "porcine apostates" ("*murtadin al-khanazir*") whose heads should be lopped off. Episode 44 features a lengthy interview with a *sahawat* prisoner who describes how Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi intelligence officials have been encouraging rebel groups to fight ISIS, while episode 45 (which runs almost 22 minutes long) features martyrs who have fallen while fighting the *sahawat*. This episode also contains additional interviews with repentant rebels who have, according to ISIS, been deceived into fighting ISIS by dishonest fatwas.

Over the course of the series, episodes become longer and more polished, but continue to focus almost exclusively on the ideological and military rivalries between Islamist factions in early 2014. Episode 46 (19 minutes) calls on ISIS rivals to repent while episode 47 (almost 20 minutes) features a Jordanian fighter criticizing al-Qaida's statement against ISIS and the abusive behavior of the Nusra Front Amir in Aleppo. Episode 48 (15 minutes) pushes back against the claim that ISIS is "extremist" (*khawarij* or *takfiri*) while episode 49 (17 minutes) calls members of Ahrar al-Sham hypocrites and states, "they are Jews," a highly insulting accusation in Islamist circles.

Confronting the world: Islamic State propaganda from 2014

By spring of 2014, the focus of ISIS propaganda finally shifts away from rival Islamist factions and internecine squabbles and starts to target a wider audience. Weeks before the fall of Mosul, ISIS released the first issue of its English language “Islamic State News” report (a product of the “News Authority of the Islamic State”) as well as its first “mujatweet,” a high quality, minute long human interest vignette. The first mujatweet is entirely in German (the next two, in Arabic, feature images of ice cream and *shwarma*). These short videos feature ISIS members reaching out to the local population and visiting injured fighters in the hospital.

The single most important product released in the spring of 2014 is the well-known 62-minute long video called “Clanging of the Swords, Part Four.”¹⁹ While rightly cited for its importance in preparing the ground for the fall of Mosul, the video builds on the content and themes contained in the action sequences of the “Windows” videos. “Clanging Part Four,” similar to the “Windows” series, features footage of repentant *sahwat* and tribesmen. It also features more extreme and prolonged footage of drive-by shootings, combat operations, and explosions. While the “Windows” videos depict the fall of individuals, “Clanging” shows the fall of military bases and entire cities (such as Fallujah). In “Clanging,” an ISIS member notes that Anbar province is “only a stone’s

throw away from the Al-Aqsa Mosque,” echoing Abu Omar al-Baghdadi’s comments in 2007, and repeatedly describes the Shiites as being equally as bad as the Jews and the Christians.²⁰

Most disturbing to the ISF was the footage of ISIS members setting up checkpoints, rounding up and liquidating enemies while posing as ISF soldiers. The video ends with the voice of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself warning that the fire lit in Iraq will eventually burn the Crusaders at Dabiq, appropriately tying the “old” ISI to the new ISIS. While the Dabiq of Islamic apocalyptic literature had been mentioned in ISIS propaganda at least twice before, it would now become a staple of ISIS propaganda (and indeed, the name of ISIS’s online magazine).²¹

With the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014, and with the ISIS project now gaining global attention, the group launched three new high quality products aimed at reaching an international and pan-Muslim audience. The 15-minute long “End of Sykes-Picot” video, hosted by an English speaking Chilean, shows ISIS member bulldozing over the manmade border between Iraq and Syria, thus suggesting that ISIS has made rapid progress. This video is followed by another 13-minute long video called “There is No Life Without Jihad,” which features British and Australian fighters announcing that victory for the Caliphate is imminent and

19. Nico Prucha, “Is this the most successful release of a jihadist video ever?,” *Jihadica*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.jihadica.com/is-this-the-most-successful-release-of-a-jihadist-video-ever/>.

20. The video’s theme song also notes that “whenever we move, the Jewish rabbi is humiliated” (at the 39.04 mark).

21. William McCants, “ISIS Fantasies of an Apocalyptic Showdown in Northern Syria,” *The Brookings Institution*, October 3, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/10/03-isis-apocalyptic-showdown-syria-mccants>.

calling for Western Muslims to fight, claiming “the cure for depression is jihad.”²² This “message to the brothers who have stayed behind” is a strong, sustained, and emotional appeal to Western Muslims to join ISIS immediately, and seeks to remove every possible excuse, such as work, family, comfort, for not going. The video thus connects the need for immediate sacrifice for the sake of suffering Muslims in Syria to a long awaited millenarian hope. This message is emphasized with clarity: “you can be here in these golden times,” or a time of sacrifice for the sake of the Caliphate and Muslims in Syria, or “you can be on the sidelines,” for which you will have to answer on judgment day.

A third video was released in June 2014 by Al-Hayat Media Center (HMC), which targets a primarily Western audience. This video is shorter (5:26 minutes) but perfectly encapsulates the deep cultural-emotional appeal to youth for which ISIS has become known. Syrian-American techie Ahmad Abu Samra is widely believed to be connected with HMC. A *nasheed* released by HMC called “Let’s Go for Jihad!” is sung in German with the text entirely in English.²³ The video is fast, violent, and victorious, featuring shootings and explosions, lines of vehicles and tanks operated by black-clad fighters, and rows of enemies shot in the head, interlaced with images of waving black flags and suffering Syrian children. Most of the footage is set in Iraq and was recycled from past videos, including the “Windows” videos. The music is a heady mix of a droning and almost hip-hop style a capella beat with the lyrics emphasizing every ISIS meme we have come to know:

“Make supplication
In order that Allah accepts
And this Nasheed may bomb the Kuffar for Real

Chorus: (Brothers RISE UP!²⁴
Claim your VICTORY

HAYA (Let’s go)
Let’s Go for Jihad)

Brothers, it is time to rise
Set forth for the battle
If YOU are TRUTHFUL
Either you get VICTORY
Or the SHAHADAH
Do you fear DEATH?
There is NO ESCAPE!
Get DIGNITY
And Shahadah FI SABILILLAH [in the
path of God]
Is the entrance to PARADISE
Rush to the battlefield, O LIONS!

(Chorus)

Your brothers and sisters are crying!
SHOUTING!
DYING!
AND SHAM IS BLEEDING TO DEATH!

(Chorus)

And we are setting...
From land to land FORTH!
From city to city!
And we will not STOP!
Until the word of ALLAH
IS THE HIGHEST!

(Chorus)

The black flags
RISE UP!
THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD
And we testify
This WITH OUR BLOOD
WITH OUR DEATH
Until we fall in battle

22. Abu Muthanna al-Yemeni from Britain, “ISIS ‘No Life Without Jihad’ Video,” *Live/leak* video, June 12, 2014, http://www.live-leak.com/view?i=6a5_1403639105.

23. Aaron Y. Zelin, “Ajnād Foundation For Media Production presents a new Nashīd from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām: ‘Clanging of the Swords, Nashīd Of The Defiant,’” *Jihadology* video, June 16, 2014, 3:08, <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/page/7/>.

24. Capitalized words are reproduced as in the original video.

(Chorus)

With harshness we fight
In front of the gates of paradise!
Brothers, join us!
We slaughter till the Day of Judgment

(Chorus)

They are coming from everywhere!
The soldiers of HONOR
Unstoppable on battlefield
Let's go for the defense of the Messenger (SAWS)

(Chorus)

They have recognized their obligations
They are destroying THE ENEMIES!
No more disease IN THE HEART!
Because they LOVE TO DIE
And the satisfaction of our Lord IS THE GOAL!

(Chorus)

Therefore WE WENT OUT!
We gave EVERYTHING!
And call you to the LAND OF HONOR

(Chorus)

Bombs DROP ON US!
But we continue to call FOR SHARIA
[Islamic law]
The laws of Allah are written!
Highest paradise for the shuhada
WE GIVE our own blood!
The Day of Judgment
IS NEAR!
But the people don't understand blinded
by this world!"

In two years, ISIS went from releasing Arabic-language propaganda about corruption and human rights abuses by the Iraqi government to English and German-language propaganda focused on changing the hearts of men. As one expert noted about ISIS songwriting, "The Islamic State's nasheeds are not defensive at all. They are about a hope to change the world forever."²⁵ But that is a recent development across ISIS social media accelerated by events on the ground, including sectarian conflict in Syria and ISIS advances in Iraq in 2014. This development underscores the centrality and urgency of Syria and sectarianism in ISIS ideology, something that the current American administration ignored until it was too late.²⁶ It is always important to note that political and military events on the ground have driven the content of propaganda, radicalized populations, and influenced the effectiveness of ISIS messaging, not the other way around. Video such as "Clanging of the Swords" were so successful because they depict versions of very real events occurring on the ground.

25. Alex Marshall, "How Isis got its anthem," *The Guardian (US edition)*, November 9, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem>.

26. Musa al-Gharbi, "The myth and reality of sectarianism in Iraq," *Al Jazeera America*, August 18, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/iraq-sectarianismshiassunniskurdsnourialmalaki.html>.

Themes in Islamic State messaging

How would one then summarize hundreds of hours of ISIS propaganda videos in a few short words? The first theme is **urgency**: the (Sunni Arab) Muslims are being slaughtered now. Syria's children are being killed by the *rafida* apostates now. There is a plot now by the Shiites in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere to utterly destroy the Sunni Muslims. The Shiites have already taken the Sunnis' dignity and political power, and are now on the march to take everything else. This is why events in Syria and the extreme sectarianism of an unrestrained Al-Maliki regime were so consequential: they provided the perfect frame for ISIS's claim to be the defender of Sunni Arab Muslims.²⁷ But this urgent call builds on a deeply embedded, broader litany of perceived outrages perpetrated against the "true" Muslims by outside enemies: the Crusaders, the Jews, the infidels (*kuffar*) and their tyrannical (*tawagheet*) puppet regimes.

The second concept is **agency**: it is up to you, the Muslim viewer, to do something now to save the Muslims. Like a Bible-belt preacher exhorting a flock, it is about the immediate decision an individual Muslim needs to make in fulfillment of his religious duty. As Thomas Hegghammer wrote, "a

growing number of micro-level studies of jihadi recruitment downplays the role of doctrine and emphasizes proximate incentives involving emotions: the pleasure of agency, the thrill of adventurism, the joy of camaraderie, and the sense of living an 'authentic Islamic life.'²⁸ The individual Muslim is called to ask himself if he is one of the "suitable bricks" for the "blessed structure" which is the Islamic State. Rather than advocating institutional violence, such as that of the nation state, the ISIS call—especially to Western Muslims—advocates violence as an individual decision and civic duty.²⁹

The third theme to highlight is **authenticity**: the authenticity of the individual finds its fulfillment in the authenticity of the organization he is joining. The fact that that organization is extreme and harsh is actually further proof of its sincerity.³⁰ The seemingly authentic black flag, the savage videos, and the black dress all reinforce the message that this is the unvarnished truth, hard but pure.³¹ This is about building the Caliphate *now* and implementation of Sharia *now*, not in some misty future time as suggested by al-Qaida. Political critics often falsely assume that the extreme violence of ISIS is nihilistic, but in fact, it has a very clear stated purpose, which is to bring about something longed for and

27. Clint Watts, "Syria: Suffering the effects of the 2nd foreign fighter glut," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 26, 2013, <http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2013/05/syria-suffering-effects-2nd-foreign-fighter-glut>.

28. Hegghammer.

29. Stern and Berger, 72.

30. Hassan Hassan, "ISIS has reached new depths of depravity. But there is a brutal logic behind it," *The Guardian (US edition)*, February 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/isis-islamic-state-ideology-sharia-syria-iraq-jordan-pilot>.

31. Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies," September 1, 2014, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* (September 2014): 15–20, <https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/article-the-black-flag-myth-ctta-2014.pdf>.

32. Robert Zaretsky and Daid Mikics, "Is ISIS an army of nihilists? Just the opposite," *The Boston Globe*, August 31, 2014.

not seen for many years. This is not nihilism, but extremely violent idealism.³² As a (non-Muslim) extremist once noted, “a nation regenerates itself only upon heaps of corpses.”³³

The fourth theme one can identify is **victory**: further proof of ISIS’s divinely sanctioned authenticity is that it is “here to stay and growing”. Actual military victory, as seen in footage from Fallujah, Mosul, or Sinjar, is highly effective messaging, but other displays of power and impunity make the same point. For example, the humiliating subjugation of infidels, the public display of beheadings, the destruction of idols, and the display of state-like qualities such as currency and passports, all suggest power, permanence, and victory.

This powerful emotional and spiritual message containing these themes of urgency, agency, authenticity, and victory was transmitted through a network that takes advantage of the decentralized, free-wheeling nature of social media and the 24-hour news cycle to extract maximum exposure. Twitter, a service once jokingly described as “Friendstalker” by one of its creators, is particularly useful because of its speed, volume, and concision.³⁴ Here is a tool where you can send a message to a huge number of people but, through hashtags, tailor your message by subject and interest. A lot of ground-breaking research has been done on dissemination networks and the challenges they pose, helping us to better understand ISIS’s social media strategy. Just as ISIS took advantage of ungoverned space in war-torn parts of Iraq and Syria, it also took advantage of “ungoverned” virtual space formed by a correlation of disparate factors.³⁵ The default libertarian worldview of American social media companies, the default U.S. policy position on the free flow of information (to counter authoritarian states such

as Russia, China, and Iran) and the default position that sees terrorist communications as chiefly a problem of law enforcement and intelligence created an opportunity that ISIS propagandists and its fans seized with alacrity.³⁶

33. Eugene N. Curtis, *Saint-Just: Colleague of Robespierre* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 236.

34. Nick Bilton, “All is Fair in Love and Twitter,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 2013.

35. J.M. Berger, “Internet Provides Terrorists with Tools – Just Like Everyone Else,” *INTELWIRE*, July 31, 2011, <http://news.intelwire.com/2011/07/internet-provides-terrorists-with-tools.html>.

36. Daniel R. McCarthy, *Power, Information Technology and International Relations Theory: The Power and Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy and the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 102; Kate Knibbs, “In the Online Hunt for Criminals, Social Media is the Ultimate Snitch,” *Digital Trends*, July 13, 2013, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/the-new-inside-source-for-police-forces-social-networks/>.

Responding to the social media storm

While ISIS's message (and that of all takfiri/salafi/jihadi groups for that matter) is relatively linear and clear, the response by opponents to ISIS propaganda has been much more diffuse and hesitant. The first line of response is often limited to traditional methods of communication used by state actors: pronouncements from on high at foreign ministries, press releases from security agencies (defense, interior) and coverage of official broadcast media. In Syria and Iraq, ground zero for ISIS messaging, the means of communication have been mostly monopolized by state governments seen by ISIS's target audience, namely Sunni Arab Muslims, as hopelessly sectarian and compromised, if not completely illegitimate.

On the wider stage of pan-Arab broadcast media, Qatari-owned Al Jazeera Television, and especially Saudi-owned Al Arabiya Television, have spent years criticizing ISIS, but have also graphically described a rise in sectarian tension across the Middle East that feeds directly into the "urgent grievance" portion of the ISIS narrative. Obviously, this trend of rising sectarianism described in both ISIS and pan-Arab media is true to some degree. Hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims *have* been killed in Syria (some by ISIS but more by Assad) and the Iraqi Government *has* been seen as increasingly sectarian, especially since 2011.

Regimes have attempted to use religious clerics as tools in countering ISIS propaganda. Governments

seem to feel that if they can somehow unleash and propagate the right credible voice, their counter-message will seem more legitimate. Most clerics in the Muslim world have repeatedly denounced ISIS, as have a preponderance of conservative and pro-jihad religious authorities. From the clerics at Al Azhar to extreme conservatives like Yusuf al-Qaradawi and jihadis like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the overwhelming weight of Islamic religious authority has been openly against the ISIS project.³⁷ It is thus a cherished myth that religious clerical voices have not been harnessed in the fight against ISIS. Even al-Qaida, surely the most credible voice amongst extremists and remembered to have "dissolved" ISIS in April of 2014, has failed to stop the rise of the ISIS on social media. Both the propaganda of regimes and of al-Qaida has fallen short before the ISIS onslaught.

However, like pan-Arab media coverage, pro-regime clerics can help to undergird at least part of the ISIS message. On October 27, 2014, the Twitter account of Saudi cleric Abdulaziz al-Turaifi (@abdulaziztarefe, a verified account with over 700,000 followers) tweeted the following: "The Jews and Christians have never colluded with the Rafidah against Islam like they are today. They used to collude in a specific country, but today, in every country."³⁸

What has been described as the "most expansive, best funded and longest continuously running

37. Although a leader of the radical Egyptian Muslim Brothers and extremely anti-Israel and anti-American, al-Qaradawi's May 2013 episode on "takfir" on his Al Jazeera program al-Sharia wal-hayat was a powerful rebuke to one of the pillars of ISIS ideology.

38. Abdulaziz al-Turaifi (@abdulaziztarefe), Twitter post, October 27, 2014, <https://twitter.com/abdulaziztarefe/status/526827289074339840>.

counter-radicalization program in existence” was established in Saudi Arabia.³⁹ It predates the rise of ISIS and uses all the tools of counter-messaging including media engagement, religious discourse, counseling and even international cooperation.⁴⁰ The Internet portion of this effort, called the al-Sakinah campaign, began in 2004. As of 2008, the al-Sakinah campaign claims to have convinced 877 individuals online to reject radical ideologies. While the project has received considerable media attention and widespread praise, it is hard to reconcile such praise with the claim that Saudis, more than any other foreign nationality, are most likely to join ISIS.⁴¹ One common criticism of the al-Sakinah campaign is that it seeks to inculcate Saudi ideology, which “has substantial areas of overlap with the extremists’ ideology,” thereby promoting loyalty to Saudi ideals but not necessarily changing “the extremists’ worldview.”⁴² But as with all counter-radicalization and counter-messaging efforts, doing something is better than doing nothing.

If Arab Muslim states have been active but not fully effective in ISIS counter-messaging, what is the track record elsewhere? Western European countries have lagged in establishing any sort of counter-messaging capability, although this may now be changing.⁴³ The United Kingdom has been

more active than other European states in counter-ing violent extremism, evidenced by its “Prevent” program which was launched in 2007 and seeks to challenge extremism in schools, universities, and on the Internet. Among an impressively broad range of initiatives growing out of this program is the high-profile, though controversial, Quilliam Foundation.⁴⁴ Despite counter-messaging efforts, the flow of British citizens to ISIS has continued, raising questions about the effectiveness of the “Prevent” program and whether ideology or “foreign policy grievances and social alienation” are to blame.⁴⁵ One former senior police officer described the “Prevent” program as “a toxic brand” and widely mistrusted, while others have defended it.⁴⁶ The United Kingdom’s private sector has produced different and intriguing approaches to countering ISIS propaganda, as seen in a series of Abdullah-X videos made by a former extremist.⁴⁷ However, while bracingly original, this initiative seems to have remained small and narrowly focused.⁴⁸

The counter-messaging efforts of the United States seem to fall somewhere in between the extensive and long-running efforts of Arab states and the relatively small and late-coming efforts of the EU. The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was formally established in

39. Christopher Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation and Aftercare” *Carnegie Papers* 97 (2008), 21.

40. Abdullah F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism: A Brief Overview of Saudi Arabia’s Approach,” *Middle East Policy Council* 15, no. 2 (2008).

41. Christopher Boucek, “Extremism, Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 5, no. 16 (2007), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4321#vVqHSvIVhBc; “Saudis most likely to join ISIS, 10% of group’s fighters are women,” *Middle East Monitor*, October 20, 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/14758-saudis-most-likely-to-join-isis-10-of-groups-fighters-are-women>.

42. Angela Rabasa, et al., *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, Rand National Security Division, 2010), 62.

43. “EU Plans to Step Up Fight on Online Jihadi Propaganda,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/01/29/world/europe/ap-eu-europe-terror-propaganda.html?_r=0.

44. Katie Engelhart, “Revealing Quilliam, the Muslim Destroyers of the English Far-Right,” *Vice*, October 10, 2013, http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/quilliam.

45. “Quilliam response to UK’s government’s new ‘Prevent’ policy,” *June 7, 2011, The Quilliam Foundation*, April 11, 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/quilliam-response-to-uk-governments-new-prevent-policy.pdf>; Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, “UK’s flawed counter-terrorism strategy,” *Le Monde diplomatique (English edition)*, December 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/uk-s-flawed-counter-terrorism-strategy>.

46. Josh Halliday and Vikram Dodd, “UK anti-radicalisation Prevent strategy a ‘toxic brand,’” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/09/anti-radicalisation-prevent-strategy-a-toxic-brand>.

47. Jack Simpson, “Abdullah-X: The new cartoon made by former extremist aimed at stopping Britain’s young Muslims from leaving for Syria,” *The Independent*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/abdullahx-the-new-cartoon-made-by-former-extremist-aimed-at-stopping-britains-young-muslims-from-leaving-for-syria-9604967.html>.

48. Abdullah-X, “Abdullah-X Official YouTube Channel,” *YouTube*, December 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx/videos>.

September 2011 with the mandate to “coordinate, orient and inform” all government-wide communications activities against al-Qaida, its allies and adherents.”⁴⁹ At the time, CSCC was a small operation seemingly at variance with the belief that the terrorist threat was finally receding.⁵⁰ CSCC attempted from 2011 to 2014 to try something unusual in carrying out attributed, targeted counter-messaging against ISIS in Arabic and in English. While always outnumbered by the massive ISIS “smart mob,” its aggressive and sometimes graphic messaging was a risky government response to the ISIS siren call.⁵¹ Of course, CSCC itself was a response to the perceived ineffectiveness of U.S. counter-messaging against al-Qaida in the decade preceding its founding.

CSCC began as an effort to counter ISI and broader al-Qaida messaging. When, in June 2014, ISIS seized control of Mosul and declared the restoration of the Caliphate, CSCC ratcheted up its operational tempo and began working almost exclusively on countering ISIS propaganda. Despite its shift in focus, CSCC maintained almost the exact same budget and staff it had had since 2012. At its height, CSCC’s team of operators and editors working in Arabic and English did not exceed 15 people.

The narrowing of CSCC’s focus to ISIS propaganda allowed for a boost in the Center’s overall production. In 2014, CSCC released at least 93 Arabic videos. In the time between the fall of Mosul and

the end of the year (June 10 to December 5, 2014), these videos were viewed on YouTube 959,187 times (additional views occurred on Vimeo and on bootleg versions posted on Iraqi and Syrian Facebook pages). The single most successful Arabic video, “DAESH Threatens Sunnis,” was viewed 115,050 times in two postings since ISIS supporters briefly knocked it off of YouTube by manipulating YouTube community standards.⁵²

While CSCC’s Arabic efforts were a priority, the rise of ISIS led to the first dedicated infusion of funding for the English language “Think Again Turn Away” campaign since its modest beginning in December 2013. A “Think Again Turn Away” YouTube channel was launched in July 2014, followed by an affiliated Facebook page launched a month later. One video titled “Welcome to ISIS Land,” which was originally posted in English and subsequently copied in Arabic, went viral after a hostile Western journalist tweeted dismissively about it.⁵³ The video was viewed almost 900,000 times, and about half of those views were outside the United States. Like several other widely-watched videos criticizing ISIS, “Welcome to ISIS Land” had to be posted twice after complaints from ISIS supporters caused its removal.⁵⁴

Like the work of the Saudis, the work of CSCC has received considerable media attention, but has had limited impact.⁵⁵ As terrorism scholar Magnus Ranstorp tweeted on September 6, 2014 in response to a high profile CSCC English language

49. “Developing an Integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative and Establishing a Temporary Organization to Support Certain Government-wide Communications Activities Directed Abroad,” *Federal Register* 76, no. 179 (September 15, 2011), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2011-09-15/pdf/2011-23891.pdf>.

50. David Remnick, “Going the Distance,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2>.

51. Hayes Brown, “Meet The State Department Team Trying To Troll ISIS Into Oblivion,” *ThinkProgress*, September 18, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/09/18/3568366/think-again-turn-away/>.

52. ThinkAgain TurnAway (U.S. Department of State Official YouTube Channel), “داعش تهدد أهل السنة في السعودية والأردن” *YouTube*, July 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcQxGG6y-MY>; ThinkAgain TurnAway (U.S. Department of State Official YouTube Channel), “ة: داعش تهدد أهل السنة في السعودية والأردن” *YouTube*, July 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j69ZQIXdfKM>.

53. ThinkAgain Turn Away (U.S. Department of State Official YouTube Channel), “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ land (ISIS/ISIL),” *YouTube* video, 1:09, July 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ljvEKOMEIY>. The Arabic version, posted twice, on July 25, 2014 and July 28, 2014 had a total of 44,813 views.

54. Alberto M. Fernandez, personal interview, February 27, 2015.

55. Simon Cottee, “Why It’s So Hard to Stop ISIS Propaganda,” *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/why-its-so-hard-to-stop-isis-propaganda/386216/>.

video, it is a “good idea in theory but will it reach IS sympathizers?”⁵⁶ That seems to be a key problem for all counter-messaging efforts and one that CSCC recognized. Recent media coverage suggests that the U.S. government may be scaling back or eliminating the CSCC model in favor of different, unspecified approaches to counter-messaging.⁵⁷ The seemingly modest Sawab Center in the United Arab Emirates, launched in July 2015, is one new approach that warrants watching.⁵⁸

If the counter-messaging efforts of Arab regimes, al-Qaida, western European governments, and the United States have all seemingly failed to substantively blunt ISIS’s efforts to recruit over social media, what elements must a well-designed, comprehensive effort include?

56. Magnus Ranstorp (@MagnusRanstorp), Twitter post, September 6, 2014, <https://twitter.com/MagnusRanstorp/status/508348795579826176>.

57. Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS’ Message,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html?_r=0.

58. Asma Ajroudi, “U.S., UAE take on ISIS in Information War,” *Al-Arabiya*, July 8, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2015/07/08/-Sawab-UAE-U-S-launch-anti-ISIS-digital-communication-center-.html>.

It's the foreign policy, stupid!

While the social media success of ISIS is indeed remarkable in that it has mobilized tens of thousands (albeit a very small portion of the pool of Muslims worldwide) to take up arms, it cannot be divorced from the political and military reality on the ground. The international community allowed the Syrian civil war to grow and fester, assuming that it could have no real impact on the region. The United States, after invading Iraq in 2003 and destroying the status quo, essentially walked away eight years later. This allowed for a corrupt and increasingly sectarian regime to take over Iraq and create the optimal conditions for the resurgence of ISIS. If Mosul had not fallen to ISIS in June 2014, one wonders if an ISIS caliphate would have been declared. Would Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have hesitated just like Abu Omar al-Baghdadi did? Has ISIS not seized control of one third of Iraq, videos like “Clanging of the Swords, Part Four” would merely be interesting curiosities.

ISIS's appeal is partly grounded in the fact that it can be plausibly seen, particularly by Sunni Muslims, as an alternative to failed statehood and anarchy. Western converts to ISIS are also attracted to a political entity which seems to be delivering on some of the extremely ambitious religious promises it makes through its messaging.⁵⁹

President Obama's August 28, 2014 remarks about the need for Iraqis to build “on the progress that

they've made so far and [form] an inclusive government that will unite their country and strengthen their security forces to confront ISIL” was a basic first step to begin rebuilding a polity which had unraveled on his watch. Such arrangements will have to address major Iraqi Sunni grievances about power and wealth, and bolster Iraqi Security Forces that have been buffeted by ISIS, hollowed out by battlefield losses and corruption, and infected by extreme sectarianism. A sectarian and incompetent Iraqi military like the one under former Prime Minister Maliki is a recipe for failure. At the very least, the Iraqi military needs to be capable of providing security to all its citizens in all of Iraq.

Successful foreign policy in Iraq would also aim to “make whole” the country's religious ethnic minorities—Yazidis and Christians principally—who have been targeted by ISIS in a campaign to exterminate their existence.⁶⁰ This aim is not only just, but it also undermines ISIS's power narrative of Islamist impunity. Showing potential ISIS fighters that their sacrifice and action are ultimately pointless and accomplish nothing is a powerful disincentive that must be made tangible. This is especially true in a world where showing footage of beheadings or demolished churches is almost as useful as a military advance.

If the way forward for Iraq is relatively clear, the shifting situation in Syria is less so. American in-

59. Alberto M. Fernandez, “ISIS Promotes Image of Building Not Just Destruction,” *MEMRI*, July 2, 2015, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8641.htm>.

60. “Between the Millstones: The State of Iraq's Minorities Since the Fall of Mosul,” *ILHR, MRG, NPWJ and UNP*, February 25, 2015, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MRG_Rep_Iraq_ONLINE.pdf.

involvement in Syria consists of air strikes, the training of an unspecified armed opposition to ISIS, and a “political solution to solve Syria’s crisis once and for all.”⁶¹ The respected former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, has characterized U.S. strategy in Syria as “too little, too late,” and has called for a much more comprehensive strategy.⁶² While Ford is almost certainly right in his prescription, there seems to be little appetite in Washington for increased involvement in Syria. One can only hope that other regional actors see the good sense in Ford’s six conditions for effective foreign policy in Syria:

That armed groups receiving assistance from the newly created central command will obey its orders only. That the armed opposition will stop atrocities against civilian communities that have backed the Assad regime and that the armed opposition command will accept responsibility for actions of its constituent groups. That the armed opposition will sever all ties with al-Nusra Front. That the armed opposition’s leadership must constantly reiterate that it is not seeking to destroy Christian, Alawite, or other minority communities and is prepared to negotiate local security arrangements, including with Syrian Arab Army elements, to protect all Syrians. That it will negotiate a national political deal to end the conflict without Assad’s departure as a *pre*-condition. That any political coalition purporting to lead the opposition must have genuine representation from minorities and top-level businessmen in Syria—communities that have, broadly speaking, supported Assad’s government—and that representation will not come mainly from long-term expatriates.

Involved governments must also ensure that an entire lost generation of Syrian youth, now displaced or in refugee camps, do not become the ISIS foot soldiers of the future.⁶³ There will never be, of course, a political solution to all the world’s problems and extremists will always use the squalid reality on the ground for their benefit, but some conflicts seem to be more mobilizing than others. Syria has been one of those. Both ISIS and al-Qaida have conveyed the travails of the Muslims of Central African Republic and Myanmar without—so far—finding much resonance.

61. “Transcript: President Obama’s Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism,” *CNN*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>.

62. Robert S. Ford. “America Is Losing the War in Syria.” *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/09/america-is-losing-in-the-war-against-the-islamic-state-and-assad-heres-a-grand-plan/>.

63. Doris Carrion. “Refugees Can Contribute to the Future of Syria,” *Chatham House*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.chatham-house.org/expert/comment/17151/>.

Volume to match volume

Russians, Israelis, and Syrians have all used a combination of government and motivated private stakeholders to push their policies through social media.⁶⁴ Those defending Israel on social media seem to do so by their own free will, while the Russian government reportedly pays social media propagandists to post favorable messages.⁶⁵ ISIS, of course, has its own media army. In January 2014, ISIS supporters announced the creation of the Al-Battar Media Battalion, a Twitter-based team designated to push ISIS propaganda and castigate ISIS opponents.⁶⁶ By summer 2014, at least 3,000 users were working together to create coordinated hashtag campaigns.⁶⁷ One individual in the United Kingdom admitted to posting over 45,000 pro-ISIS messages on Twitter and Instagram in less than a year. That is more than 125 messages per day.⁶⁸

Counter-messaging entities need their own “troll army” to monitor and counter ISIS propaganda online. Enhanced volume alone would provide organic opportunities for counter-messaging which do not currently exist. Volume, done right, creates an echo chamber with multiple, individualized voices adding credibility and heft to an argument. This

approach could be overt or discrete, focused on one country or issue, or target a broader audience. No Western government and few Middle Eastern ones may want to hire 3,000 people to devote their time to trolling social media and countering terrorist messages. But if an anti-ISIS coalition is to degrade and destroy the organization, as explained by President Obama, using some resources to create online teams among the highly motivated Syrian opposition diaspora and displaced Iraqi populations in Iraqi Kurdistan would both create entities with a real sense of the stakes on the ground and provide much needed work for vulnerable populations.

The CSCC’s counter-messaging team has historically been too small to be effective, and there have been very few organized social media teams consistently countering jihadi propaganda. The reasons are not hard to identify. Teams have to be motivated by salaries (as in the Russian model, for example) or by zeal and belief in a cause, as is the case with ISIS fanboys. But governments have a compelling reason to create conditions favorable to the flourishing of such collectives. This, of course, excludes hackers who also help to make the dissemination of ISIS media more difficult.⁶⁹

64. Daisy Sindelar, “The Kremlin’s Troll Army,” *The Atlantic*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-kremlins-troll-army/375932/>.

65. Cnaan Liphshiz, “From Dutch situation room, pro-Israel volunteers defend Jewish state on social media,” *JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.jta.org/2014/07/29/news-opinion/world/in-dutch-situation-room-pro-israel-volunteers-defend-jewish-state-on-social-media>.

66. “Jihadists Create Twitter-based Jihadi Media Group, al-Battar Media Battalion” *SITE Monitoring Service*, January 15, 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/jihadists-create-twitter-based-jihadi-media-group-al-battar-media-battalion.html>.

67. Stern and Berger, 156.

68. Claire Carter, “London woman, 22, admits posting 45,000 Tweets supporting ISIS in less than a year - including pictures of dead bodies and instructions for children to pick up weapons,” *Daily Mail*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3030237/London-woman-22-admits-posting-45-000-Tweets-supporting-ISIS-year.html>.

69. Elise Viebeck, “Anonymous ups Twitter war against ISIS,” *The Hill*, March 17, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/235918-anonymous-doubles-down-against-isis-on-twitter>.

A handmade approach to western audiences

While creating Arabic language counter-messaging teams in the Middle East is relatively easy to accomplish, it is more difficult to respond to the flood of ISIS propaganda released in Western languages, and in English in particular. While CSCC's "Think Again Turn Away" campaign was a tiny pilot that received mostly bad reviews, it seemed to have motivated the creation of the French #StopJihadisme campaign in January 2015.⁷⁰ Whatever dubious merits these preliminary campaigns may have had in blazing a trail, neither amounts to the efforts of a platoon, much less an army. Perhaps such an effort is best handled by a public-private partnership that would empower vetted community groups and activists in the West, subsidized by government, to provide a public service in alerting at risk communities about the dangers and warning signs of radicalization.

Such a partnership would hopefully be bolder than government can be in countering some of the ideological claims of extremist supporters. This service could work on several levels, combining the mass appeal of social media with the individual attention only a counselor or social worker (or a terrorist recruiter) can give to a troubled, questioning soul. The riveting testimony of a recent potential ISIS

convert underscores the challenge of such outreach: it needs to be aggressive and voluminous enough to address the problem, but also intimate, polite, and rooted in a sympathetic understanding of human nature.⁷¹ Volume excluded, these are qualities that government does not independently possess.

In addition to posting negative material about ISIS, counter-messaging teams need to lend a sympathetic ear to uncertain, troubled individuals who need answers. The persona of such individuals can be seen in people like Mubin Shaikh or Humera Khan.⁷² The question is how does one regularize and select for such all-important skills of trust building and positive intervention (usually done best on an individual basis) in a bureaucracy or public-private partnership? Slick media produced by extremists may not be the only source of radicalization; heartbreaking footage of the suffering in Syria is widely available in the mainstream Western media. The radicalization process involves all kinds of media, certainly, but also a relationship, whether a physically proximate or virtual. Relationship building is even more important than propaganda, especially considering the radicalization trajectory of people mobilized in clusters.⁷³ In the end, online interaction should be viewed as part of a spectrum including offline intervention.

70. Andrew Giambrone, "How to Spot a Jihadist," *The Atlantic*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/how-to-spot-a-jihadist-france/385010/>.

71. Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American," *New York Times*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html>.

72. Joshua Taylor, "Extremist Turned Academic Explains How We Stop More Young Men and Women Joining the Ranks of ISIS," *Liverpool Echo*, March 17 2015, <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/qa-extremist-turned-academic-explains-8858896>; Humera Khan, "Why Countering Extremism Fails," *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2015-02-18/why-countering-extremism-fails>.

73. Elhanan Miller, "Western Jihadists follow their friends to Syria," *Times of Israel*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/western-jihadists-follow-their-friends-to-syria/>.

Content over coordination

Rather than seek to coordinate disparate approaches to counter-messaging (each with its own national priorities and sensitivities), governments ought to be invested in creating good content and encouraging civil society to do the same. Whether provided by the public or the private sector, there is a crying need for better counter-messages to fill the space that ISIS is using to circulate its message. Neither the Saudi, “Prevent,” CSCC, nor Abdullah X models are good or bad in and of themselves; all have a role to play. They are all inherently flawed in that none of them can fully provide a response similar to the tailored combination of lethal agency and revolutionary authenticity that ISIS messaging offers. This basic flaw does not mean that counter-messaging can’t help in blunting some extremist appeal by highlighting dissonance and contradictions in the enemy’s own narrative.⁷⁴ Counter-messaging rarely get the extra attention that ISIS propaganda gets from the mainstream news reporting, so its counter-messages must be disseminated in quantities larger than what ISIS and friends churn out. Currently, ISIS is not only more prolific than its opponents, but is helped by Western media due to its “newsworthiness,” its lamprey-like attachment to the demands of the news cycle in coming up with new, click-worthy material for an easily distracted audience.

Governments should consider using direct or indirect funding to convene and empower all sorts of voices working along broadly defined and

complementary lines of approach. Connections and coordination should be loose, but communications should be constant and crosscutting across government and private sector, domestic and international, and law enforcement and intelligence communities.

The result of this strategy should be clear: there would be more high quality material of every possible sort available across social media platforms that will push back against ISIS propaganda emphasizing urgency, agency, authenticity, and victory. This strategy should include a wide range of approaches and tactics, including a religiously-grounded approach when appropriate, sarcasm, humor, distraction, and music. After all, ISIS itself is multifaceted in its approach. This is an organization whose supporters have successfully used combat footage, beheadings, explosions, sermons, and kittens to market itself.

The best counter-messages would be well grounded in facts but would seek to communicate powerfully and emotionally. This is a sweet spot that ISIS’s counter-messaging opponents have had difficulty finding, and even when they have found it, they do not exploit it as effectively as ISIS does. An effective counter-messaging strategy would also include polished material that is topical and timely, as well as content with a longer shelf life should ISIS implode. Such material would attack the ideological roots of ISIS in order to prevent future regeneration. If the plague of ISIS is, like a mundane crime,

74. Rachel Briggs, “Foreign Fighters: How to Win the War of Ideas,” *Huffington Post*, May 19, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rachel-briggs/foreign-fighters-how-to-win-war-of-ideas_b_5295531.html.

made up of “means, motive and opportunity,” then the “means” (ability to wage terrorism), the “opportunity” (slaughter and chaos in the Middle East) and the “motive” (the takfiri salafi jihadist world-view) all need to be addressed in some fashion. Addressing motive means being able to produce material that reaches into and responds to the thought and language found in the jihadist (especially Western) sub-culture.⁷⁵

75. Daniela Pisoiu, “Subculture: The Third Wave of European Jihad,” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 2, Spring 2015, <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/15/15>.

Better policing of social media

While social media companies have ramped up efforts to constrain ISIS propaganda, there is still too much room online for ISIS and its supporters to take advantage of. It is incredible how long pro-ISIS Twitter users such as Mujahid4Life, Shami Witness, and Musa Cerantonio, were able to spread their poison.⁷⁶ Twitter is an especially powerful propaganda tool, but it is not difficult today to find all sorts of radicalizing material across many social media platforms. The Recorded Future Internet security team found 60,000 pro-ISIS Twitter accounts in September 2014 despite the fact that their mere existence is a clear violation of Twitter rules.⁷⁷ A March 2015 Brookings study found similar numbers for roughly the same period.⁷⁸

Some experts have touted the value to intelligence agencies of allowing terrorist use of social media, which allows governments to better monitor and gather information on potential terrorists. Nevertheless, social media companies have

for almost a decade facilitated the rapid growth of virtual communities of terrorists and their sympathizers.⁷⁹ Stern and Berger note that, at the very least, software that recognizes terrorist logos and symbols could be used by social media companies to flag accounts for preliminary review, but this has not yet happened.⁸⁰ Stern and Berger also persuasively argue that even temporary disruptions of terrorist propaganda networks can be beneficial.

Given the apparent inability of social media companies to police the virtual space under their discretion, Yigal Carmon and Steve Stalinsky of MEMRI reasonably suggest that the United States hold public congressional hearings on whether or not greater control passes judicial scrutiny.⁸¹ However, given concerns about the potentially polarizing nature of such a debate, and the growing political clout of social media companies, even such a preliminary step is a challenge.⁸² Nevertheless, a freewheeling, public discussion on how social media companies may

76. Sara Elizabeth Williams, "The bullied Finnish teenager who became an ISIS social media kingpin - and then got out," *Newsweek*, June 5, 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/bullied-finnish-teenager-who-became-isis-social-media-kingpin-then-got-out-328290/>; Shiv Malik and Michael Safi, "Facebook removes page of preacher using social media to back jihad-ists," *The Guardian (US Edition)*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/apr/17/facebook-removes-page-radical-preacher-jihadists/>.

77. Staffan, "ISIS Jumping from Account to Account, Twitter Trying to Keep Up," *Recorded Future*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/isis-twitter-activity/>.

78. J.M. Berger, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Making Sense of ISIS's Use of Twitter," *The Brookings Institution*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/03/06-isis-twitter-census-berger>.

79. Catherine A. Theohary and John Rollins, "Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace," *Congressional Research Service*, no. R41674, March 8, 2011, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41674.pdf>.

80. Stern and Berger, 139.

81. Yigal Carmon and Steven Stalinsky, "Terrorist Use of U.S. Social Media Is A National Security Threat," *Forbes*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2015/01/30/terrorist-use-of-u-s-social-media-is-a-national-security-threat/>.

82. Sarah Mishkin and Gina Chon, "Google overtakes Goldman Sachs in US political donations," *Financial Times*, October 16, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6b637b56-53da-11e4-80db-00144feab7de.html>.

have unintentionally empowered the ISIS popular revolution is overdue.⁸³ The potential controversial role of government cyber operations to blunt terrorist use of the Internet is also worthy of discussion, but outside the scope of this study.

83. Rick Gladstone, "Twitter Says It Suspended 10,000 Twitter ISIS-Linked Accounts in One Day," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/world/middleeast/twitter-says-it-suspended-10000-isis-linked-accounts-in-one-day.html>.

Conclusion

ISIS and its brand were forged under unique circumstances that go back decades and will not be easily reversed. A dysfunctional Iraq, a bloodily sectarian Syria, and the rise of social media all helped make the ISIS movement truly revolutionary.⁸⁴ This spin is also present among certain elements of Muslim diaspora communities worldwide.⁸⁵ Communicators hoping to counter ISIS's messaging can constructively focus on creating sizable and authentic online communities of interest, addressing the intimate one-on-one dimension of radicalization, producing more content, and encouraging better social media policing practices by both governments and the private sector. Such steps will at the least make it a fairer fight.

The ongoing military campaign against ISIS might chip away at ISIS's physical presence, but ISIS as a state of mind will be harder to defeat. Nevertheless, a concerted counter-messaging campaign must be based on the physical and historical realities that gave rise to ISIS in the first place. There is some evidence of action, if not actual progress, on the media front. Hopefully such action will include a large helping of humility by policymakers in both the East and the West, who must recognize that the rise of ISIS was entirely preventable. It is a living breathing nightmare of our own choosing, partially forged by the action and inaction of a dozen capitals in the region and beyond, a nightmare, to paraphrase James Joyce, from which we are all trying to awake.

84. Haim Malka, "Chapter 2: Jihadi-Salafi Rebellion and the Crisis of Authority," in *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings (CSIS Reports)*, ed., Jon B. Alterman, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015) http://csis.org/files/publication/Chapter2_Malka_ReligiousRadicalism.pdf.

85. Alberto M. Fernandez, "Abu Talha al-Almani - ISIS's Celebrity Cheerleader," August 13, 2015, *MEMRI Daily Brief No. 52*, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8704.htm>.

About the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on the changing dynamics in Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities all over the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim-majority states, including issues related to mutual misperceptions;
- Analyzing the social, economic, and political dynamics underway in Muslim societies;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

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- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research and publications on key questions facing Muslim states and communities;
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