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# ISIL Propaganda

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## Introduction

Following the establishment of its so-called caliphate in 2014, ISIL generated a diverse array of media products, many of them published simultaneously in as many as eight languages, ranging from video clips, feature films, newspapers, and photo-stories, to radio bulletins, posters, and mobile phone apps. Each piece of its propaganda was strategically designed not just for recruitment of new supporters, but also for shaping perceptions, manipulating understanding, and steering behaviors. To be sure, its production of propaganda was not new; however, from 2014 onwards, it was a sphere of activity that was systematically scaled up, accelerated, and globalized.

ISIL's sophisticated and extensive use of strategic communication was and, in many ways, remains unprecedented. This form of communication was integral to its caliphate project, amplifying its operations daily and solidifying its place in the annals of modern insurgency. Its nuanced approach to propaganda starkly contrasted the simplistic viewpoint held by many, even at a policy level, who perceived it merely as a tool to draw supporters and showcase its "savagery." Throughout ISIL's rise and, in more recent years, decline, the common belief was that its media operations were a homogeneous, straightforward form of communication that could be readily countered with a similarly straightforward, homogeneous response. This mainstream perception, however, proved dangerously inadequate as it failed to comprehend the multi-faceted tactical and strategic benefits that ISIL derived from its propaganda.

The existing research literature on ISIL's approach to and usage of propaganda is rich, but it is overly focused on its appearance and role in online spaces. Moreover, it is for the most part highly theoretical and, for that reason, not immediately applicable in a court of law. This report sets out to rectify that imbalance, providing a structured analysis of why and how ISIL engaged in outreach in the way it did during the 'golden years' of its caliphate. Such an analysis has become increasingly important in recent years as jurisdictions around the world have sought to try third country nationals who participated – as either perpetrators or producers – in the violent mediatization of ISIL's project in Iraq and Syria. Whether they served as co-conspirators to executioners like the UK national El Shafee Elsheikh or as narrators like the Canadian citizen Mohammed Khalifa (aka Abu Ridwan al-Kanadi), foreign nationals were always disproportionately impactful in ISIL's propaganda cycle.<sup>1</sup> They played pivotal roles not only in the furtherance of its proto-state project, but also in its incitement of terroristic violence back in their home countries.

Accordingly, international jurisdictions are – and will continue to be – duty bound to prosecute these individuals, if and when they are repatriated to their home countries. Moreover, several jurisdictions have in recent years found themselves prosecuting not their own citizens, but Iraqi and Syrian supporters of ISIL who fled to their own territories as its prospects soured from late 2015 onwards. Consider, for example, Finland, which in 2015 arrested Iraqi twins over their participation in ISIL's mass summary execution of Iraqi soldiers at Camp Speicher the previous year.<sup>2</sup> What's more, besides this, ISIL propaganda materials have played and continue

- 1 (2020). ISIS Militants Charged With Deaths Of Americans In Syria. United States Department of Justice. Accessible at: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/isis-militants-charged-deaths-americans-syria>; 2021). United States of America v. Mohammed Khalifa. FBI. Accessible at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Mohammed%20Khalifa%20Affidavit%20in%20Support%20of%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf>.
- 2 (2015). Finland detains Iraqi twins over IS massacre in Tikrit. BBC News. 10 December. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35067187>.

to play a central evidentiary role in prosecutions relating to both support for the group in Syria and Iraq and domestic terrorism and related offences.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis that, for the above-stated reasons, ISIL propaganda will continue to have an enduring centrality in the context of ISIL-related prosecutions for years to come, this report provides a broad but detailed strategic overview of the structures, processes and motivations behind ISIL's media activities in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2019 – that is, the period that constituted the high point of its proto-state. In doing so, this paper aims to establish a rigorous, evidence-based context for prosecutors working to charge ISIL media activists, producers, and perpetrators, enabling more effective prosecution of the actors that were involved in these activities and providing a well-sourced baseline for jurisdictions aiming to hold the movement accountable for its crimes.

*It has four sections:*

*Section One* provides a brief history of ISIL propaganda;

*Section Two* gives an overview of ISIL's strategic approach to propaganda and propaganda-adjacent activities;

*Section Three* describes how ISIL engaged in the production and distribution of propaganda and propaganda-adjacent activities; and

*Section Four* focuses in particular on the role of execution propaganda in ISIL's overarching outreach strategy, exploring how it was produced and why (with a focus on foreigner fighter involvement and terrorism incitement) as well as what its significance is as a potential evidence base for prosecutors.

The intention is that prosecutors will be able to draw on this analysis as they build out a contextual basis for the cases they are prosecuting, using it to understand precisely what role the defendants in question played within ISIL, how this overlapped with ISIL's perpetration of war crimes and acts of violence, and why they, whether translators, narrators, videographers, photographers, editors, or producers, “mattered” in the context of its global terrorist project.

## Section One: Background

The roots of ISIL's approach to propaganda can be traced back to al-Qa'ida's activities in Afghanistan and Iraq during the 1990s and early 2000s. Recognizing the power of media in shaping perceptions, al-Qa'ida heavily relied on propaganda as a tool for recruitment, ideological indoctrination, and fostering anti-Western sentiments. Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of al-Qa'ida's top leaders, famously once noted that “media is half the battle,” underscoring the organization's understanding of the value of strategic communication in its war against perceived enemies of Islam.

The subsequent emergence of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 marked a significant shift in the conventional production and distribution of propaganda. AQI harnessed the growing influence of the internet, using online forums alongside traditional channels to broadcast its message.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: (2020). Cumulative prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters for core international crimes and terrorism-related offences. EUROJUST. Accessible at: [https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Partners/Genocide/2020-05\\_Report-on-cumulative-prosecution-of-FTFs\\_EN.PDF](https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Partners/Genocide/2020-05_Report-on-cumulative-prosecution-of-FTFs_EN.PDF).



This allowed it and its supporters to reach a wider audience and fast-track their dissemination of propaganda, making communications efforts both more efficient and more effective.

Following AQI's transformation into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006, the organization continued to prioritize the production of "jihadi media." Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, ISI's long-time War Minister, championed a more systematic and aggressive approach to propaganda creation and dissemination. His organization's commitment to well-resourced and ambitious strategic communication remained steadfast and unyielding even when ISI was at its lowest ebb in the late 2000s, acknowledging the critical role it played in ISI's effort to create and sustain a militant "Islamic" state.

This focus on propaganda became even more pronounced when ISI morphed into ISIL after its intervention in the Syrian Civil War. At this juncture, ISIL massively ramped up its production capabilities and moved away from using closed forums such as Shumukh al-Islam and Al-Platform Media for media distribution. Instead, its media officials and supporter communities began to distribute propaganda on more open mass social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube, reaching out to a global audience and making their content more accessible than ever before.

The declaration of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate in 2014 brought about yet another radical change in ISIL's approach to propaganda. Its production and distribution of media content became formalised and centralised, fueled by an injection of resources and an influx of foreign "talent" in the form of foreign nationals who had flocked to join the caliphate following its declaration, bringing with them a diverse set of skills and experiences that enriched ISIL's propaganda efforts.

From 2015 to 2019, ISIL's vast and complex media infrastructure consolidated, becoming its primary method of engagement with the rest of the world. It served as a potent tool for recruitment, a platform to intimidate adversaries, and a means to project, on a global basis, ISIL's image and narrative. Through propaganda, the movement was able to create a powerful and enduring presence, even while it was facing near existential military and territorial losses, reinforcing the truth in Zawahiri's words: "media is half the battle."

It is important to bear in mind that, throughout this evolution, but especially from 2014 onwards when ISIL was actively attempting to recruit both men and women, the movement's approach to propaganda was highly, and very deliberately, gendered. ISIL reached out directly to female audiences through a variety of methods. Women-centric articles were featured in publications such as English-language magazines like Dabiq and Rumiya, and Arabic-language materials like al-Naba'. Its materials not only provided theological content specifically designed for women, but also offered practical advice including recipes and lifestyle tips. From 2018 onwards, the organization even began to directly call for women's military mobilization as its prospects in Syria and Iraq soured. It is worth noting that some, if not most, of these materials were likely produced by women, although the precise scale of women's involvement in ISIL's day-to-day media operations at the time remains unknown.

This highly gendered approach to communication extended beyond topics that were explicitly focused on what ISIL saw as "women's issues." Even when women were not its direct focus, ISIL's media content was always gendered. The movement exerted significant and continuous efforts to promote a hyper-masculine image of its male supporters by glorifying the "warrior



mujahidin.” This was achieved through the intensive mediatization of its male fighters. Women, on the other hand, were conspicuously absent from the visual landscape of ISIL propaganda, due to what was presented as a theological necessity. The exclusion of women from these visuals reinforced traditional gender norms within the organization and underscored its version of the masculine ideal. This not only made its propaganda more appealing to potential male recruits but also subtly reinforced the group’s interpretation of Islamic theology, which placed men in roles of public power and women in private, supportive roles.

## Section Two: Strategy

According to the conflict communications scholar Carsten Bockstette, jihadist movements have historically had a significant advantage in information environments over better-equipped, better-resourced, and more numerous adversaries due to the way that they conceptualize the communication battlespace.<sup>4</sup> They are able to take advantage of a “favorable communication asymmetry” that arises from their ability to nimbly navigate the global influence landscape, thereby compensating for a comparative lack of military and resource might.<sup>5</sup> With relative freedom of action, jihadist actors are better able to carry out highly planned, high-risk outreach strategies using both social, mainstream and legacy media channels, influencing friend and foe alike.

Jihadist communication campaigns generally focus on one of three strategic objectives: propagation, legitimization, and intimidation.<sup>6</sup> Propagation refers to the efforts to attract new recruits, draw in new donors, and expand the reach of their ideology. Legitimization is a more defensive form of communication that focuses on justifying violence and situating the movement in question’s actions within a broad Islamic-historic context. Intimidation efforts target adversary audiences and are most prominent in the context of terrorist operations and execution propaganda, both of which are typically deployed for their communicative, rather than kinetic, potential.

Besides propagation, legitimization, and intimidation, there is at least one more core communication objective to bear in mind in the context of ISIL’s deployment of propaganda – instruction. While scarce in quantity, ISIL’s instructional materials have been central to its aggressive communication campaigns since 2014. In 2017-2019, for example, its central media offices issued extensive, detailed advice on how to commit terrorist attacks using anything from knives and cars to more complex tactics like hostage-taking and bomb-making, advice that was operationalized by ISIL supporters in the West on a number of occasions. To be sure, ISIL was not the first to produce such materials – they have a rich pedigree both in and out of the jihadi paradigm, including AQAP’s Inspire magazine and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Muqrin’s 2004 publication, ‘A practical course for guerrilla warfare’ – nor will it be the last. However, their global impact is, at least at the time of writing, unprecedented.

Per Bockstette, jihadist movements (ISIL foremost among them) usually follow a five-step model to achieve these objectives. (Notably, this model is effective for strategic communication

4 Bockstette, C. (2008). Jihadist terrorist use of strategic communication management techniques. George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies. Accessed at: [https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F\\_Publications/occPapers/occ-paper\\_20-en.pdf](https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/occPapers/occ-paper_20-en.pdf).

5 Ibid. 20, 14.

6 Ibid. 20, 14.



planning outside of the context of insurgency, and can equally be applied to non-jihadist political marketing campaigns.) Bockstette's "five steps" include strategic end-state assessment and development; communication infrastructure evaluation; target audience analysis and channel selection; plan development and execution; and monitoring and evaluation.<sup>7</sup>

In recent decades, this approach has allowed jihadist communicators to exploit an asymmetry in which their enemies are often bound by ethical and moral conventions associated with modern-day war-fighting, while jihadists are not. Notably, while this model was first proposed in 2008, today's advanced jihadist media production efforts bear little resemblance to the rough-cut tapes of the mid- to late 2000s. However, the three strategic objectives identified as part of it have remained enduringly relevant, as is demonstrated in the following pages.

Below, two key documents relating ISIL's official position on media warfare and propaganda are analyzed. The first document, titled "To those entrusted with the message," is a speech attributed to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, a former first and war minister of the Islamic State of Iraq, who was one of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's immediate successors. The speech surfaced in 2010, after Abu Hamzah's death, when the group was at its lowest ebb since its formal emergence in 2006. The second document, titled "Media operative, you are also a mujahid," is a field-guide for media operatives published by the Himmah Library, ISIL's official printing press. It was first released in mid-2015 when the group was at the height of its influence, and has been frequently cited in its communications around propaganda in the years since.

Both documents have a similar focus and simultaneously speak to the relevance of Bockstette's theoretical framework; they aim to address core supporters and justify why ISIL invests so much time and energy into media activism by, among other things, setting out its strategic and tactical value.

## **"TO THOSE ENTRUSTED WITH THE MESSAGE"<sup>8</sup>**

Abu Hamzah's speech revolves around 14 guidelines that are grouped into four themes and align directly with Bockstette's communication objectives: propagation, legitimization, and intimidation. (The fourth theme covers educational and administrative matters, which are not seen as motivators for propaganda activism.<sup>9</sup>)

Throughout the text, Abu Hamzah emphasizes the importance of proactive and positive outreach as the primary means to propagate the ideology of what would, four years after the speech was first published, become the group known as ISIL. He advises media workers to establish communication and dialogue with sympathizers and to prepare daily video news bulletins on events related to the prospects of the "mujahidin." He also suggests compiling a monthly memorandum of proposals and guidance for the "mujahidin and commanders of jihad." By correctly implementing these instructions, Abu Hamzah holds that jihadist

7 Ibid. 9.

8 al-Muhajir, Abu Hamzah (2010). To those entrusted with the message. Furqan Foundation.

9 Abu Hamzah states that jihadist media workers should expend a great deal of effort in analysing any "books, reports, and analysis that the West publishes" that could "be useful for the mujahidin." These should be in turn digested and republished through "scientific technique forums" established by ISIL. Among the skills considered to be "useful" is media production, about which operatives should prepare bespoke "training courses" – both on- and offline – to hasten organisational learning. Moreover, they should also use the internet to monitor and evaluate the impact of their collective activities. By "register[ing] all reactions that arise from all the mujahidin and the leaders of jihad and [...] the enemy," Abu Hamzah states that ISIL's media centres will then be in a better position to judge their efficacy, both on individual and collective bases. Muhajir. To those entrusted with the message.



media operatives – wherever they are – can efficiently expand the global support base of the movement, “raising the spirits of the mujahidin,” frightening their enemies, and making the group and its supporters appear as “one ummah fighting for one objective on many front lines.”

Abu Hamzah also emphasizes the media worker’s crucial role in legitimizing jihad in the face of its adversaries. He stresses that they must constantly work to “defam[e] the image of the infidels, expos[e] their immorality, and describ[e] every defect they have.” At the same time, they must understand their adversaries’ arguments to develop counter-messaging campaigns based on this awareness. If successful in these endeavours, the jihadist media operative will be equipped with everything they need to “expose their [enemies’] contradictions, violations, and grave sins.” Essentially, this second stream of media operations aims to deride any ideas that run counter to ISIL and its belief system, including those that emerge in mainstream news media, to entrench the group’s exclusivist in-group identity, and legitimize its actions while discrediting those of its adversaries.

This text also delves into the theme of intimidation, which Abu Hamzah introduces as one of the primary objectives of aggressive communication operations. He proposes two approaches: first, to “instill terror in the hearts of our enemy” using tactics that “comply with shari’ah,” such as terrorism and violent propaganda, and second, to provide online jihadist activists with instructions for electronic and information warfare against enemy institutions, to “terrify those who have shares in these establishments and destroy their trust.” By creating a perception of ISIL’s ubiquity, influence campaigns focused on intimidation can amplify the perception of the organization’s “strength” in terms of “determination and number” for both allies and adversaries alike.

Despite the fact that they first appeared in a more-than-decade-old speech by a deceased and now fairly obscure figure, these ideas continue to inform ISIL’s media operations, the architects of which have utilized them in various outreach campaigns, including efforts to propagate utopian depictions of life under the caliphate and ultra-violent propaganda, as well as counter-messaging campaigns.

### **“MEDIA OPERATIVE, YOU ARE ALSO A MUJAHID”<sup>10</sup>**

For its part, the Himmah Library field-guide, when it was published in 2015, aimed to inspire ISIL media operatives to double down in their efforts, stressing the strategic importance of propaganda production and media jihad directly in line with Abu Hamzah’s guidance. Its authors clearly state that media production and distribution is crucial in advancing the prospects of the movement. As part of it, the “first goals” of the jihadist media operative are:

“To buoy the morale of soldiers, spread news of their victories and good deeds, encourage the people to support them by clarifying their creed, methodology and intentions and bridge the intellectual gap between the mujahidin and ordinary Muslims.”<sup>11</sup>

The document’s anonymous authors hold that propaganda plays a crucial role in popularizing the ISIL brand, conveying information about its news, current affairs, and ideological matters related to its creed. As Abu Hamzah also asserted, media outreach is a primary tool for inciting “regular Muslims” to participate in jihad en masse. The authors frequently return to

<sup>10</sup> Anon. (2015). *Mujahid, you are also the media operative*. Himmah Library.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 13-14.





this notion, underscoring the importance of “bring[ing] glad tidings to the believers’ hearts,” “transmit[ting] to the simple people a true picture of the battle,” and “steering others towards [the ideology] and opening their eyes to it.”<sup>12</sup>

In essence, the text suggests that propaganda serves as a central vehicle for promoting the ISIL brand and spreading its message to the masses. By using various media channels, including social media, audio and visual productions, and printed materials, it asserts that a fine-tuned and carefully targeted propaganda operation is an optimal means with which to disseminate the ISIL worldview and win over supporters. According to the authors, propaganda plays a critical role in shaping the perceptions of potential recruits, drawing them to the cause and persuading them to take action. Ultimately, then, the use of propaganda helps to create a coherent narrative that can resonate with a wide range of audiences, promoting ISIL’s brand and furthering its strategic goals.

Echoing Abu Hamzah (and, indeed, Bockstette), this document also emphasizes the importance of defending the ISIL “caliphate” through media operations that focus on legitimization. The authors argue that Western states are conducting an “intellectual invasion” against Muslims worldwide and that “Muslim media workers” must respond to their lies and falsification efforts.<sup>13</sup> The authors also note that, since the early 2010s, defensive communication operations have become even more important due to the recent intensification of this propaganda war. The battle is not just about the reputation of ISIL as an organization, they hold, but also for the existence and future of Islam as a religion.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, the document turns to intimidation. Aggressive communication operations are discussed as a significant component of both “verbal jihad” and “jihad of the sword.”<sup>15</sup> The authors emphasize the importance of offensive psychological operations in “infuriating the enemy,” which they view as an entirely legitimate form of jihad even if it means engaging in egregious acts of violence. Their perspective suggests that such operations – especially execution propaganda – should be considered a logical extension of or even a substitute for kinetic military campaigns.<sup>16</sup> Notably, the text highlights the fact that ISIL’s war is total and, therefore, it is irrelevant which aspect of the adversary is targeted, be it the government and its military or the general “enemy” public. The authors write that anything that “angers the enemies of Allah is a form of jihad.”

Considered together, the eight chapters of the Himmah Library field-guide repackage and reiterate much of what Abu Hamzah said five years earlier regarding the fundamental drivers and objectives of ISIL’s propaganda efforts. This is especially noteworthy because the group underwent a significant strategic transformation between 2010 and 2015, having announced in 2014 its caliphate, attracted tens of thousands of supporters to Iraq and Syria, and incited a global war. The fact that its core communication objectives remained more or less the same throughout this transition speaks to their enduring relevance today.

12 Ibid. 32, 40, 25.

13 Ibid. 44, 39, 42, 15.

14 Ibid. 10; for another example of this content, see: Al-Zawahiri, A. (2005). Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi. Federation of American Scientists. Accessed at: [https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter\\_in\\_english.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf).

15 Ibid. 13, 16, 26.

16 Ibid. 26.

## Section Three: Production

Having set out “why” ISIL used propaganda in the manner it did between 2014 and 2019, this section explores “how” it did it. It draws on a series of internal documents relating to ISIL’s media operations that were declassified by the United States Department of Defense (DoD) in August 2018.<sup>17</sup> Captured from a senior propaganda official in the group’s Afghanistan-based Wilayat Khurasan, the files were originally produced and covertly distributed by ISIL’s Central Media Diwan.

Prior to the emergence of these documents, the media infrastructure of the “caliphate” was one of its most obscure facets. To date, aside from a handful of propaganda-related legislative decrees leaked from Iraq and Syria – which, considered together, did little more than compound its obscurity – no detailed tactical- or operational-level documents regarding its outreach activities had been available in open sources. As such, independent analysis of the intricacies of its operations had been limited to reasoned speculation informed by interview data, historic (and, therefore, outdated) documents, and the output itself. With this in mind, it is difficult to exaggerate the value of the Khurasan files, which profoundly altered the extent to which outside observers could understand ISIL’s approach to conflict communication.

This section focuses on what this author considers to be four of the most important documents that were released as part of the tranche: “Clarification regarding the media of the Islamic State,”<sup>18</sup> “General guidance and instructions,”<sup>19</sup> “Organizational structure of the media office,”<sup>20</sup> and “The essential duties of the media mujahid in the wilayat of the Islamic State.”<sup>21</sup> Using the author’s own translations alongside those provided by the DoD, it analyzes each in turn, highlighting key insights found within them.

Before proceeding, it is worth briefly setting out some context regarding these documents. When they were first made public in 2018, the DoD asserted that they were captured in the course of operations in 2016 and 2017 that targeted “senior ISIL Khurasan personnel in Afghanistan.”<sup>22</sup> Comprising thirteen individual PDF files written in modern standard Arabic and dating back to 2015-2017, they range in length from two to sixteen pages and cover multiple aspects of the ISIL media nexus – anything from its dissemination tactics to the way it trained photographers. In none of the documents is an author identified, but a number of them are stamped with the logo of organizations and committees known to be directly affiliated with ISIL’s Central Media Diwan (aka Ministry).

Critically, these materials were never meant for public consumption. They were written in a manner that is unlike most other propaganda-focused literature attributed to and deliberately made publicly available by ISIL. Indeed, besides one fleeting reference to the Prophetic tradition, there are no substantive discussions of theology or Islamic history in

17 Milton, D. (2018). Pulling back the curtain: An inside look at the Islamic State’s media organization. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. 28 August. Accessed at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization/>.

18 Anon. (2015-2017). Clarification regarding the media of the Islamic State. Central Media Diwan.

19 Anon. (2015-2017). General guidance and instructions. Central Media Diwan.

20 Anon. (2015-2017). Organisational structure of the media office. Central Media Diwan.

21 Anon. (2015-2017). Essential duties of the media mujahid. Media Monitoring Committee, Central Media Diwan.

22 Milton, D. (2018). Pulling back the curtain: An inside look at the Islamic State’s media organization. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. 28 August. Accessed at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization/>.



them. Instead, the authors opt for clear, almost scientific language. As will be further discussed below, this, coupled with the fact that they are centrally produced documents that were found in the possession of a provincial affiliate outside of Iraq and Syria, is unequivocal evidence that, behind the ideological veneer of the “caliphate,” there existed a highly pragmatic and hierarchical public relations bureaucracy.

It is important to note that the operational relevance of these materials today must be approached with caution. ISIL’s central media infrastructure has proven to be both nimble and innovative in recent years. Thus, what was true seven years ago when the first of these documents were captured may not be true today. Notwithstanding this, the strategic insights that can be gleaned from them in relation to ISIL’s propaganda operation while it was at its height from 2014 to 2019 remain unprecedented and unparalleled.

## PURPOSE AND LIMITATIONS

The first document, “Clarification regarding the media of the Islamic State,”<sup>23</sup> sets out, in very general terms, the structure and purpose of ISIL’s media department. It begins by stating that its purpose is to explain the central media authority’s “publishing policy” with a view to making sure that “all media personnel [in ISIL] are aware of it and abide by it.” In so doing, it adds a degree of nuance to issues about which observers hitherto had but a superficial understanding.

In the introduction, the authors clarify the remit of ISIL’s Central Media Diwan, which is said to have supervised all the group’s media-facilitated outreach operations “from Indonesia in the east to Africa in the west.” They state that this includes both the communication activities of provincial affiliates – that is, the wilayat – as well as those of the various “battalions and groups that have pledged allegiance to the caliph” – which it refers to as “soldiers of the caliphate.” The Diwan, the document states, had oversight over everything “happening within the authority of the caliphate, including military, shari’ah, [and] service matters.” Its core mouthpieces are identified as the Furqan Foundation, the AlHayat Media Center and the Furat Center (both of which were foreign fighter-dominated); and their outputs are complemented by a newspaper (Naba’), a news agency (A`maq), and a radio station (Bayan).

The next part of the document sets out what the Diwan’s operations looked like on a day-to-day basis while it was operating at the peak of its influence. It states that its core aim was to “standardize” ISIL’s official output by “monitoring, supervising and reviewing productions,” whether they were news bulletins, images, videos, or audio files. Pending approval, Diwan officials published these wares online through a small collection of channels on Telegram, namely those that are operated by Nashir and the Furat Center. Though it is not mentioned here, the A`maq News Agency channel was, and continues to be, a third publication outlet.

Having established this, the document sets out three core responsibilities for media operatives in the rank-and-file. They are as follows:

- All were obliged to “follow the policy set by the [Central] Media Diwan,” regardless of their whereabouts.
- Media operatives could publish nothing, online or off-, “without [first] consulting with the Media Monitoring Committee.” This Committee was, and likely continues to be, embedded within the Diwan.



- The “provincial-level” media operative’s “principal” role was to document life in ISIL. The actual production and publication of materials online is strictly off-limits.

If these core principles were not adhered to, the document warns, the credibility of “the wilayah’s media [as well as] the credibility of those materials that were published in an unofficial method [i.e., materials produced by pseudo-unofficial outlets like A’maq and Furat]” would suffer, thereby “causing the spread of rumours, gossip, and questions.”

The above is significant for a number of reasons. First, it unambiguously confirms that both the Furat Media Center and the A’maq News Agency were official mouthpieces of ISIL, something that was long suspected by the analyst community but that has never been independently confirmed by ISIL. Second, it details, with clarity, the expansive authority of the Central Media Diwan, demonstrating the sheer extent of its reach and structure at the time. Third, it gives us a broad sense of how ISIL was able to harmonise its production and dissemination activities so efficiently in recent years. This last aspect is elaborated on in the next text.

## KEY ROLES, THEMES, AND REMITS

The guidelines in the second document, “General guidance and instructions,”<sup>24</sup> are significantly more detailed than the above. Reiterating some of what has already been stated, they provide a granular overview as to how ISIL’s media infrastructure operated on a day-to-day basis, in the main focusing on production, dissemination and monitoring.

The document begins by reiterating the core stipulation of the first directive, “Clarification regarding the media of ISIL.” Its authors declare that:

“The official media offices in the wilayah are platforms belonging to the Central Media [Diwan] and the wilayah have been authorised to run them on behalf of the center [...] therefore, we want all the brothers to follow the guidance of the Central Media [Diwan], otherwise the granted authorization to the wilayah will be withdrawn.”

The authors then build on this, again stipulating that regional media workers were not allowed to engage in any form of external outreach whatsoever: their first priority was to document at the local level – that is, to record “everything that happens in the wilayah including news and events” – and their second priority was to distribute at the local level – whether that was through the dissemination of “news bulletins, video and photo-reports, individual and breaking images [or] statements.” All other publishing activities, the document states, were to be left to the Central Media Diwan and the Central Media Diwan alone.

In the next section, the authors focus on the first side of that equation, media production, specifically discussing what should be catalogued. In so doing, they identify four thematic clusters:

1. “Military news: [This] includes offensive and defensive military operations, enemy airstrikes against the Islamic State, and everything else that is related to military work, whether individually executed operations (such as martyrdom operations) or group-executed operations (such as raids and so on).
2. Shari’ah [Religious] news: [This] includes news related to the hisbah [religious policing], [Islamic] courts, da’wah [operations], mosques and other things related to shari’ah affairs taking place inside the wilayah.



3. Services: [This] includes all news related to the services that are being provided inside the wilayah such as the fixing and cleaning of roads, waterworks, electricity, and other related topics.
4. Other: The wilayah [media office] should [also] cover miscellaneous events that are not included in the topics above such as snowfall in areas of the Islamic State, the rise of water level in a river, and other such things.”

The guidelines then set out how these things should be documented. Media workers were instructed to produce five outputs:

1. Breaking news announcements, which should be compiled using the “red template” and “include the precise details of the military event such as location, results, and weapons used.”
2. Non-urgent news announcements made using the “regular template,” which “should include the same content as the red template; however, this [one] should be used for news of events that took place more than 24 hours ago [and] after the [Media Monitoring] Committee’s assessment that it is no longer breaking news.”
3. Photo-reports, which “deliver an image about what is going on in the Islamic State, the status of Muslims there, the way its services and diwans work, and other such things.” Ideally, these reports were mono-thematic, conveying just one “clear idea,” and their constituent images were professional in style – they were to be captured on high-definition cameras and are uniformly designed.
4. Individual images or collections of images, which were to be produced alongside formal photo reports. These were “mostly used in [the context of] breaking news” and akin to photo-reports inasmuch as they were to be high-quality, monothematic and uniformly presented.
5. Videos, which comprised “a series of clips edited and prepared in a professional way that has an idea, scenario, or commentator.” They had to be uniform in every way – that is, their “fonts, introduction and conclusion” should all adopt the template provided by the Central Media Diwan – and they were meant to show ISIL at its best. To this end, those that appeared in them – whether soldiers or civilians – should “appear in a very suitable appearance” and “be well spoken.” Videos also had to be technically impressive: all filming, for example, “should be done using more than one camera.” Once produced, they would be sent “from the wilayat to the [Media Monitoring] Committee” for evaluation. Once there, quality control was tight: indeed, “when there are big mistakes,” the video would be rejected.

The next section of the document describes the three-pronged network that was used by the Central Media Diwan for editing, dissemination and discussion.

Its first prong is described as a “pre-publishing” (qabal al-nishr) group, which comprised an encrypted chatroom – based on the “Information security” document released at the same time as this one, it can be assumed that this was on either Telegram, Pidgin, or Whatsapp – to which designated provincial representatives submitted their office’s output for evaluation.<sup>25</sup> Once there, “brothers” in the Media Monitoring Committee evaluated and cleared content for approval. If approval was not granted, “it is not permissible to publish [it].”



Upon completion of the review process, approved outputs were dispatched to the “publishing” (al-nishr) group, which formed the next prong of the network. The document stipulates that “the only [activities] that take place inside the (publishing) room are publishing” – “comments or editing” suggestions were strictly forbidden. The third and final prong of the network was the “monitoring” (mutaba’at) room, which was reserved for “communication between the media personnel of the wilayat.” It is described as a chatroom where media officials virtually congregated “to discuss important issues and participate in wider scale publishing.” It is highly likely that this is where the Central Media Diwan issued directives for tactical media campaigns.

The last substantive section of the document describes the reporting responsibilities of media offices, which are said to have directly fed into the monitoring and evaluation programming of the Central Media Diwan. The process was relatively simple, but time consuming: each month, media offices were requested to “send statistics of their work” – including “the number of videos alongside the title of each one,” “the number of photo reports alongside their titles,” and “the number of individual images alongside their titles and subjects” – to the Media Monitoring Committee. These figures were then published – presumably internally – before being incorporated into the Committee’s general reporting.

Other documents published by the DoD demonstrate that a more detailed evaluation of videos – in the course of which they would be graded according to framing, narrative, and technical proficiency – was also conducted in parallel to this more general process.

## MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

Besides the above, the document is littered with miscellaneous requests and stipulations. An inexhaustive list of these follows below:

- Media offices were advised against innovation, because it is “the main cause of mistakes.” It is unclear what prompted the inclusion of this statement but, in any case, it was adhered to: ISIL’s media output to this day remains highly uniform and, if any office introduces innovations, it is outlets associated with the Central Media Diwan.
- Cameramen were instructed to ensure that they do not show audiences at public hudud punishments smiling. This is an interesting addendum to the document, one that speaks to how concerned ISIL was with global perceptions regarding its governance operations. Cameramen were also advised to avoid “filming the apostates saying the shahadah before executing them, and if this happens, it should be removed during the editing of the clip.” This is presumably to ensure that “apostates” remained “apostates” in the eyes of the target audience (technically speaking, the accused’s proclamation of the shahadah would nullify an allegation of apostasy).
- Only ISIL’s flag was allowed to appear in official output. Indeed, “no report is accepted with a different flag such as a white flag or any other flag other than ISIL flag.” This is interesting because it suggests that other flags were used on a local basis by regional allies. If this is the case, it could indicate that there was more fluidity to the affiliate model than was previously thought.
- Media offices are instructed to “avoid exaggerating in acting and making ISIL look in a way that is not true in the video releases, photo-reports, or individual images.” This item speaks to the fact that the group considered itself to be providing news, not propaganda.

- Lastly, media offices were told that they must cooperate with the “A`maq News Agency by providing it with details about main events that take place inside the wilayat.” Their cooperation was extensive: “each wilayah should send video clips to the A`maq Agency on a monthly basis about the course of battles, events, and other items.” They had to also “cooperate with al-Naba’ newspaper and al-Bayan radio and answer all the information they request from you to make their media projects successful.”

Considered as a whole, this document paints a picture of a meticulously organized apparatus for propaganda production, review, and dissemination, the activities of which revolved around three core principles: uniformity, centralization, and variance. In pursuit of each, the Central Media Diwan issued strict, regimented instructions to its subsidiaries, instructions that were geared towards maximizing efficiency and minimizing regional autonomy.

## STRUCTURE

The third document, “Organizational structure of the media office,”<sup>26</sup> shifts the focus to how provincial media offices should best be organized. It contains a detailed blueprint for their leadership and organizational structure. Its authors open by stating that a dedicated media amir should preside over every media office, wherever it was and whatever the extent of its relationship with the Central Media Diwan. This amir would be in charge of regional management and discipline and operated as the chief liaison between the office in question and the Central Media Diwan. Where possible, the amir was also required to meet with the Media Monitoring Committee in order to coordinate with it in terms of recruitment and expertise management – presumably, such meetings occurred virtually.

Working closely with each of the media amirs was an “administrative cadre” (kadri idari), who was the chief liaison with the governor of the wilayah in question and charged with providing “administrative needs for the office,” “maintaining headquarters and vehicles,” and “assisting the team of the interior publishing to carry out their mission.”

Both the amir and their administrative cadre were advised to have lines of communication open with all “diwans, groups and news sources” at all times so that they could efficiently keep abreast of “their work and conduct media coverage.” Moreover, they were advised to be in regular communication with key military officials in the wilayah so as to make sure that they did not miss important news events. Clarifying this instruction, the authors propose the following scenario:

“If the military amir wants to communicate with the media office to convey to them information about an upcoming raid or operation, whom should he communicate with? There should be a person in charge of this matter. Also, if the filming team wants to coordinate regarding a specific project with any group inside the wilayah, and instead of them busying themselves with coordinating and scheduling appointments, the [administrative cadre] should coordinate and schedule appointments for them.”

The next part of the document shifts the focus from the leadership to the rank-and-file. In so doing, it differentiates between internal (dakhili) and external (khariji) media production and distribution.



The internal side of this equation is said to have involved a “publishing and distributing team” for disseminating media products to soldiers and citizens of ISIL as well as a cluster of production teams for “main filming,” “military filming,” “montage,” “design,” and “printing.” Together, they were responsible for the compilation, production and dissemination of all local media products. The external side of the equation was less convoluted but more networked. Its teams were in charge of “framing news, preparing photo reports, individual photos and photos related to breaking news, communicating with the Central Media [Diwan], and publishing and downloading official releases on a daily basis before delivering them to the internal publishing team.” It is unclear how much crossover there was between each team and, for that matter, the materials that were distributed by each team.

The blueprint set out in this document is interesting if nothing else for the sheer amount of detail into which the authors go. However, it is its separation of internal and external propaganda operations that is most interesting. It suggests that, at the local level, there was more variation and flexibility in ISIL’s narrative priorities than was often assumed.

## AUDIENCE DELINEATION

The last of the documents dealt with in this paper, “The essential duties of the media mujahid in the wilayah of the Islamic State,”<sup>27</sup> issues detailed advice to individual media operatives – that is, the photographers, editors, sound engineers, and distributors that made up the rank-and-file. It covers a lot of ground that has already been addressed, but, in addition to this, provides more detail on the abovementioned internal-external delineation.

“Internal media” is said to comprise media products that were published for “the soldiers and subjects of the Islamic State inside the wilayah,” while the latter constituted that which was published “for the supporters, opposition and enemies of the Islamic State outside of the wilayah of the Islamic State.” While videos, photo-reports, audio programmes and statements were included in both streams of output, there were several internal-only items – among them a publication called Yara’ and an electronic magazine called Maysarah, neither of which has ever been published online.

Towards the end of the document, the authors also state that “exterior publishing (via the internet) is the responsibility of the Central Media [Diwan] exclusively.” There is an implicit suggestion here that the regulations regarding internal publishing were more relaxed and that certain outputs that were published offline never made it online. The further detail that this document adds to the delineation between internal and external outreach is critically important; it suggests that ISIL presided over a parallel system of in-theatre media production and distribution.

## IMPLICATIONS

Evidently, ISIL presided over a highly structured and centrally regulated system for producing, reviewing, and distributing propaganda between 2014 and 2019. Recognizing the workings of this system, its underpinning principles, and varied methods is crucial for prosecutors seeking to indict individuals accused of being involved with ISIL for several reasons:





The elaborate level of detail and organization within the above-described guidelines suggests that participation in ISIL's media division was not an arbitrary or incidental activity. Instead, it demanded strict adherence to guidelines, professional skill, and a grasp of the group's objectives and messaging. An understanding of this could help to illustrate a level of intent and active involvement, which would be pivotal in any attempt to prosecute individuals involved with ISIL's media activities.

The integral role of ISIL's media offices in shaping how it was perceived globally, both internally and externally, underscores its centrality in the group's operations. Individuals deeply involved in its propaganda machine can and should therefore be seen as not just passive participants, but as key actors in disseminating ISIL's ideology, something that speaks to the seriousness of the allegations of which they are charged.

These guidelines could also assist in efforts to investigate and map tangible links between accused individuals and ISIL as an organization. Evidence of the use of specific templates, adherence to certain themes or narrative structures, or the implementation of strict, formalized reporting protocols could serve as definitive indicators that the accused in question was not merely engaging in independent pro-ISIL activity, but was actually part of ISIL's formal structure.

The intricacies associated with this operation – from the network behind ISIL's pre-publishing, publishing, and monitoring activities to the detailed responsibilities of provincial media offices and individual operatives – speak to a highly coordinated system designed for optimal efficiency and minimal independence. Understanding this system could aid prosecutors as they work to evaluate the role and importance of individuals within ISIL, thereby facilitating a more informed and evidence-based judicial process.

## Section Four: Execution propaganda

This section describes the ideological logic behind ISIL's execution propaganda, which, though it only formed a small proportion of its total media output between 2014 and 2019,<sup>28</sup> is the most likely to be drawn on or be referenced as an evidence base for prosecutions. Foreign nationals have always played an outsized role in ISIL's media operations, and especially so in the context of its execution-focused materials, in which they regularly featured as both orators and executioners.<sup>29</sup>

ISIL media production peaked between 2014 and 2019 before tailing off with the fall of its proto-state in Baghuz. Between 2014 and 2016, its thematic focus was fairly evenly split between war-focused content and civilian-life-focused content.<sup>30</sup> This changed from 2017 onwards, when it became progressively more war-focused.

Throughout this time, execution propaganda was published with relevant frequency, peaking in both brutality and regularity in 2016 and 2017 during the preamble to the battles for Mosul and Raqqa. Generally speaking, these materials revolved around four core precepts, two

28 Winter, C. (2019). Daesh propaganda, before and after its collapse. NATO. Accessible at: [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/web\\_nato\\_daesh\\_propoganda\\_17-09-2019.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/web_nato_daesh_propoganda_17-09-2019.pdf).

29 See, for example: (2021). United States of America v. Mohammed Khalifa. FBI. Accessible at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Mohammed%20Khalifa%20Affidavit%20in%20Support%20of%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf>.

30 Zelin, A. (2015). Picture or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output. Perspectives on Terrorism. Accessible at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/picture-or-it-didnt-happen-snapshot-islamic-states-official-media-output>.

of which were used to depict ISIL positively, with the other two portraying its adversaries negatively. The two positive themes, in-group strength and in-group religiosity, aimed to glorify the group and its members. Meanwhile, the two negative themes, out-group aggression and out-group weakness, aimed to dehumanize ISIL's opponents.

These four themes worked together to create a textbook case of moral disengagement, a psychological phenomenon that has been observed throughout history, most famously in Nazi Germany.<sup>31</sup> Moral disengagement involves violent political movements legitimizing their actions by demonizing their opponents, often through comparing them to animals or insects.<sup>32</sup>

One of ISIL's most notorious execution videos, "Kill them wherever you overtake them," provides an example of how these themes were deployed. Documenting the Camp Speicher massacre in Iraq in June 2014, in which hundreds of members of the Iraqi security forces were summarily executed, this video is an emblematic example of ISIL's execution propaganda. Through the use of rational and religious framing, the video depicts the captured individuals as physically and spiritually weak, positioning them as submissive animals who had abandoned their religious beliefs in the face of ISIL's might. The captives are portrayed as defenceless and resigned to their fate, effectively "justifying" their execution.

By constructing their adversaries in this consistently negative and dehumanized light, ISIL attempted to justify its most egregious crimes against humanity. It was a framing, and process, that occurred not just in the context of this video but that was repeated each and every time it executed an "enemy" on film.<sup>33</sup> This portion of its propaganda thus served to normalize extreme violence and fuel the moral disengagement of ISIL's members and sympathizers, ultimately legitimizing its actions and inciting attacks against imagined enemies of the "in-group."

## IN-GROUP STRENGTH

This message was fundamental to ISIL's broader propagandistic narrative between 2014 and 2015.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that it underpins much of "Kill them wherever you overtake them," which is, in many ways, an archetypal representation of ISIL content from that period.

On multiple occasions in the video, the video's protagonists can be heard returning to the idea that ISIL had almost effortlessly prevailed over its enemies in Salah ad-Din governorate in the run-up to the Speicher massacre in 2014 – whether that was in the context of vehicles ("As for their hummers and armoured vehicles, they became chunks of rusty metal"),<sup>35</sup> fortifications ("The fortifications of the Rafidah did not benefit them for they began to collapse by Allah's grace, in the face of the mujahidin's attacks"),<sup>36</sup> or manpower ("By the grace of Allah, despite our weakness and small numbers Allah honoured us and enabled us to overpower them. More than 2,000 captives! More than 2,000 surrendered themselves, by Allah's grace!").<sup>37</sup> This idea

31 O'Shaughnessy, N. (2016). *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi brand*. London: Hurst & Co. 149.

32 Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3(3), 193-209.

33 Winter, C. (2022). *The terrorist image: Decoding the photo-propaganda of the Islamic State*. London: Hurst.

34 Winter, C. (2015). *The virtual caliphate: Understanding ISIL's propaganda strategy*. Quilliam. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>. 22-28.

35 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:03:03-00:04:12.

36 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:00:06-00:00:30.

37 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:07:34-00:08:49.

is also frequently raised in quoted excerpts of speeches from Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani (“We will surely send you to Hell in masses”)<sup>38</sup> and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (“It is impossible for the followers of the Majus to overpower the sons of al-Hasan and al-Husayn”).<sup>39</sup>

Such framing was an essential part of a large amount of ISIL propaganda from the same period.<sup>40</sup> It rested on the idea that ISIL’s supporters in Iraq and Syria in particular were able to triumph over their adversaries in spite of the seemingly unassailable odds they faced at the time. Implicit to this claim is the idea that ISIL was militarily successful not because it had better weapons or greater numbers; rather, it was militarily successful because it was, per ISIL’s propaganda line, happening “with the permission of Allah” or “by the grace of Allah.”<sup>41</sup>

## IN-GROUP RELIGIOSITY

The second key pretext in “Kill them wherever you overtake them” relates specifically to the religious credentials of ISIL and its supporters, a recurring theme in its execution-focused media. Throughout the video, they are celebrated as archetypal Sunni Muslims, idealized “mujahidin” fighting for Islam and nothing else.

This idea is conveyed both verbally/explicitly and visually/implicitly. It is, for example, typified in one of the excerpts of Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani, who at one point can be heard saying, “We have not fought a single day for the sake of territory. We do not fight except for the return of the khilafah and the establishment of the Shari’ah. We fight to rule the entire world with what Allah has revealed.”<sup>42</sup> It also comes up frequently in a statement from an unnamed Wilayat Salahuddin official, who says, for example, that ISIL “will kill [Shi’ite Muslims] because [they] seek help from other than Allah.”<sup>43</sup> Assertions such as these are intended to convey the idea that this episode at Camp Speicher was part of a broader war between Muslims and non-Muslims, a war for Islam, not transient material ambitions.

The religious credentials of ISIL’s rank-and-file fighters are also underlined visually in these materials. Indeed, throughout the video in question – and perhaps most clearly in the clerical garb of the unnamed Wilayat Salahuddin official – they are framed as quintessential examples of the “ideal” mujahidin, positioned as Islamic heroes fighting simultaneously on two fronts: physically, to protect and expand their Sunni Muslim in-group, and spiritually, to perfect their religiosity. In the context of this video and other, similar ISIL content, their idealization occurs through the recurrent use of a series of distinct but overlapping image frames. The overarching picture that emerged is characterized by a duality: on the one hand, they are shown to be hyper-masculine, reveling in the chaos of battle and consumed by bloodlust; on the other, they are framed as thoughtful worshipers, able to spontaneously quote the Qur’an and Islam’s other canonical sources at will.

Notably, while the specific form of this “warrior” ideal is unique to ISIL, the stuff of which it is made is highly conventional. Indeed, its core ingredients conform to an ancient and durable warrior-hero mythology, one that is, to a large extent, cross-cultural and pan-historic.<sup>44</sup>

38 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:17:07-00:17:30.

39 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:18:57-00:19:48.

40 Winter, C. (2018) Apocalypse, later: A longitudinal study of ISIL brand. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35:1. 113-116.

41 These words are repeated throughout the video.

42 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:00:42-00:01:34.

43 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:13:36-00:14:14.

44 See, for example, Campbell, J. (2004). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 309-314.

## OUT-GROUP AGGRESSION

Two core, complementary out-group-focused narratives run through ISIL execution propaganda and are particularly apparent in “Kill them wherever you overtake them.” The first is the idea that, in killing these captives, ISIL was staving off an attack on what it considers to be “true” Islam.

In conveying this, the video’s various protagonists frequently assert that ISIL’s war is not being fought out of worldly desires or ambitions; rather, it is a war between good and evil, between “Islam” and its enemies. This proposition thereby justifies its violent actions by embedding them within a broader religious-political framework.

Essential to this claim is the way ISIL refers to the captives it took at Speicher – as “rafidah,” “rafidi” or “rawafid.” These terms, which are used pejoratively throughout materials in this genre, are meant to indicate that these soldiers are Shi’ite Muslims hostile to the fundamental beliefs of Sunni Islam (regardless as to whether or not the captives in question were all Shi’ite Muslims). In addition to “rafidi” and its derivatives, various other terms are used in the captions and speech overlays – for example: “from the filth of shirk and the mushrikin,”<sup>45</sup> “the grandsons of the spiteful Majus,”<sup>46</sup> “the evil Safawi project,”<sup>47</sup> “followers of the Majus,”<sup>48</sup> and “the grandsons of Abu Lu’lu’, Ibn Saba’, and Rustum [figures from the history of Islam that ISIL considers to be prominent and primeval enemies of Sunni Muslims].”<sup>49</sup>

Each of these labels is steeped in ideological and theological connotations. References to shirk, or idolatry, are levelled at Shi’ite Muslims on account of what ISIL considers to be the wrongful Shi’ite practice of worshiping the family and companions of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>50</sup> In its view, this practice means associating others with Allah, something that is tantamount to a rejection of Islam and, inasmuch as that is the case, by definition an act of hostility. Separately, when there is mention of “the Majus” or “the evil Safawi project,” ISIL is attempting to tie these captives to the geopolitical and religious influence of Iran which is, in these two cases, metaphorically implied through references to Zoroastrian Magi and the Safavid Empire. In a similar vein, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi refers to “the grandsons of Abu Lu’lu’” et al., he is naming key figures from Islamic history who are for one reason or another notorious and considered a threat to Sunni Islam by the likes of ISIL (Abu Lu’lu’, for example, killed one of the early caliphs).<sup>51</sup>

Together, these labels are used to frame those being killed as primeval “enemies of Islam.” To be sure, this is not a new practice, something that is rendered especially apparent in the various excerpts of speeches made by Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi, the long-dead leader of ISIL’s predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq – consider, for example, when he can be heard saying, in reference to Shi’ite Muslims in Iraq, “Both their past history and present are filled with treachery and plotting against you. Do not trust them!”<sup>52</sup>

45 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:06:55-00:06:57.

46 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:00:06-00:00:30.

47 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:04:16-00:04:48.

48 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:18:57-00:19:48.

49 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:18:57-00:19:48.

50 In, for example, the 15th issue of Dabiq, ISIL wrote that celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday were “a sinful novelty in religion.” (2016). Issue 15: Break the cross. Dabiq. July 31.

51 Sahih al-Bukhari, Chapter 66, Book of the Virtues of the Companions, Hadith number 3497.

52 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:12:13-00:13:32.

## OUT-GROUP WEAKNESS

The last out-group narrative in ISIL execution propaganda revolves around the purported cowardice and weakness (both physical and spiritual) of ISIL's adversaries. In the Speicher case, this notion is grounded in both rational and religious terminology which positions the captives in question as physically weak on the one hand and ready to cast aside their religious beliefs on the other.

This idea is explicitly referenced throughout the video. The narrator, for example, notes in his introduction that those being captured “used to be savage lions against the masses of Ahlus-Sunnah and who were in the prisons like deadly wolves or likely hungry hyenas, except that they became, by the grace of Allah, in front of the mujahidin, submissive animals. They howled and whined.”<sup>53</sup> For his part, the unnamed wilayah official, reflecting on the efforts of some captives to deny their status as Shi'ite Muslims, says, “Look at their lie while they are in Ramadan! And look at their weakness, cowardice and feebleness! How they lie! How they left their religion and abandoned their creed in fear of the fangs of the lions of ISIL, and in fear of death!”<sup>54</sup> This specific point about deception and denial is also frequently raised by the executioners themselves. One of them, for example, says, “taqiyyah [deception] is your religion,” to one of the men about to be executed.<sup>55</sup>

This narrative is continually emphasised through the visual framing of the video. At multiple points in it, captives are shown huddled together in vehicles, clearly outnumbering their captors yet showing no signs of resistance. Instead, they are shown up close and personal being taunted and mocked, tormented en masse.

This imagery, and the broader discourse of which it is emblematic, is extremely common when it comes to ISIL's depictions of its adversaries. It is transparently aimed at demonstrating their weakness, the fact that they are resigned to their fate in the hands of ISIL.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, it is meant to further entrench a sense of the essential power dynamic that was purported to exist between ISIL and its opponents back between 2014 and 2019.

By producing such uncompromising visual accounts of its enemies, ISIL shatters any presupposition of their superiority: they may be better armed, but, when stripped of their armour and fought with the “permission of Allah,” they are framed as being as defenceless as they are irreligious.

## IMPLICATIONS

The ideological and psychological narratives woven into ISIL's propaganda machinery, particularly in the context of its execution-focused materials, are an essential resource for prosecuting individuals accused of participation in ISIL. The importance of these elements lies not only in their potential evidentiary value, but also in the insight they provide into the mindset and motivation of those participating in, or drawn towards, the group's activities.

53 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:03:03-00:04:12.

54 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:13:36-00:14:14.

55 Kill them wherever you overtake them. 00:11:53-00:12:13.

56 For a detailed account of this, see Chouliaraki, L. and Kissas, A. (2020). The communication of horrorism: A typology of ISIS online death videos. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35:1. 24-39.



As set out above, ISIL's propaganda was designed to elicit moral disengagement, convincing the audience that the "enemies" depicted in its execution videos were deserving of their fate due to their perceived hostility towards true Islam, their inherent weakness, and their spiritual and physical inferiority. Understanding these narratives is instrumental for comprehending the cognitive process through which many if not most individuals may be drawn to engage with or join ISIL. It helps to explain how they might become desensitized to extreme violence and ultimately commit acts that most would regard as morally reprehensible.

In terms of evidentiary value, the prominent role of foreign nationals in ISIL's execution-focused media provides a tangible link between individuals from different geographical regions and the atrocities committed by the group. The distinct thematic patterns and structures of these propaganda pieces, their timeframes, and the identifiable individuals that appear in them can all contribute to a solid evidence base for prosecution. Perhaps most crucially, they can be used to place accused individuals in specific locations at specific times, potentially tying them directly to crimes.

Additionally, demonstrating an understanding of the narratives employed by ISIL can help in countering the defense that the accused were merely victims of brainwashing, coercion, or misinformation. By illustrating the repetitive, manipulative, and constructed nature of ISIL's propaganda, prosecutors can argue that the accused, especially those who rose to positions of power within the group, were fully aware of the group's ideological position and actions.

## Section Five: Conclusion

This paper has described in detail how and why ISIL engaged in the production of propaganda during its peak years between 2014 and 2019. For reasons mentioned in the introduction, the sphere of propaganda has, and will continue to have, enduring relevance in the context of prosecutions of individuals believed to have been involved, either directly or indirectly, in ISIL crimes against humanity in Syria and Iraq in particular. With this in mind, this paper's description of why, from a strategic perspective, and how, from an operational perspective, ISIL engaged in propaganda activity – especially when it came to execution-focused materials – is intended to furnish prosecutors with a more granular and tangible understanding of the context in which the individuals they are (or will be) prosecuting operated on a day-to-day basis.



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