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IS (ISLAMIC STATE) AND THE WEST: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

A year after the establishment of the caliphate, it has become clear that Islamic State is a hybrid threat. Apart from its military prowess on the battlefield, Islamic State is conducting an ideological war in cyberspace. Through a deft use of social media, the caliphate is spreading its ideology and violence, luring *foreign fighters* to restock their ranks and inciting supporters everywhere to carry out attacks (*lone wolf attacks*). The thousands of people (from the West) that have flocked to the caliphate and the infamous terrorist attacks such as those carried out in Paris, Tunis and Texas confirm the extent of this threat. In what can be deemed as the first “social media war”, the West is lagging behind. Its counter-terrorism measures are inadequate for this new dimension of warfare. Drawing on existing efforts carried out by governments, organizations and civil society, this thesis seeks to identify the main characteristics of an effective online strategy needed to win this ideological war, i.e. widespread, choral (with the use of different voices) counter-narratives.

KEY WORDS

Islamic State, terrorism, propaganda, radicalization, foreign fighters, social media, cyberspace, hybrid threat, ideological war, counter-narrative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Il 29 giugno 2015 segnerà il primo anniversario del califfato proclamato dallo Stato Islamico.

Il gruppo terroristico Stato Islamico è l'ultimo stadio dell'evoluzione di ciò che iniziò come campo di addestramento fondato alla fine degli anni '90 in Afghanistan, dal giordano Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, e che in circa 20 anni, si è “evoluto” – grazie al supporto logistico e finanziario di al-Qaeda e sfruttando il marasma della guerra civile siriana – fino a creare il “primo *stato jihadista*”.

Il califfato si estende su un vasto territorio a cavallo dell'Iraq e della Siria, nel quale il gruppo ha violentemente imposto la propria autorità alle popolazioni locali. Il successo del gruppo è dovuto principalmente alla sua capacità di presentarsi alle popolazioni locali come alternativa ai rispettivi *stati falliti* – come male minore – soprattutto grazie all'organizzazione di un *proto-stato*.

Lo Stato Islamico è infatti riuscito a mettere in piedi una complessa macchina statale, gestita da una struttura gerarchica alla base della quale vi sono sei Consigli (Militare, Provinciale, della Sicurezza, degli Affari Religiosi, della Finanza e quello Mediatico), controllati dal Consiglio della *Shura* (il consiglio consultativo) e quello della *Sharia* (responsabile per l'interpretazione ed applicazione della Legge Islamica). Alla sommità della gerarchia vi è il califfo, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

La complessa macchina statale prevede anche corti giudiziarie, corpi di vigilanza armati, istituzioni come il garante dei consumatori, servizi sanitari, un sistema fiscale ed anche scolastico.

L'indipendenza finanziaria del gruppo è assicurata dalle ingenti risorse accumulate: dagli armamenti saccheggiati negli arsenali iracheni e siriani, dal controllo delle centrali idroelettriche e petrolifere della regione ed anche dai proventi del commercio delle antichità trafugate.

Tutto è subordinato ad una rigida – e spesso violenta – applicazione della *Sharia* (Legge Islamica), come vuole l'ideologia *salafita-jihadista* – forza motrice del gruppo – secondo la quale gli affari politici, economici e sociali dipendono dalla sovranità di *Allah*.

Pilastro di questa ideologia è la cosiddetta *jihad globale*, ovvero il dovere di tutti i Musulmani di accorrere in difesa dei propri fratelli e delle loro terre. Negli anni '80, molti Musulmani accorsero in Afghanistan per combattere l'invasione sovietica. Oggi lo stesso avviene in Siria. Migliaia di *foreign fighters* (o *mujahidin*) stanno alimentando i ranghi dell'esercito del califfato.

Ad oggi, nonostante l'impegno militare della coalizione internazionale e delle forze locali – sia governative che non – lo Stato Islamico non mostra segni di cedimento. Al contrario, il califfato continua la sua espansione territoriale, come dimostrato dalla recente presa di Ramadi e Palmira e dall'avanzata a nord, verso il confine con la Turchia.

La minaccia dello Stato Islamico non è limitata ai confini del teatro di guerra. I cosiddetti *lone wolf attacks*, come quelli di Parigi o di Tunisi al museo del Bardo, hanno attestato che la minaccia è globale.

La portata della minaccia del califfato è ampliata dal fatto che lo Stato Islamico è militante anche nel cosiddetto *cyberspace*. In questo “nuovo” teatro operativo si sta combattendo una guerra ideologica attraverso l'utilizzo dei *social media*, ovvero le applicazioni internet che consentono la creazione e lo scambio di contenuti generati dagli utenti (UGC), le più note delle quali sono Twitter, Facebook e YouTube.

Nel 2012, forum jihadisti presenti sul Web hanno diffuso la nozione di *electronic jihad*, ovvero la possibilità di combattere ed essere considerati *mujahidin* semplicemente attaccando il nemico sulla “rete”, sostenendo – sempre nello spazio informatico – i combattenti sui campi di battaglia.

L'*electronic jihad* comprende attività come: l'istigazione a compiere atti terroristici, la radicalizzazione e il reclutamento di simpatizzanti e sostenitori, financo la conduzione di una guerra psicologica volta a rendere vulnerabile il nemico.

Riadattando le parole del Generale von Clausewitz a questo contesto: “l'uso dei *social media* diventa dunque la continuazione della guerra con altri mezzi”. Tuttavia, quest'evoluzione strategica da parte dei terroristi non è stata contrastata da misure anti-terroristiche adeguate, motivo per cui, ad oggi, lo Stato Islamico sta vincendo la guerra ideologica, specialmente contro l'Occidente.

Lo Stato Islamico ha sposato sin dall'inizio il concetto di *electronic jihad*, facendo dei *social media* – grazie alla loro ampia portata ed immediatezza – parte integrante della loro belligeranza, come attesta la presenza di un complesso apparato propagandistico, gestito dal Consiglio Mediatico e sul quale il califfato investe molte risorse, sia umane che finanziarie.

L'efficacia di tale apparato è data dall'interazione dei seguenti fattori, sui quali esso si basa:

- la capacità di raggiungere simultaneamente sia gli “amici” che i “nemici”;
- la sincronizzazione tra narrativa e azione;
- la centralità del marchio dello Stato Islamico;

il tutto incorniciato da una visione apocalittica della storia e degli eventi.

La guerra ideologica del califfato si rivolge a due categorie ben distinte: gli “amici”, ovvero simpatizzanti e sostenitori (potenziali o effettivi) e i “nemici”, che comprendono chiunque si opponga allo Stato Islamico, tra cui l'Occidente, i Paesi Arabi che ne sono stati corrotti (occidentalizzati) e Israele.

Oltre alla differenziazione amici/nemici, il califfato tiene anche in considerazione l'area geografica di appartenenza del pubblico, l'età e il sesso dei destinatari dei loro messaggi.

Grazie alle diverse case di produzione gestite e supervisionate dal Consiglio Mediatico, lo Stato Islamico è in grado di produrre una vasta gamma di contenuti multimediali (pubblicazioni testuali, stile riviste mensili, e video, come le note decapitazioni) di altissima qualità, con riprese teatrali e abili rimaneggiamenti, a volte inserendo i *nasheed* (canti senza musica) di sottofondo. I contenuti vengono pubblicati in diverse lingue e confezionati a seconda del pubblico destinatario (nel marketing il fenomeno è noto come *narrowcasting*).

Gruppi prescelti di *foreign fighters* e donne, completano le “produzioni” diffondendo i contenuti sulle varie piattaforme sociali (con un *tweet* su Twitter e/o un *post* su Facebook). Essi si impegnano ad essere “attivi” su questi *social network*, fornendo resoconti di prima mano della vita nel califfato o del fronte di battaglia, incitando a compiere attacchi contro gli infedeli e rispondendo a domande riguardo al migrare nel califfato (*hijrah*).

Quando dirette agli adolescenti, le narrative proposte fanno leva sul desiderio di avventura, cameratismo e romanticismo. Se invece sono destinate ad un pubblico maturo, le narrative vertono su aspetti emotivi quali torti e ingiustizie subite dai Musulmani; sul dovere di unirsi alla missione umanitaria in aiuto dei fratelli siriani; sul dovere di donna come moglie di un *mujahidin* e madre, fondamentale per la crescita della popolazione; e infine sul progetto di unire tutta la *Ummah* (comunità Musulmana) in un unico territorio senza confini, quale il califfato.

Oltre a queste fonti “ufficiali”, sotto stretto controllo del califfato, lo Stato Islamico conta anche sull'appoggio dei canali ufficiosi, ovvero i simpatizzanti e sostenitori che ampliano la diffusione di questo materiale e a loro volta ne producono di proprio. Tra questi canali ci sono anche i predicatori Islamisti, pericolosi in quanto giustificano religiosamente le azioni del califfato, *de facto* legittimandolo.

Per “sincronizzazione tra narrativa e azione” si intende lo sfruttamento dell'immediatezza dei *social media* per fornire una comunicazione e documentazione di fatti in tempo reale. La corrispondenza tra fatti e parole è fondamentale per l'affidabilità, la legittimità e la risonanza del gruppo. Inoltre, tale sincronizzazione agisce da amplificatore quando usata sul campo di battaglia.

È ormai evidente il destro uso di strategie di *marketing*, che viene riaffermato dalla centralità del “marchio Stato Islamico”. Non vi è immagine né fotogramma che non inquadri il drappo nero del gruppo, simbolo centrale del califfato, che viene pubblicizzato continuamente. Immagini e video (i cosiddetti *Mujatweet*) esaltano la vita al suo interno ed il risultato – non ancora completo –

dell'*Ummah* che vive in una terra sconfinata. Il motto “Consolidamento ed Espansione” indica chiaramente quest'intento, così come il cambiamento di nome del gruppo da al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) a Stato Islamico dell'Iraq e del Levante/Siria (ISIS o ISIL), sino a semplicemente Stato Islamico (IS).

Il tutto è condito da una visione apocalittica della storia e degli eventi. La *jihad* vista come battaglia escatologica tra il bene (loro) e il male (gli altri) pervade ogni narrativa, esaltando il ruolo del martire, che è visto come un eroe. La conseguenza diretta è l'assenza di paura della morte, la quale porta inevitabilmente all'uso indiscriminato della violenza, anch'essa esaltata – come dimostrano i soliti video delle decapitazioni e di punizioni pubbliche – perché purificatrice dell'*Ummah* dagli infedeli ed apostati.

Lo Stato Islamico punta dunque, sulla diversità. La diversità di pubblico (amici/ nemici), la diversità di fonti per produrre e diffondere il contenuto (ufficiali e non), di contenuti multimediali, della lingua utilizzata e infine delle piattaforme *social*. Tutto questo per assicurarsi che la loro voce abbia un ampio raggio, raggiungendo il pubblico più vasto possibile.

Risultato della strategia è il reclutamento di nuovi *foreign fighters* (circa 4.000 provengono da Paesi occidentali) che vanno a rafforzare la potenza militare del califfato e l'incitamento a compiere attacchi terroristici a casa (*lone wolf attacks*) come quelli citati di Parigi, Tunisi o in Texas, estendendo così il teatro di guerra.

Per il momento, l'Occidente sta perdendo questa guerra. Ciò è dovuto a diversi fattori.

In primis, la vulnerabilità del sistema mediatico occidentale, nel quale la teatralità è tutto. La brutalità dello Stato Islamico diventa fonte di notizia e i media inconsciamente diventano ripetitori ed amplificatori della narrativa del califfato, spargendo ulteriormente il terrore. In tale situazione, le vittime diventano i Musulmani (quelli veri), i quali vengono identificati come il nemico perché un gruppo di fanatici si proclama “protettore” della loro religione. Ne consegue che si diffondono atti *islamofobici* e vengono attuate misure anti-terroristiche che inevitabilmente li discriminano. Il risultato di tutto ciò è la conferma di alcune delle narrative avanzate dallo Stato Islamico che fanno leva sulle ingiustizie e rancori, che in estremi casi portano individui ad unirsi a questo gruppo, creando così un circolo vizioso.

Il continuo mostrare delle immagini e messaggi del califfato rischia inoltre di normalizzare il tutto, arrivando a creare una sorta di norma sociale per la quale i soggetti vulnerabili si sentono tenuti ad unirsi allo Stato Islamico o agire per loro conto.

Un secondo fattore è la scelta delle misure repressive per contrastare l'ampia portata del messaggio del califfato. Queste misure, quali il blocco dei vari *account* affiliati al gruppo presenti sui vari *social media*, si sono dimostrate inutili, vista la velocità di ricomparsa degli stessi, ma anche dannose in quanto questi *account*, e i siti controllati dagli stessi, a volte forniscono preziose e utili informazioni sullo Stato Islamico, come il caso del *mujahidin* che ha pubblicato la foto di una delle loro basi, permettendone così il bombardamento da parte degli Americani.

Seppur tardive, alcune misure proattive, volte a smontare e screditare le narrative del califfato e a proporre delle contro-narrative, sono state messe in atto da governi, organizzazioni, comunità religiose e società civile. Ne sono esempi la campagna lanciata dal Dipartimento di Stato Americano su Twitter: *#ThinkAgainTurnAway*; oppure *#MuslimApologies*, lanciata da Musulmani Inglesi, stanchi di vedere la loro religione in mano a degli scellerati ed essere associati a loro; o la campagna di video-cartoni *Abdullah-X* lanciata su YouTube da un presunto ex-estremista, per mettere in guardia i giovani dalla radicalizzazione. Queste misure, tuttavia, non sembrano poter reggere il confronto con il complesso apparato propagandistico dello Stato Islamico. La loro debolezza dipende dalla mancanza di credibilità del messaggero e dalla portata del messaggio.

È fondamentale la corrispondenza tra chi trasmette il messaggio ed il contenuto stesso della comunicazione. La logica imporrebbe ai governi di garantire la difesa dei valori democratici che rappresentano e di rendere il più trasparente possibile le loro posizioni, le loro politiche, le loro azioni ed anche le loro inazioni. La difesa della religione dovrebbe essere prerogativa delle autorità religiose e dei fedeli, ciò per evitare incoerenze tra messaggero e messaggio, potenzialmente sfruttabili dallo Stato Islamico per rafforzare ulteriormente le proprie tesi.

Il contributo della società civile (attraverso la creatività dei singoli individui, con contenuti umoristici e sarcastici) e quello delle varie organizzazioni nate per contrastare l'estremismo violento (dando voce alle testimonianze di vittime di estremismo ed ex-estremisti o disertori), è fondamentale al fine di una contro-narrativa composita ed efficace.

Come il punto di forza della propaganda del califfato è la diversità, allo stesso modo l'efficacia della contro-narrativa dipende dalla varietà dei messaggeri i quali, ciascuno a modo loro, cercano di fare appello al lato emotivo, religioso e razionale di chi è attratto dall'ideologia del califfato.

Tuttavia, l'efficacia del contro-messaggio dipende anche dalla sua divulgazione.

I tentativi di contro-narrative non godono della stessa "portata" raggiunta dallo Stato Islamico. Queste iniziative non godono "dell'esercito di diffusori" di cui gode il califfato, quindi rimangono meno visibili e di conseguenza, meno influenti.

Un tentativo per aumentare la “portata” dei messaggi può essere fatto con il supporto delle compagnie di *social media* e con le corporazioni di *internet*. Oltre a fornire assistenza per la produzione di contenuti, finalizzata ad aumentarne la visibilità sul *web*, l’offerta – con agevolazioni economiche o addirittura *pro bono* – di spazi pubblicitari sulle pagine di ricerca Google o sui video di YouTube, potrebbe costituire già un grande slancio per le organizzazioni *non-profit* impegnate in questa guerra di contro-narrative. La pubblicità mirata, in base alle ricerche effettuate dall’utente su *internet* e sulle varie piattaforme *social*, potrebbe rendere la strategia delle contro-narrative più efficace, dirigendole direttamente ai soggetti ritenuti a rischio di radicalizzazione e reclutamento.

Detta strategia (*soft power*) è pre-condizione per la sconfitta militare del califfato. L’ideologia è la forza motrice dei *fighters* e di chiunque impieghi la violenza in nome del califfato.

Prima vengono demolite queste fondamentali ideologiche, prima crolla tutto ciò che da esse dipende.

L’idea di fondo è di riappropriarsi del campo di battaglia virtuale – il *web* – prima di passare a quello reale.

Risulta dunque opportuno e necessario ampliare e rafforzare tale coalizione di contro-narratori per non celebrare più futuri anniversari del califfato.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major current threats to international security is the infamous terrorist group known as Islamic State (IS).¹ With the seize of Mosul in June 2014 and the establishment of the caliphate, the group gained international visibility, and its bloody territorial expansion across Syria and Iraq raised concern in the international community which, under the American-led coalition, has been carrying out airstrikes against IS since August 2014.

Despite the targeting of oil-fields, military bases and equipment, IS doesn't seem weakened, as its relentless expansion and victories attest (the latest ones being the seizure of Ramadi and Palmyra, in May 2015). IS has thus proved to be resilient enemy. Its strength lies in the complex organizational structure that underlies the caliphate, different from ordinary terrorist organizations and insurgency groups. The caliphate is financially independent, it has an administrative system governing its territories and the subjected populations, and carries out skillfully designed media operations.

Such operations are the backbone of Islamic State's information warfare, which is carried out principally on social media platforms (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook). They consist in a vast array of multimedia content, perfused with jihadist ideology, a distorted vision of Islam and violence, with the purpose of funding, indoctrination, radicalization, recruitment, instigation to carry out terrorist attacks, magnifying its power and spread terror.

The thousands of foreign fighters, women and families flocking to the caliphate, the increasing number of IS-affiliated lone wolf attacks throughout the world, and the constant exhibit of its atrocities which fuel the West's terror hysteria, are symptom of the effectiveness of the caliphate's media warfare, which has become a great concern for the international community.

In what can be considered the first social media war, classic counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategies have proved to be ineffective in contrasting this new threat, leaving the caliphate to dominate cyberspace with its own narrative.

Thus, an effective online counter-narrative strategy is needed to defeat IS. Discrediting and dismantling their messages is the only way to eradicate the roots on which the caliphate rests on.

Through the portrait of the caliphate and the analysis of its information warfare, the present work seeks to identify the guidelines for the ideation of a potent online counter-narrative strategy, capable of tackling Islamic state's presence and influence on social media platforms.

¹ Hereinafter Islamic State will be referred to as "IS" or "caliphate". The omission of the article *the* in front of the name and acronym, and the use of the lower case for the initial of the caliphate are intentional decisions to avoid granting this terrorist group any legitimacy.

1. IS (ISLAMIC STATE)

What is Islamic State? Before June 2014, almost no one had ever heard of ISIL, ISIS, Daesh or Islamic State. Nevertheless, after June 2014, those have become “household words.” The group behind the names seemed to have appeared out of nowhere when Mosul, a city of some two million people in northern Iraq, fell under the group’s militants.²

However, this was but a misconception. What we today call IS, is the result of almost 20 years of evolution of what started out as a training camp, founded by a Jordanian man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,³ assisted by another terrorist group – al-Qaeda – and inspired by *Salafi-jihadism*.

In order to attempt to explain what Islamic State is, its history, its strategy and goals, it is important to follow a deductive path. Starting with the definition of the Salafi-Jihadist ideology and its two main interpretations, the one followed by al-Qaeda and that followed by IS, the chapter will then briefly focus on Al-Qaeda and its role in the emergence of IS. Finally, having laid the foundations, it will be possible to explain Islamic State in its entirety.

Salafi-Jihadism

Salafi-Jihadism is both the point of convergence and divergence between al-Qaeda and Islamic State. These terrorist groups both stem from this ideology, yet each one uses a different strategy to achieve the same goal.

To define *Salafi-jihadism*, it is necessary to clarify two important terms: *Islamism* and *Jihadism*.

Islamism is a set of ideologies that have arisen as a consequence of imperialist oppression of Muslims. Islamism calls for the application of Islam to social and political life, as well as private life, to achieve a utopian Islamic society. In a nutshell, Islamism is the politicization of Islam. However, as for any ideology, there are moderate and extremist strands: an example for the latter category, is Jihadism, which can be considered as a violent subcategory of Islamism.

Jihadism, is a distortion of *jihad*. Jihad stands for the struggle – which can be both internal and external – on behalf of Islam. Its aim is the protection of the faith, not a blind war against other religions: Jihad has a violent connotation only if strictly necessary.⁴ As Islamism, Jihadism is the manipulation of Jihad as a political and military tool to achieve political ends, not religious, which is ultimately the establishment of a caliphate.

²Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

³Ibid.

⁴ISCA, *Jihad: A Misunderstood Concept from Islam*. See: <http://islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/5-jihad-a-misunderstood-concept-from-islam.html?start=9>

Jihadism has a very rigid black-and-white vision, dividing everything into two categories: Muslims (the Good) and non-Muslims (the Evil), which must be fought.

Having defined these two key concepts, we can move on to outline the Salafi-jihadist ideology.

Salafism, or *Salafi movement*, is a puritanical movement within Sunni Islam,⁵ which believes that Islam has been corrupted by errant Muslims and thus calls for a return to a strict reading of the sources.⁶ As Wiktorowicz wrote, the term *salafi* derives from the Arabic *salaf* – to precede – and in the Islamic context it refers to the Companions of the Prophet.⁷ Salafism is one of the fastest-growing Islamic movements and has a vast global reach.

The Salafi movement bases all its decisions and actions on the strict reading of the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah*,⁸ and the example of the Companions. As a result, Wiktorowicz writes, Jihadi-Salafis – the violent Salafis – apply the arguments supporting the use of violence to diligently locate the religious evidence needed to legitimize particular conflicts, actions and decisions.

Salafi-Jihadism is based on three fundamental concepts: *hakmiyyah*, *jahiliyyah*, and *global jihad*. *Hakmiyyah* is the belief of Allah's sovereignty over political, economic and social affairs. *Jahiliyyah* is the idea that the Muslim community has been reverted to a pre-Islam state of affairs and thus a radical and violent change to the existing order is justified. Finally, there is *global jihad*, a concept introduced in 1979 with the issuing of a *fatwa*⁹ by Abdullah Azzam and restated by Osama bin Laden's 1998 *fatwa*,¹⁰ which rules out that Muslims all over the world have a duty to fight defensive jihad against any enemy invading a Muslim land that is unable to defend itself.¹¹

Azzam outlined two kinds of jihads against infidels: *offensive Jihad* and *defensive Jihad*. Offensive jihad calls for attacking the enemy's territory in the absence of a enemy's attack. Defensive jihad instead, aims at protecting Muslim territories and populations from attacks. Here lies one of the crucial differences between al-Qaeda, which follows the former kind of jihad, and Islamic State, that follows the latter.

⁵Distinction between *Sunni* Islam and *Shi'a* Islam: *Sunni* Islam is the branch of Islam that believes that Abu Bakr (father-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad) was the first Caliph after the Prophet's death. This branch is considered the most orthodox. *Shi'a* Islam instead believes that Ali (Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin) was the Prophet's successor.

⁶Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad*. Middle East Policy, 8.4: 18-38, 2001.

⁷Namely the first three generations of Muslims who learned about Islam directly from the Prophet or those who knew him, which therefore have a pure understanding of the religion. Ibid.

⁸Traditions of the Prophet that are written in the *hadiths*.

⁹Religious law or religious jurisprudential opinions.

¹⁰Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad*. Middle East Policy, 8.4: 18-38. 2001.

¹¹Azzam, Abdullah, *Defense of the Muslim Lands: the first obligation after Iman*, 1979, translation by Brothers in Ribatt.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda surfaced during the 1980s when Muslims from around the world travelled to fight defensive jihad against the Soviets in the Afghan War. At first, the group – or better, the ensemble of fighters – was a loose entity held together by a common ideology. Crucial for the real creation of the group was the convergence of external factors, like the circumstance of state (Saudi Arabia) and non-state actors working together with the Afghan mujahidin to aid the fighters against Communism via recruitment, funding and training.¹²

The most important of the non-state actors, was an organization named MAK – Maktab al-Khadamat – led by Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, which can be seen as the precursor of al-Qaeda. However, MAK was not a jihadist organization but a network that operated as an intermediary between the Afghan mujahidin and foreign fighters wishing to fight in Afghanistan.¹³

In 1988, with the end of the Soviet occupation, the network had to transform itself to remain viable. This necessity revealed some major differences in the leadership's views regarding the future direction of the jihad.¹⁴ Azzam wanted al-Qaeda to become an 'on-call force' ready to intervene wherever Muslims felt threatened. By contrast, bin Laden believed that the fighters should return to their home countries and try to topple secular pro-Western Arab leaders,¹⁵ view that was shared also by Ayman al-Zawahiri, then leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. However, Azzam was killed in 1989 and the leadership issue was solved.

The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a crucial point for al-Qaeda's history. The U.S. troops hosted by Saudi Arabia to protect it from an Iraqi invasion, were seen as occupiers of Islamic land and the Saudi royal family was painted as complicit. At this point, both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri believed that in order to bring about Islamic regimes, it was necessary to drive away the backer of secular regimes, i.e. the United States.¹⁶ To do so, throughout the 1990s, the group carried out attacks against American military and diplomatic facilities abroad which eventually culminated in the 9/11 terrorist attack on American soil.

September 11 represented bin Laden's most effective achievement: bin Laden sought to destabilize the West before confronting the internal enemies, whereas IS has the exact opposite strategy, namely internal purification. The consequences of the 9/11 attack were on one hand, the increasing of jihadists' support, and on the other, the waging of the Global War on Terror against it.

¹²Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹³Vilchez, Carlos Setas, *What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Al-Qaeda*. Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies N. 4, 2014.

¹⁴Brown, Vahid. *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa'ida from 1989-2006*. Military Academy West Point Ny Combating Terrorism Center, 2007.

¹⁵Katzman, Kenneth, *Al Qaeda: Profile and threat assessment*. Library of Congress Washington DC Congressional Research Service, 2005.

¹⁶Ibid.

The resulting Global War on Terror altered al-Qaeda's central role in Islamic terrorism, forcing it to decentralize and shift its strategy to *defending* Muslim values from local regimes.¹⁷ As the 2004 U.S. State Department report on terrorism says:

*"The core of al-Qaeda has suffered damage to its leadership, organization and capabilities...At the same time, al-Qaeda has spread its anti-U.S., anti-Western ideology to other groups. It is therefore no longer al-Qaeda itself, but increasingly groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or independent ones adhering to al-Qaeda's ideology, that present the greatest threat of terrorist attacks against U.S. and allied interests globally."*¹⁸

As a matter of fact, al-Qaeda has always been a coalition of different groups led by a central leadership; it *"functioned like a venture capital firm – providing funding, contacts and expert advice to many different militant groups and individuals from all over the Islamic world."*¹⁹

After 9/11, the group experienced unprecedented support and expansion thanks to new affiliates. However, this constituted both an asset and a new challenge for the group. This new challenge consisted in the tension between the affiliate's tactical objectives and strategies and the need for al-Qaeda to maintain a wide network of sympathizers beyond the areas of conflict.²⁰ Until bin Laden's death, in 2011, AQC's (al-Qaeda Central)²¹ priority was the protection of its global reputation.²² An example of this prioritization was the rejection of al-Shabaab (a Somali militant group) to join al-Qaeda. However, after bin Laden's death, al-Zawahiri changed AQC's policy, first welcoming al-Shabaab into the al-Qaeda network, then by acquiescing in front of its affiliate's – al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – open defiance.²³

Nevertheless, in front of AQI's evolution into IS, al-Zawahiri saw himself forced to repudiate its troublesome affiliate in 2014.²⁴

The Emergence Of Islamic State

The rise of IS can be considered as the result of the interplay of three factors.²⁵ The first one is the appearance of al-Qaeda in the global arena. Al-Qaeda was exceptional in its far-reaching promotion of the Islamic jihadist approach, climax of which were the 9/11 attacks. The group became an example and contributed – financially and ideologically – to the establishment of similar organizations that pursued global jihad.

¹⁷ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹⁸ US Department of State Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*. 2005

¹⁹ Burke, Jason, *Al Qaeda*, Foreign Policy (May-June), p.18, 2004.

²⁰ Cragin, R. Kim, *A Recent History Of Al-Qa'ida*. The Historical Journal, 57, pp 803-824, 2014.

²¹ From now on, AQC (al-Qaeda Central). AQC was a term coined by the media and subsequently borrowed by bin Laden himself in a letter he wrote to Shayk Mahnud in 2010.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Turner, John, *Strategic Differences: Al Qaeda's Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 26:2, 208-225, 2015.

²⁵ Kam, Ephraim, *The Rise of the Islamic State Organization*. Strategic Assessment, Volume 17, No. 3, October 2014.

This was the case for the precursor of the group today known as IS, which emerged under the leadership of a Jordanian man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

At the end of the 1980s, in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi travelled there to fight the Afghan State. As a result, he spent time in the training camps sponsored by the forerunner of al-Qaeda²⁶ and eventually also befriended bin Laden. There, he remained until the early 1990s, when he returned to Jordan where he was imprisoned on terrorism charges.²⁷ He stayed in prison until 1999, period spent mostly with one of the most prominent salafi-jihadist ideologues, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. This encounter further polarized al-Zarqawi's ideology, that would eventually bring him to an over-the-top enforcement of *Sharia*.²⁸ Upon release, al-Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan where he set up a training camp in Herat under logistical²⁹ and financial³⁰ assistance from bin Laden, which however remained al-Zarqawi's own camp, thus ideologically independent.³¹ This camp served as a launch-pad for his new group named Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTWJ).³²³³

The second fundamental factor in the emergence of IS, is the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq, which revolutionized Iraq's political and social characteristics and also its strategic capabilities. With the invasion of Iraq in 2003, JTWJ was relocated in Iraq and, in October 2004, al-Zarqawi gave in – after years of requests – to bin Laden's request to pledge *bay'a*³⁴ to him. As a consequence, JTWJ was renamed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).³⁵ This was a clear marriage of convenience, since AQC's finances and global infrastructure were precious resources.³⁶ In Iraq, al-Zarqawi pursued extremely violent tactics aimed at instigating internal chaos and instability. However, these tactics also involved the targeting of Shiites and ignoring the difference between combatants and non-combatants.³⁷ This was one of the several divergence points between AQC and AQI (and later IS). As mentioned, AQC's priority was the protection of its global reputation,³⁸ which was undermined by al-Zarqawi's (and his successors') unconstrained violence. However, despite such divergence, AQI remained AQC's affiliate (temporarily).

²⁶ MAK – Maktab al-Khadamat.

²⁷ Kam, Ephraim, *The Rise of the Islamic State Organization*. Strategic Assessment, Volume 17, No. 3, October 2014.

²⁸ "Shariah is the Islamic Law – it establishes the patterns believers should follow in worshipping Allah: prayers, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. The disciplines and principles that govern the behavior of a Muslim individual towards his or herself, family, neighbors, community, city, nation and the Muslim polity as a whole, the Ummah. Similarly Shariah governs the interactions between communities, groups and social and economic organizations. Shariah establishes the criteria by which all social actions are classified, categorized and administered within the overall governance of the state." See <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/52-understanding-islamic-law.html>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

³¹ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

³² Which means "The Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad".

³³ Terrill, Andrew, *Confronting "The Islamic State": Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS*. Parameters, 44(3), Autumn 2014.

³⁴ *Bay'a* is the pledge given to the ruler of a region who is accepted by its people. See <http://www.onislam.net/english/ask-the-scholar/shariah-based-systems/482155-what-is-bayah-pledge-of-allegiance-in-islam.html>

³⁵ Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

³⁶ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

³⁷ Turner, John, *Strategic Differences: Al Qaeda's Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham*. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 26:2, 208-225, 2015.

³⁸ Cragin, R. Kim, *A Recent History Of Al-Qa'ida*. The Historical Journal, 57, pp 803-824, 2014.

In 2006, AQI merged with other Iraqi jihadist groups creating the Majilis Shura al-Mujahidin (MSM). Later that year, after al-Zarqawi's death and a further merger with other groups, his successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, announced the creation of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).³⁹ To this creation followed a symbolic shift of allegiance, that is worth clarifying.

As mentioned, al-Zarqawi pledged *bay'a* to bin Laden in 2004. Pledging *bay'a* can only be done by individuals, not organizations, so in theory the pledge ceases once one of the parties dies: in other words, al-Zarqawi's death invalidated MSM's pledge to bin Laden.⁴⁰ Consequently, al-Muhajir, pledged *bay'a* to the *emir*⁴¹ of ISI, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. However, this pledge was purely symbolic since, in practice, AQC and ISI still shared resources and worked together.⁴²

Meanwhile, the continuation of the use of indiscriminate violence and the use of *takfir*,⁴³ brought to the loss of major support⁴⁴ which, paired with the 2006 establishment of US-funded anti-al-Qaeda militias named *Sawha* – Awakening – Groups⁴⁵, inflicted major setbacks to ISI and eventually marginalized the group in Iraq by 2011. In the meantime, precisely in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the new and current leader of the group.

Finally, the third and fundamental factor for the creation of today's Islamic State, which has also been vital for its survival back in 2011, is the Syrian civil war. Marginalized and weakened by the *Sawha* groups, ISI fled to Syria, country plagued by a civil war since April 2011. In Syria, ISI found the perfect situation for its regeneration, especially thanks to the recruitment of foreign fighters. By 2013, ISI had re-emerged in Iraq while,⁴⁶ at the same time, standing out as a fighting force also in Syria.

This geographical expansion of ISI's activities resulted in a further name-change: the group was now known as Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIL or ISIS).⁴⁷ However, this evolution increased the pre-existing friction between ISIL and AQC and also deteriorated its ties with another jihadist group, Jabaat al-Nusra (JN). JN is a jihadist group that has entered the Syrian scene at the beginning of 2012, led by Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani. Al-Jawlani was an operative dispatched to Syria by al-Baghdadi,⁴⁸ with the aim to set up a new jihadist organization.⁴⁹

³⁹ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

⁴⁰ Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

⁴¹ *Emir* is the title for military chiefs or local chiefs.

⁴² Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

⁴³ *Takfir* is the practice of denouncing Muslims as infidels only because they don't adopt the *Sunni* radical concept of Islam. This accusation is very serious since 'infidels' are executed.

⁴⁴ Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

⁴⁵ Terrill, Andrew, *Confronting "The Islamic State": Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS*. *Parameters*, 44(3), Autumn 2014.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *al-Sham* stands for the Levant or Greater Syria.

⁴⁸ Also al-Zawahiri was included in the planning.

Nevertheless, the operative success and its popularity amidst the Syrian population, was the result of al-Jawlani's command. Vis-à-vis this success, al-Baghdadi declared ISI's operative expansion, thus becoming ISIL and in addition, he announced the merger between ISIL and JN.

This announcement was rejected by both al-Jawlani (JN) and al-Zawahiri (AQC), with the former pledging *bay'a* to al-Zawahiri and the latter demanding for the groups to respect the boundaries of each other's conflict.⁵⁰ The rejection was backed by an unsuccessful mediation by AQC between JN and ISIL, which didn't manage to stop the infighting between the two groups and eventually ended with AQC's disavowal of ISIL⁵¹ on February 2, 2014.⁵²

Meanwhile, ISIL racked up several successes in Iraq, the main ones being the taking control of Fallujah, Tikrit and Mosul. In the wake of such victories, on June 29, 2014, the *Shura* (consultation) council of ISIL declared the establishment of the Islamic caliphate.

The declaration, was released through audio and video recordings, then an English transcript of the statement was made available on one of the group's Twitter accounts. Along with the establishment of the caliphate, the declaration restated the group's ideology and mission and changed its name to Islamic State (IS). This further change of name reflected the group's enhanced ambitions beyond Syria and Iraq,⁵³ namely the rejection of borders in the Muslim world.

IS's motto "*Baqiyya wa tatamaddad*" – remaining and expanding – reflects this expansionist outlook,⁵⁴ and it is further confirmed by the caliphate's frontlines.

The caliphate's operative theatres are three:⁵⁵

- The *interior one*, whose core is formed by Syria and Iraq, but which extends to the bordering countries such as Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon;
- The *near abroad theater*, which roughly corresponds to the geographical area of the old caliphate, the Ottoman Empire;
- The *far abroad theater*, consisting of Europe, the US, Southern Asia, Australia and the cyber domain,⁵⁶ which is of great importance for this work.

⁴⁹ Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

⁵⁰ Cragin, R. Kim, *A Recent History Of Al-Qa'ida*. The Historical Journal, 57, pp 803-824, 2014.

⁵¹ Despite al-Baghdadi had never pledged *bay'ah* to al-Zawahiri.

⁵² Zelin, Aaron Y., *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Number 20, 2014.

⁵³ Terrill, Andrew, *Confronting "The Islamic State": Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS*. Parameters, 44(3), Autumn 2014.

⁵⁴ Barnes-Dacey, Julien et al., *The Islamic State Through the Regional Lens*. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015.

⁵⁵ Gambhir, Harleen, *ISIS Global Intelligence Summary*, Institute for the Study of War, 2015.

⁵⁶ Lupo, Stefano, *Cyber Isis: la Strategia Mediatica del Califfato*, Intelligence and Fraud Investigation, Cyber Defense Symposium 2015.

Building An Islamic State

Having retraced the historical developments that resulted in the declaration of Islamic State's caliphate on June 29, 2014, it is also important to understand IS's structure and state-building strategy.

As stated, IS follows the Salafi-jihadist ideology, which is based on the concept of *global jihad* with the ultimate goal of establishing a caliphate under the rule of *Sharia*. The establishment of a caliphate is a goal shared by every other jihadist group, first among everyone, al-Qaeda. However, Islamic State's caliphate is the first real jihadist state.⁵⁷ It holds a contiguous – but not coherent – territory that extends across eastern Syria and western Iraq, it enjoys popular legitimacy – to some extent – and, unlike groups such as al-Qaeda, it carries its actions out openly.

Islamic State's success is due especially to its ability to take advantage of situations of instability in *failed states*⁵⁸ such as Iraq and Syria, filling their vacuum with a semblance of effective security and administration.⁵⁹ In such unstable areas, populations see IS as the lesser of two evils, as their only possible source of stability, despite their disapproval for the extreme degree of violence they use and their dislike for IS's ideological program. IS thus poses itself as an alternative to those failed governments, and it does so by setting up its own institutions aimed at administering IS territories and providing services to its populations “*to win their hearts and minds.*”

While IS is far from being a state as defined in the first article of the *Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States*,⁶⁰ and despite it being designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations, and other countries and organizations, Islamic State does have some elements that invoke statehood.

Who's in Charge

The *state* is governed by a hierarchical structure,⁶¹ on top of which is the *caliph*, al-Baghdadi. All of IS leaders are radical Sunnis and ex-members of the Iraqi party Ba'ath, part of Saddam Hussein's government⁶² and they all share a common experience of detention in American military prisons, as the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp or Abu Ghraib in Iraq.⁶³

⁵⁷ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

⁵⁸ The definition of 'failed states' is: Weak states incapable of creating domestic order. Jackson, R., and Sørensen, G. *Introduction to International Relations. Theories and Approaches* (fifth ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

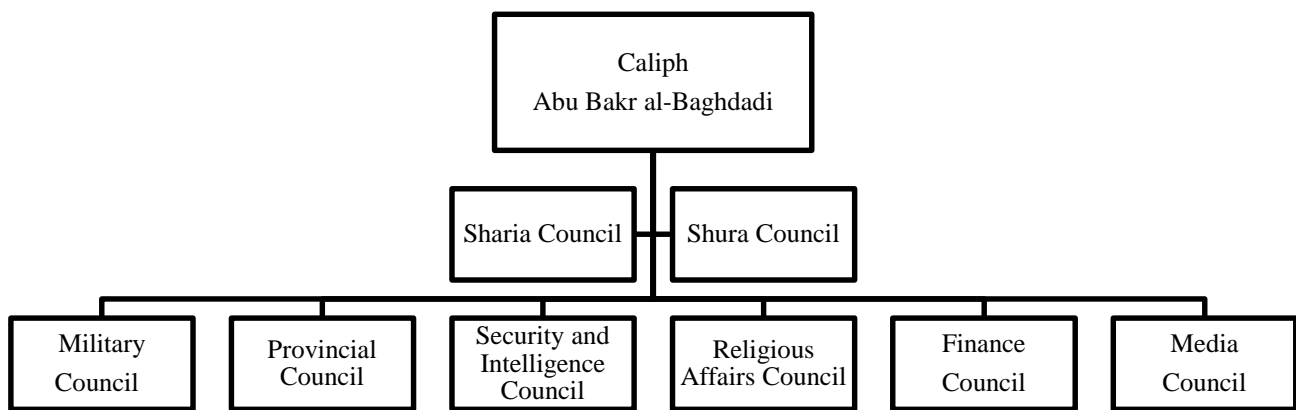
⁵⁹ Jabareen, Yosef, *The emerging Islamic State: Terror, territoriality, and the agenda of social transformation*, Geoforum, November 7, 2014.

⁶⁰ Montevideo convention art 1: “The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.” Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, International Conference of American States in Montevideo, Uruguay on December 26, 1933.

⁶¹ The source used to construct the table is: Barret, Richard, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, October 28, 2014.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Lupo, Stefano, *Cyber Isis: la Strategia Mediatica del Califfato*, Intelligence and Fraud Investigation, Cyber Defense Symposium 2015.



Right under al-Baghdadi there are the *Sharia* and *Shura* Councils:

- the *Sharia* Council is considered the most powerful body and it is the council responsible for interpreting *Sharia* law, and ensuring that citizens either comply or are punished. It is directly overseen by al-Baghdadi;
- the *Shura* Council is the governing authority of the Islamic State, which is responsible for handing down orders from al-Baghdadi and his deputies, and ensures they are followed.⁶⁴

Then we have the other councils, responsible in their respective fields to draft and implement policies and strategies. Further on in this work, we will focus on the Media Council, responsible for the caliphate's propaganda.

The "State's" Resources

Islamic State's overall success is due to its resources that keep the machine going.

IS enjoys a stable financial situation. Its revenue comes from the trading of looted antiquities, kidnappings and the relative ransoms, taxes and extortions, black market activity, especially in the field of oil. As a matter of fact, IS controls several oil fields, which represents their major source of funding, consequence of which is the achievement of financial independence.⁶⁵

Moreover, IS is in control of the Haditha dam, situated in Iraq on the Euphrates river. Until March 2014, IS also controlled the Mosul dam, liberated by the US-backed Pashmerga forces.⁶⁶⁶⁷ These Hydroelectric dams which produce electricity, are a very important resource for the functioning of life under the caliphate. Furthermore, the control of water supply is extremely important in such

⁶⁴ Amico, Chris and Evan Wexler, *Who Runs the Islamic State?*, PBS, October 28, 2014. See: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/who-runs-the-islamic-state/>

⁶⁵ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, *ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization*, November 26, 2014.

⁶⁶ Iraqi Kurdish forces.

⁶⁷ Bradley, Matt, Renee Rigdon and Stuart A. Thompson, *The Battle Against Islamic State*, Wall Street Journal, March 31, 2015. See: <http://graphics.wsj.com/battle-against-islamic-state/>

territories and it is used, by IS, as a weapon against populations that resist their rule, by cutting off supplies to their villages.⁶⁸

Finally, its military equipment, obtained by looting US-furnished Iraqi arsenals and Assad's conquered bases, provides IS with modern weapons and vehicles, crucial for their mission's speed and efficacy.

These three factors are essential not only for the military success of IS, but also for its state-building activity, which is just as important.

The Caliphate's Statehood

VICE's full-length documentary titled *The Islamic State*⁶⁹ provides an insight on such state-building activity, through the example of Raqqa,⁷⁰ the caliphate's capital.

The caliphate is governed by rule of law,⁷¹ following a strict reading of the *Sharia* (Islamic law), which covers everything from high crimes to every aspect of the daily life of civilians. This is called *positive intervention* aimed to “show [people] the way back to God and religion.”⁷²

The caliphate has its own Islamic Courts, which deal with everything from major crimes to the settlement of mundane disputes: all the sentences are obviously based on *Sharia* and the punishments are public. The law is enforced through the *Hisbah*, a sort of (armed) police force,⁷³ that patrols the city 24/7, ensuring that the *Sharia* is respected by the population in their everyday activities. The *Hisbah* supervises citizen's personal behaviours, as their personal appearance (especially the conformity of women's dress-code) or the observance of prayer time, festivities and the related diets and norms.⁷⁴ Moreover, the *Hisbah* also verifies the fair trade of shops, by inspecting products, practices and prices, together with the Consumer Protection Authority.⁷⁵

The caliphate also controls the production and distribution of bread. This allows them easy-gain of popular support, co-opting locals from rival factions.⁷⁶

IS invests even in public works, such as fixing potholes and building infrastructures as streets and bridges. Moreover, welfare programs and social services both have ample space in the new

⁶⁸ Cunningham, Erin, *Islamic State jihadists are using water as a weapon in Iraq*, The Washington Post, October 7, 2014. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-jihadists-are-using-water-as-a-weapon-in-iraq/2014/10/06/ae6d6792-79ec-4c7c-8f2f-fd7b95765d09_story.html

⁶⁹ Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014. See: <https://news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-full-length>

⁷⁰ Conquered in March 2013.

⁷¹ The Oxford English Dictionary has defined “rule of law” this way: “The authority and influence of law in society, esp. when viewed as a constraint on individual and institutional behaviour; (hence) the principle whereby all members of a society (including those in government) are considered equally subject to publicly disclosed legal codes and processes”.

⁷² Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014.

⁷³ Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, *The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham*. In: Middle East Forum, January. 2014.

⁷⁴ For example during Ramadan, where it is forbidden to eat, drink and smoke until sundown.

⁷⁵ *Islamic State Report, an Insight into the Islamic State*, al Hayat Media Center, Issue 1, Shaban 1435.

⁷⁶ Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, *The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham*. In: Middle East Forum, January. 2014.

caliphate. IS will use *Zakat* (one of the five pillars of Islam) which is an obligatory payment required by the wealthy towards the poor, to eradicate poverty (which is usually given to a fighter's widow or to take care of orphans).⁷⁷ Furthermore, IS keeps on running the general health services and facilities provided by the previous Iraqi and Syrian governments and apparently still runs polio vaccinations in the region.⁷⁸

Education is also important for the caliphate, which runs schools that are open to both girls and boys, where children are bred with the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. The scholastic curriculum is very limited, having removed anything that might contrast with the *Qur'an*. As one of the interviewed in VICE's video said, the children are being implanted with the right doctrine.⁷⁹ Thus, the caliphate is risking to raise a generation with only theological knowledge and no scientific know-how. However, such decision is contradictory since IS recognizes the need of specialized people such as doctors or engineers, which are actively encouraged to migrate to IS territories.⁸⁰ Part of the IS education system are two training camps: the *Sharia* camp – meant for children under 15 years of age and that consists in further religious teachings – and the military camp, open to boys (the so-called *Cubs of the Caliphate*⁸¹) aged 16 and up, which prepares them to take part in future military operations.⁸²

Finally, IS issues its own official documents such as passports⁸³ and, allegedly, also birth certificates, as shown by a picture of a baby with his birth certificate on one side and a handgun and grenade on the other, circulating on Twitter.⁸⁴

Use of Propaganda as Part Of Warfare

Propaganda is another fundamental element for Islamic State's viability and warfare. The caliphate has a twofold propaganda strategy: one is directed internally and the other externally. Each strategy is accurately tailored according to the type of target it is intended for.

The inward-strategy is directed towards the populations that live in IS territories and its aim is proselytism. It goes hand-in-hand with the caliphate's state-building endeavors, and together they strive to win the hearts and minds of the population.

⁷⁷ Al-Khansaa Brigade, Women of the Islamic State, Translation and analysis by Charlie Winter, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

⁷⁸ Erlich, Reese, Despite Islamic State Presence, Polio Vaccinations Continue in Iraq, Take part, September 9, 2014. See:

<http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/09/11/despite-isis-polio-vaccinations-continue-iraq>

⁷⁹ Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014.

⁸⁰ Gambhir, Harleen K., Dabi q: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State, Institute for the Study of War, Backgrounders, August 15, 2014.

⁸¹ Porter, Tom, Isis pays parents for children to attend jihadist 'cub' camps, International Business Times, February 28, 2015. See: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-pays-parents-children-attend-jihadist-cub-camps-1489911>

⁸² Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014.

⁸³ ISIS allegedly issues 'caliphate' passport, Al Arabiya News, July 5, 2014. See: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/05/ISIS-allegedly-issues-caliphate-passport.html>

⁸⁴ Spencer, Robert, Photo of newborn with gun and grenade features Islamic State's first official birth certificate, Jihad Watch, April 27, 2015. See: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2015/04/photo-of-newborn-with-gun-and-grenade-features-islamic-states-first-official-birth-certificate>

Unlike the outward-strategy – which, as we will see, is carried out online – the inward-strategy is mostly perpetrated offline thus, vis-à-vis with the population. This offline propaganda consists in advertising the caliphate's statehood; in the indoctrination via the education system (targeting the little ones); and in the organization of the so-called *caliphate celebrations*,⁸⁵ which represent important recruiting opportunities. Moreover, Islamic State preaching centers are set up in Christian churches and other infrastructures, where proselytism and indoctrination are pursued through the narration of the caliphate's accomplishments – assisted by the showing of videos – by handing out printed material and invariably, by preaching about God and teach people about their religion. These preaching centers are also equipped with mobile units – preaching cars – that are deployed wherever there is a grouping of people.⁸⁶

To sum up, the inward-strategy targets the population in IS territories, to win its hearts and minds.

As the name suggests, the outward strategy's targets are situated outside the caliphate. Compared to the former strategy, this one is more complex and it represents a distinctive feature of IS in relation to other groups, such as al-Qaeda. The outward strategy is carried out online and this is due to tactical reasons, namely to reach its faraway targets, which are two: potential (western) followers and the enemy : the *Crusaders* and *Zionists*,⁸⁷ or more generally *the infidels*. Hence, in this case, the targets are two opposite categories, which thus require different messages.

To achieve its purposes, IS displays a deft use of social media which, due to its efficacy, has become a downright weapon, extensively deployed in the caliphate's ongoing war.

The rest of this work will focus precisely on social media and how it has become an essential part of warfare, skillfully used by one side (the caliphate) and naively underestimated by the other (the West) at first, and how it has recently been included as part of the war against IS.

⁸⁵ Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Farwell, James P., *The Media Strategy of ISIS*, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:6, 49-55, 2014.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA

For a more comprehensive understanding of the present work, this chapter will provide a brief insight on social media. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first one will explain the evolution of social media, its characteristics and how it works, while the second part will deal with the terrorists' use of social media and how it has become an essential part of their *modus operandi*.

The Revolution of Social Media

In order to understand what social media is and how it works, we must first define two fundamental elements: the *internet* and the *World Wide Web*.

The *internet*⁸⁸ is a global system of interconnected computer networks, with the purpose of sharing data. It is the result of a project – ARPANET – initiated in the early 1960s and financed by the DARPA.⁸⁹ The Internet does not offer services to users, but serves primarily to interconnect other networks on which services are located, such as basic services for electronic mail, the transfer of computer files, and high-level services including the World Wide Web.⁹¹

The *World Wide Web* is a computer-based information service developed at CERN⁹² in the early 1990s. It is precisely a digital space within the internet, destined to the publication of multimedia content (text, images, videos, audios etc.) and to implement certain services such as the download of software, programs, data, applications, videogames etc. It allows users to view and retrieve information from web pages containing links to other web pages(also pertaining to different web sites) , thus mimicking the structure of a spider's web.

Social media belongs to the phase of the evolution of the World Wide Web know as Web 2.0.

The first and precedent phase was that of Web 1.0, which began with the creation of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s and ended with the beginning of the new millennium. As the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Burners-Lee, defines it, Web 1.0 was a web of cognition. Specifically, it was read-only, mono-directional web, with limited user interactions or content contributions.

Web 2.0 is thus, the evolution of Web 1.0. If Web 1.0 was mono-directional, Web 2.0 was now bi-directional. Web 2.0 no longer was read-only, but a read-write web, where users could participate

⁸⁸ Interconnected Networks.

⁸⁹ American Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency.

⁹⁰ Leiner, Barry M., et al., A brief history of the internet, ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review, Volume 39, Number 5, October 2009.

⁹¹ Oxford, A dictionary of Physics (6 ed.), 2009. See: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199233991.001.0001/acref-9780199233991-e-1532#>

⁹² The European Organization for Nuclear Research (in French: Organisation Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire).

and collaborate in the creation and sharing of content: it was a wisdom web, in which users add value. This phase began in the early 2000s,⁹³ during which social media emerged thanks to the new breakthroughs.

The definition of social media is: “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)*.”⁹⁴ As mentioned, users are the main actors of social media, since they create and share content. Content varies in its forms, which can be text or multimedia (i.e. pictures, video, audio recordings) and it is created and shared in a vast array of social media platforms. Content can be the result of separate, individual users (e.g. blogs, videos on YouTube, etc.) or the simultaneous creation by many users (the so-called collaborative projects named wikis, specimen of which is Wikipedia).

Social media platforms vary according to their purpose and way of user interaction. The main categories are:

- *Inter-User Communication and Networking Platforms*, as the well-known social network Facebook, which serve to build and maintain relationships among users. People create online profiles with personal details and post updates that are shared with “friends” (that can be real friends, family or total strangers) and join interest-based, topic-related groups. Through *News Feed* users get information from friends to whom they are connected and from the pages they’ve liked;⁹⁶
- *Discussion Sites* such as *Blogs* (e.g. WordPress), are usually managed by one or few users only. The ‘managers’ create the main posts (entries) on which discussions, open to any user, will be centered on. In the blogging category, more precisely *micro-blogging*, we also find Twitter, a platform where registered users post publicly visible messages on their profile. These messages are called *tweets* and they are text-based messages of up to 140 characters. Users can subscribe to other users to receive their posts and they can also follow certain topics by using *hashtags* (#), which are used to flag posts as belonging to a certain topic or group;⁹⁷

⁹³ We are currently in the third phase of the World Wide Web evolution: Web 3.0, also known as Semantic Web, which entails a deeper human-machine cooperation.

⁹⁴ Kaplan, Andreas M.; Haenlein, Michael. *Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media*. Business horizons, 53.1: 59-68, 2010.

⁹⁵ To be considered as such, UGC must fulfill three requirements: it must be published on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site; it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; it needs to be a product created outside of professional routines and practices.

⁹⁶ Marcu, Mihaela; Bălteanu, Cristina. *Social Media—a Real Source of Proliferation of International Terrorism*. Annales Universitatis Apulensis-Series Oeconomica, 16.1, 2014.

⁹⁷ Dean, Geoff et al., *The dark side of social media : review of online terrorism*. Pakistan Journal of Criminology, 3(3), pp. 103-122, 2012.

- *Collaborative Projects* as the afore-mentioned *wikis* – which embody the definition of “wisdom web” – are created mainly by a collaborative effort of the site visitors (users that add and update content);⁹⁸
- *Content Communities* which are media sharing platforms and differ whether they are pictures (e.g. Instagram, Pinterest), audios or videos (e.g. YouTube). On YouTube, users upload videos that are publicly viewed and shared around the world, and registered members have the possibility to subscribe to another user’s YouTube channel, receiving alerts whenever new videos are uploaded.⁹⁹

Social media has revolutionized the field of communication making it global, decentralized and instant.

The cost to participate in the World Wide Web, hence to use social media, is relatively low and this allows a true mass participation: as a matter of fact, today, internet users are more than 3 billion, around 42% of the global population.¹⁰⁰ Anyone possessing a PC or mobile device with access to internet is a user and has the possibility to actively participate in such an environment. It is thus a cheap and effective tool for mass communication.¹⁰¹

Information of any kind, from any part of the world is available and due to the vastness of the web, there is barely any control, hence allowing the upload and sharing of any kind of content – also illegal or offensive contents. This comes at very low risks, especially thanks to the anonymous nature of the internet. As a matter of fact, any person with a valid e-mail address can register in a social media platform, allowing a certain degree of anonymity depending on the extent of the user’s self-disclosure (the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information).¹⁰²

Interaction among users is easy, direct and instant, thanks to real-time communication systems like instant messaging applications or video chats. Social media has made the world a smaller place, cutting across geographical borders and language barriers, thus allowing high levels of interactions. Users have the possibility to expand their personal social networks, communicating with people that share common interests, political ideologies, etc. but whom they don’t know personally, by joining groups or communities.

One last fundamental feature is real-time UGC,¹⁰³ namely live documentation, be it written or under media form, of facts. This is important because social media has become a viable source of daily knowledge: for example, people keep themselves updated by “reading the news” on Twitter. Social

⁹⁸“Wiki.” Definition. See: <http://techterms.com/definition/wiki>

⁹⁹ Dean, Geoff et al., *The dark side of social media : review of online terrorism*. Pakistan Journal of Criminology, 3(3), pp. 103-122, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ "World Internet Users Statistics and 2014 World Population Stats. See: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

¹⁰¹ Dean, Geoff et al., *The dark side of social media : review of online terrorism*. Pakistan Journal of Criminology, 3(3), pp. 103-122, 2012.

¹⁰² Kaplan, Andreas M.; Haenlein, Michael. *Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media*. Business horizons, 53.1: 59-68, 2010.

¹⁰³ User Generated Content

media has replaced traditional media – newspapers and television – reason why, almost all newspapers and news channels have their Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

The possibility – thanks to social media – to communicate in real-time with many people at once, also allows big group mobilizations such as the well-known *Flash Mobs*.¹⁰⁴ Such short-notice collective mobilization is very important and it may be dangerous when used for deviant activities.

Moreover, social media has the ability to spread information at extraordinary speed, thanks to features like the *Retweet* on Twitter or the *share post* on Facebook. These mechanisms empower users to spread information of their choice beyond the reach of the original *tweet*'s or post's followers.¹⁰⁵

The following table summarizes the main differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (as well as the main features of social media).

	Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Content	Read (consume/ download)	Read and write (create/ upload)
	Owning of content(top – down)	Sharing of content(bottom – up)
	Focused on Companies	Focused on Communities/ Crowds
	The information displayed is mostly static and the data is only updated once in a while	The information is very dynamic and the rate that information is updated is extremely fast
Technology	Client-server network (server fulfills client's service requests)	Peer to peer (each party has the same capabilities as the other)
	Computer software	Web applications
	Home Pages	Blogs/profiles/Wikis
	Wire (PC)	Wireless (Mobile Devices)
	Asynchronous (e.g. e-mail)	Synchronous (e.g. live chats)
Security	Webmaster has control of the content (One source of information)	Users have control of the content (multiple sources)
	Taxonomy (structural organization)	Tagging (keywords used to describe an article or website. Tags are often used in social bookmarking, social news and blog entries to help users search for relevant content) ¹⁰⁶

However, there are consequences to this evolution. The same technology that has facilitated the world's communication is also exploited for the purposes of terrorism.

¹⁰⁴ Flash Mobs are large public gatherings of people, usually organized by means of the internet and social media, for various purposes.

¹⁰⁵ Ishengoma, Fredrick Romanus, *Online Social Networks and Terrorism 2.0 in Developing Countries*, International Journal of Computer Science & Network Solutions, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 2013.

¹⁰⁶ Nations, Daniel. *The Definition of Tag, Tagging and Tag Clouds*.. See: http://webtrends.about.com/od/glossary/g/tag_def.htm

The Revolution of Social Media for Terrorist Organizations

Given the Web's global inclusiveness, also terrorist organizations have benefited from its evolution and thus take advantage of the decentralized nature of the Web 2.0, its low levels of control and restrictions, and its free access.

Before the advent of Web 2.0, terrorist groups like al-Qaeda had few and restricted means to spread their messages and connect with sympathizers and supporters. The rigid structure of Web 1.0 allowed a one-sided communication system, where users could only read information provided on websites. There were online chats, but they had restricted access, so it was more of an elitist communication: participants needed to know where to go as well as have connections to someone who could have recommended them to gain access with a password.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the upload of media content, such as videos, was impossible. In fact, al-Qaeda relied on traditional media channels to disseminate multimedia content, namely his appearances. Videos such as the claim of responsibility for the 9/11 attacks were sent to Al Jazeera Television station, which would then broadcast them. This meant that the dissemination of material depended on a third party and it was vulnerable to censorship and changes.

However, Web 2.0 drastically changed the situation. Terrorists don't rely on mainstream media anymore, since they have the means to spread whatever content they wish to and reach whomever they want, whenever they need. To be more precise, there has been a downright reversal of roles: mainstream media now relies on UGC disseminated on social media for news and real-time coverage.

The importance of the use of the Web (and social media) is such that, in 2012, jihadist forums have published a comprehensive paper on *electronic jihad* in which was stated that:

*"[...] any Muslim who intends to do jihad against the enemy electronically, is considered in one way or another a mujahidin, as long as he meets the conditions of jihad such as the sincere intention and the goal of serving Islam and defending it, even if he is far away from the battlefield. He is thus participating in jihad indirectly as long as the current contexts require such jihadi participation that has effective impact on the enemy."*¹⁰⁸

This is an important statement since a *mujahidin* is whoever is engaged in jihad and it is thus, a divine status yearned for by many. Furthermore, such statement promotes the use of the web to an official mean of warfare.

¹⁰⁷ Klausen, Jytte. *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, ahead-of-print: 1-22. 2014.

¹⁰⁸ *Jihadist Gives Analysis of Electronic Jihad*. See: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/jihadist-gives-analysis-of-electronic-jihad.html>

Electronic jihad entails activities such as propaganda, fundraising, psychological warfare, training, planning, data mining and cyber-attacks, which are essential for terrorists' viability. Social media has drastically facilitated their performance thanks to its vast range of platforms. This variety allows terrorists groups to select and use the most appropriate means to fulfill their needs.

Propaganda includes recruitment, radicalization, incitement to terrorism and spread of terror (psychological warfare). It is the dissemination of multimedia content which provides ideological or practical instructions, explanations, justifications and promotion of terrorist activities¹⁰⁹ and it is aimed at different audiences, namely sympathizers and potential sympathizers on one hand, and the enemies on the other. The presence of multiple audiences requires the creation of different messages to send out, and different approaches. For example, Facebook is ideal to reach potential recruits and sympathizers. Terrorist groups can view people's profiles to decide whom to target and how to approach each individual.¹¹⁰ They act like marketing companies and use the strategy known as *narrowcasting*, which is the communication and dissemination of information tailored to match preferences, values and inclinations of particular groups or individuals.

Propaganda aimed at sympathizers also has fundraising aims. Terrorists disseminate fundraising materials on social media instructing supporters to transfer funds to accounts linked to the organization.¹¹¹ An example is a 2013 Qatar-based campaign featured on Twitter, that called for donations to "Arm the Mujahidin." The solicitation included contact names and phone numbers, and wire transfer instructions for international transfers.¹¹² Usually, after receiving the donations, the groups utilize social media platforms to express gratitude for donations and highlight the use of the funds (usually for the purchase of artillery).¹¹³

Psychological warfare instead, consists in disseminating uncensored, gruesome pictures and videos of their activities (for example YouTube, has little control and its content is removed only after it has been reported by other users), and it targets the enemies with the purpose of spreading terror.

The content may be developed by the terrorist organizations themselves (official channels) or by dislocated sympathizers (unofficial channels),¹¹⁴ and it is spread throughout the various existing platforms or their own websites.

Amidst such content there is also "teaching" material, namely practical guides with instructions are freely available as manuals, audios and videos. This is a very important feature because it allows

¹⁰⁹ UNODC, *The use of the internet for terrorist purposes*, 2012. See: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2012/October/unodc-launches-report-to-assist-member-states-to-counter-the-use-of-the-internet-for-terrorist-purposes.html>

¹¹⁰ Weimann, Gabriel, *New Terrorism and New Media*. Wilson Center Common Labs, 2014.

¹¹¹ Sanctions Intelligence Update, *Social Media and Illicit finance: a look at the conflict in Syria*. The Camstoll Group. August 12, 2014.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Weimann, Gabriel, *New Terrorism and New Media*. Wilson Center Common Labs, 2014.

terrorist organizations to train people transcending physical geographical barriers. An unfortunate example of this potential is the Boston Marathon bombing of April 15, 2013. The young terrorists responsible for the act, had manufactured pressure-cooker bombs following the instructions found in a feature of Al-Qaeda's online magazine, *Inspire*.¹¹⁵

In addition to training, social media also help to plan and coordinate attacks thanks to its immediacy, thus making the attacks more effective, or to exchange urgent communications, preparing for attacks believed to be aimed at themselves.¹¹⁶

Essential for planning and coordination is data mining – the collection of relevant strategic information – which is usually the result of cyber-attacks, namely the deliberate exploitation of computer networks to launch attacks. Moreover, such attacks intend to disrupt the proper functioning of targets, which can be computer systems or the infrastructures that depend on them, through the use of hacking, computer viruses and other means of unauthorized and malicious access.¹¹⁷ However, data-mining and cyber-attacks are beyond the scope of social media.

Thus, terrorists now have a valuable weapon to use and it seems that they are making a deft use of it.

¹¹⁵ Associated Press, Al Qaeda magazine on pressure cookers: '*Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom*', The Washington Times, April 16, 201. See: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/16/al-qaeda-magazine-pressure-cookers-make-bomb-kitch/>

¹¹⁶ Weimann, Gabriel, *New Terrorism and New Media*. Wilson Center Common Labs, 2014.

¹¹⁷ UNODC, *The use of the internet for terrorist purposes*, 2012. See: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2012/October/unodc-launches-report-to-assist-member-states-to-counter-the-use-of-the-internet-for-terrorist-purposes.html>

3. IS AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

IS has fully embraced the notion of *electronic jihad*, inasmuch as it has developed well-structured and comprehensive *Information Operations* (IO), as key features of its belligerency. Unlike other terrorist groups, IS has proven to be a capable and skillful user of the Web 2.0, transforming social media from a mere tool to an out-and-out weapon. Adjusting Von Clausewitz's famous words to our context, cyber activity is the continuation of war with other means.¹¹⁸

This came as a surprise for the caliphate's enemies, which found themselves in the middle of, and unprepared for, what can be considered the first "social media war."¹¹⁹ This means that, in addition to a military response, the IS crisis also calls for a tailored social media strategy.

For the time being, IS seems to be winning this social media war, using the West's media tools and techniques against them¹²⁰ since international counterterrorism measures still have to adapt to the new threats introduced by social media.

Strategic Targets and Objectives

The caliphate's information warfare has a twofold target: "friends" – sympathizers and supporters (actual or potential) – and "foes", the infidels, which comprise the West, Israel, Shiite Muslims and in general whoever doesn't adhere to IS's ideology.

The twofold audience reflects the division in two categories of the various strategic objectives of the caliphate's narratives. On one hand, the caliphate intends to attract and lure the so-called friends, while on the other it wants to spread terror amongst its enemies.

However, the differentiation between friends and foes isn't so simple. Within each category, there are subgroups, depending on their geographical location, which correspond to the frontlines mentioned in chapter one (i.e. interior theater, near abroad theater and far abroad theater). The 'friends' category, includes the populations living in IS territories ('coerced friends'), supporters living in near countries (Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, etc.) and supporters living in Europe, the US, Australia and so on. Foes, instead, are the Syrian and Iraqi governments with their relative armies, neighboring states and the West.

¹¹⁸ Lupo, Stefano, *Cyber Isis: la Strategia Mediatica del Califfato*, Intelligence and Fraud Investigation, Cyber Defense Symposium 2015.

¹¹⁹ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹²⁰ Rose, Steve, The Isis propaganda war: a hi-tech media jihad, The Guardian, October 7, 2014. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/07/isis-media-machine-propaganda-war>

The ultimate goal of IS is to create a vast state – a caliphate – in which all the believers can live under the rule of the *Sharia*. Along with military action to seize territories, propaganda is fundamental, if not vital, for the very existence of the caliphate.

Propaganda consists in the promotion of such caliphate and its ideology, in the attempt to increase the number of sympathizers and supporters around the world; raise funds; recruit new fighters to enlarge its ranks; and lure people to make *hijrah* (emigrate) in IS territories to expand the population, hence increasing the number of those that are there by will and not by coercion (i.e. the local populations subjected to the caliphate). The caliphate promises free housing, food supply and monthly allowance for those wishing to move there.¹²¹

Moreover, with regards to the populations living *in loco*, IS wants to give the population the perception of an accountable and transparent authority¹²²(a minimum support from local populations is required for the viability of the caliphate).

Thus, the main purposes of propaganda are – aside from funding – radicalization, indoctrination, socialization, and recruitment. The main targets of such narratives are young individuals – usually in their teens or early twenties – both males and females, which come from well-off environments and are usually in the secondary or higher education stage. They are either Muslims by birth or, a majority of them, are converts. Converts represent a very fertile ground for terrorists since, Berger and Stern write “*they are particularly vulnerable to fundamentalist ideas, often combining wild enthusiasm with a lack of knowledge about their new religion, making them susceptible to recruiters.*”¹²³

It is important to note that the ‘first sparks’ of ‘introductory’ radicalization take place offline, in places like Mosques or universities.¹²⁴ However, the internet, hence social media, acts as a catalyst to the process¹²⁵ by providing easy access to streams of indoctrination, teachings and socialization.¹²⁶ Socialization is the process through which an individual learns how to be a member of a particular group or society.¹²⁷ The caliphate draws on these young people’s quest for identity, by offering them to be part of the *Ummah* – the whole community of Muslims – thus providing them with a sense of identity.

¹²¹ Hoyle, Carolyn, et al., *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

¹²² Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹²³ Berger, J.M. et al., *Why Are Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS?*, Defense One, March 8, 2015. See: <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/03/why-are-foreign-fighters-joining-isis/106962/>

¹²⁴ Hussain, Ghaffar, Erin M. Saltman, *Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter It*, Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹²⁵ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Fulcher, James and John Scott, *Sociology*, Oxford, 4 ed. 2011.

Online socialization plays a fundamental role within the process of radicalization, by solidifying extremist ideologies and ideas. It allows individuals to immerse themselves in “an online world which supports the Islamist extremist agenda without incorporating any rational or mainstream counter-narrative.”¹²⁸ Such individuals are perfused with ideological and identity narratives that draw on the impulsiveness of the young people: narratives of adventures on the battlefield for boys and romantic adventures for girls (they are usually promised to marry a *mujahidin*), narratives of life in a “Muslim Utopia,”¹²⁹ in which one can find a strong sense of camaraderie, sisterhood¹³⁰ and brotherhood.¹³¹

These young people are, in the strictest sense of the word, being groomed. At such an early and troublesome age it is easy to influence them, especially by taking advantage of their insecurities and luring them with promises of adventurous lives¹³² and romance with a “real” Muslim man.¹³³

However, there are other narratives, aimed at an older audience, which draw on deeper emotional aspects such as grievances, the sense of persecution among Muslims, and the duty to join, as a humanitarian mission, the fight against the West along fellow Muslims.¹³⁴ In VICE’s documentary,¹³⁵ a man who moved from Belgium to the caliphate with his young son, was featured crying when talking of how the West invaded their territories, captured their women and orphaned their children.

Concerning the enemies instead, the main the purpose of its message is to spread terror. IS wants to intimidate and deter its enemies (especially its close enemies such as Iraqi/ Syrian soldiers and rival jihadist factions) and gain international attention and visibility which serves to amplify their actual size and strength, thus making them more alarming. Moreover, the brutality they use to terrorize, fosters a violent reaction of the West towards a generalized enemy which unfortunately, out of ignorance, is characterized by the fact of being Muslim.¹³⁶ This in turn fuels the afore mentioned grievances of certain Muslims, which are encouraged to join the ranks of IS to expand the caliphate.

To fulfill such diverse objectives, thus diffuse such different narratives, Islamic State has developed a complex apparatus which seems, so far, to have yielded the desired results.

¹²⁸ Hussain, Ghaffar, Erin M. Saltman, *Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter It*, Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹²⁹ Ahmed, Beenish, *How A Teenage Girl Goes From Listening To Coldplay And Reading Harry Potter To Joining ISIS*, ThinkProgress, February 24, 2015. See: <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/02/24/3626720/women-isis/>

¹³⁰ Hoyle, Carolyn, et al., *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

¹³¹ Platt Usher, Barbara, *The US state department's YouTube 'digital jihad'*, BBC, November 28, 2014. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30045038>

¹³² Milevsky, Avidan, *Why Are Teens Joining ISIS?*, The World, August 9, 2014. See: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/avidan-milevsky/why-are-teens-joining-isi_b_5773668.html

¹³³ Ahmed, Beenish, *How A Teenage Girl Goes From Listening To Coldplay And Reading Harry Potter To Joining ISIS*, ThinkProgress, February 24, 2015. See: <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2015/02/24/3626720/women-isis/>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Video Documentary, *The Islamic State (Full Length)*, VICE News, December 26, 2014.

¹³⁶ Maggioni, Monica and Paolo Magri, *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale (ISPI), 2015.

IS's Propaganda Machine

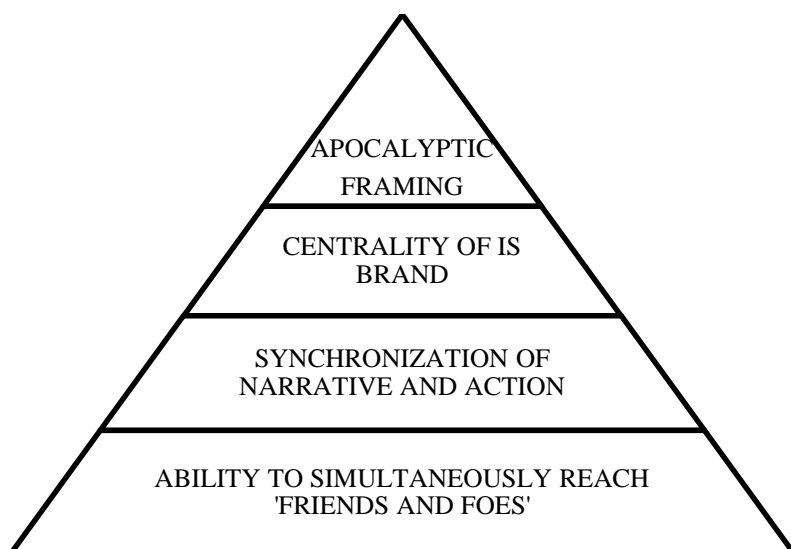
Unlike other terrorist groups, IS has been the first one to transform the use of Web 2.0, from a mere asset to an integral part of its war.

In fact, IS has invested enormous resources – both human and financial – creating a well-developed, well-organized and complex propaganda apparatus,¹³⁷ such that it has been defined the gold standard of propaganda in terms of the quality and quantity of content produced.¹³⁸

The effectiveness of such apparatus depends on the cumulative impact of four traits¹³⁹ that characterize the caliphate's information warfare, which are:

- The ability to simultaneously reach friends and foes;
- The synchronization of narrative and action;
- The centrality of the IS brand;
- The apocalyptic framing of its messages.

Each of these traits enshrines different nuts and bolts of such machine.



¹³⁷ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, *ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization*, November 26, 2014.

¹³⁸ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹³⁹ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

Ability to Simultaneously Reach “Friends and Foes”

As mentioned, the caliphate’s information warfare has a twofold target: “friends and foes.” To simultaneously address the strategic objectives relative to each of the audiences, IS has adopted a multidimensional, multi-lingual and multi-platform approach.

The availability of such diversity is due to the fact that production and dissemination of information and media depend on the interaction between official and unofficial outlets.

The official outlets are those that operate under the well disciplined and well organized Media Council (top-down approach), whereas the unofficial outlets are composed of the supporters and sympathizers of IS, which operate independently of the caliphate’s directives (bottom-up initiatives).

The interplay between a rigid and controlled structure on one hand and a free and spontaneous one on the other, allow the caliphate’s narratives to acquire three fundamental factors that benefit its objectives. The first one is *reach*, which is the ability of a message to access an audience (the wider the reach, the bigger the audience). *Relevance*, instead, depends on the timeliness of the message and its significance within the context of socio-cultural and situational factors,¹⁴⁰ and it is the importance of a certain message. Finally, *resonance* is the interaction the audience has with the content published, namely how the content influences their perceptions.

Official Channels

The caliphate has a Media Council, which is the entity that oversees the overall media effort of IS.¹⁴¹ Under the control of the Media Council operate propaganda centers, responsible for producing the official multimedia content of the caliphate.

Amidst these production entities, two are worth mentioning for the purpose of this work:

- The al-Furqan Institute for Media Production is the caliphate’s oldest media branch(established in 2006)¹⁴² and its official media bureau.¹⁴³ One of the main features of the institute is that it receives its material directly from the caliphate’s leadership. In fact, it was al-Furqan that released the video of the first – and so far only – public appearance of the caliph al-Baghdadi, in early July 2014.

¹⁴⁰Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State’s Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁴¹ Barret, Richard, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, October 28, 2014.

¹⁴² Under what was then Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

¹⁴³ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization, November 26, 2014.

- The al-Hayat Media Center, instead, was founded after the caliphate's establishment and it produces content destined mainly to western audiences. It is a multilingual recruitment channel which provides a large selection of media material, destined to attract potential foreign recruits.¹⁴⁴ An example are the so-called 'Mujatweets' which are short videos promoting life under IS.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the videos, the caliphate also releases various publications in PDF format:

- The Islamic State News (ISN), a six-pages long propagandistic commentary in English about day-to-day events;
- The Islamic State Report (ISR)¹⁴⁶, which features articles on the caliphate's events and agendas;
- The Dabiq,¹⁴⁷ a lengthy online magazine (similar to al-Qaeda's own magazine, Inspire), which is designed to attract recruits, by justifying the caliphate's actions as well as encouraging to make the journey to join the State. It is written in several languages such as English French and German.¹⁴⁸

These production centers are the central multimedia nodes from which IS meticulously and skillfully prepares its official content.

The quality of their productions are something never seen before. They use the latest technologies to create very high resolution images and videos (both short and hour-long). They shoot using cameras such as the popular *go-pro* camera and drones,¹⁴⁹ for dramatic aerial shots, and they shoot with multiple cameras to capture different angles. This material is then proficiently edited to create Hollywood-style products¹⁵⁰ complete with soundtracks (pro-jihadi *nasheeds*¹⁵¹).

As we can see, the differentiation of audiences is central to the production of content, not only regarding the subjects but also the way they are edited, including graphic or less graphic scenes. For example, the series of beheading videos targeting the West¹⁵² didn't have the actual beheading scenes so that could be easily shown on televisions without being censored.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁴ Barret, Richard, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, October 28, 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Also known as *An insight into the Islamic State*.

¹⁴⁷ Dabiq is a town in northern Syria and according to Apocalyptic Muslim myths, it is the location of one of the final battles.

¹⁴⁸ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Bartlett, Jamie, Ali, Fisher, *How to beat the media mujahideen* Demos Quarterly, March 20, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Terror Asymmetries Project on Strategy, Tactics and Radical Ideologies (TAPSTR), *Jihadi Selfies and the Thrill Kill Cult: The Evolution of AQ/ISIL Media Machine*, March 1, 2015. See: <http://thetacticsofterror.org/jihadi-selfies-the-evolution-of-isil-media/>

¹⁵¹ A *nasheed* is an Arabic chant.

¹⁵² 'A Message to America'; 'A Second Message to America'; 'A Message to the Allies of America'; and 'A Message to America and its Allies'

¹⁵³ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

Another example of such targeted productions is the video-game style footage called “Grand Theft Auto: Salil al-Sawarim.”¹⁵⁴ It targets the young and it aims to train them to become *jihadis*. The sophisticated use of CGI (Computer-generated imagery) gives the sense of a first-hand experience of combat, with IS flags in the background and characters shouting “Allahu Akbar!” Luckily, an actual playable version of the game has not been seen yet.¹⁵⁵

The differentiation of productions is thus tailored according to the position of the audience vis-à-vis the caliphate (friends or foes), the age of the audience, their geographical origin (the West or neighboring African and Middle Eastern States) and, as we will see, on their gender.

The content produced is then released on the Caliphate’s official accounts and websites, which are indeed, the same of the production entities. Such websites are accessible on the web and they can be seen as baskets from which secondary outlets take the material to diffuse (disseminating the links to the content by re-posting, re-tweeting and sharing them). While IS maintains monopoly of the creation of the message and narrative, it exploits a crowd-sourced diffusion of it.

This is the case for the regional or provincial accounts which, in addition, post live reports from strikes and use localized messaging, targeting local populations,¹⁵⁶ obviously under the Media Council supervision. In fact, each province – *Waliya* – of the caliphate has a local press office which operates under the main department. Moreover, IS uses such channels to promote its authority and legitimacy to locals, also thanks to the aforementioned reports (ISN and ISR).

Until now, we’ve seen official websites and accounts on the various social media platforms. However, the caliphate also heavily relies on individual, yet still official, channels. These are selected groups of women and fighters¹⁵⁷ which are allowed to diffuse self-produced images and videos of their daily lives under the caliphate or frontline scenes from the battleground, which are obviously centrally verified and approved.

These are selected groups, usually composed of foreign fighters, *mujahidin*, as denoted by their epithet which usually indicates their country of origin (e.g. al-Britani “the Briton,” al-Canadi “the Canadian,” al-Australi...) and women, *muhajirat* (female migrant – or *Umm* – a honorific name used to address women),¹⁵⁸ which are sometimes the foreign fighters’ wives.

¹⁵⁴ Which roughly translates in Arabic as “the sound of swords coming together”.

¹⁵⁵ *Grand Theft Auto ISIS: Islamic State Video Game Trailer Targets Youth*, RT/ AL Arabiya, September 2104. See: <http://leaksource.info/2014/09/21/grand-theft-auto-isis-islamic-state-video-game-trailer-targets-youth/>

¹⁵⁶ Nisse, Thomas Elkjer, *Terror.com – IS’s Social Media Warfare in Syria and Iraq*, Military Studies Magazine, Contemporary Conflicts, Royal Danish Defence College, Issue 2, Vol. 2, 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Klausen, Jytte. *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, ahead-of-print: 1-22. 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Their messages – first-hand reports – are specifically intended to reach western audiences and their content varies from religious instructions to reports from the battle, from interpersonal communications to threats against the West, and basic “tourism” information on life in the caliphate.¹⁵⁹ They usually employ Twitter – which is IS’s absolute favorite platform – and to a lesser extent, Facebook and Instagram.

Women are also very present on Ask.fm, which is a social networking platform based on a question-and-answer interaction, which can be anonymous. Such platform is used especially to ask specific question on how to reach IS territories¹⁶⁰ and what to pack for the trip, or in general to seek advice for migrating to the caliphate.

The Role of Women

Women play a very important role in the caliphates’ propaganda, both as targets and disseminators.

Unlike other groups such as al-Qaeda, IS has devoted efforts and resources to recruit and articulate a place for women.¹⁶¹ Women are essential for the existence of the caliphate, for the mere reason that they are the key to population growth. Thus, female migration is highly encouraged.

Clearly, the differentiation of content mentioned before (geographical and generational) applies also within the category of women. When interacting with western women and girls, the message IS conveys is one of empowerment. Muslim women in the West are often seen as victims of their religion for the various obligations envisaged by their religion. IS in turn, presents women – in a patriarchal way – as pillars of the caliphate, for their being mothers and wives of the fighters. As Rafia Zakaria points out, Western women’s act of joining IS can be seen as “a militant rebellion against the enduring Western construction of the Muslim woman as the lesser feminist.”¹⁶²

With regards to women coming from neighboring countries, especially those in the Arabian Peninsula, the message is one of rectitude against the corruption of mores in those countries, due to their Westernization.¹⁶³

In January 2015, the media wing of the al-Khanssaa Brigade (described right under), released a document titled “Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study.” Such document was intended to draw

¹⁵⁹ Klausen, Jytte. *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, ahead-of-print: 1-22. 2014.

¹⁶⁰ Hoyle, Carolyn, et al., *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

¹⁶¹ Zakaria, Rafia, *ISIL’s feminine mystique*, Al Jazeera America, March 24, 2015. See: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/3/isils-feminine-mystique.html>

¹⁶² Zakaria, Rafia, *ISIL’s feminine mystique*, Al Jazeera America, March 24, 2015. See: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/3/isils-feminine-mystique.html>

¹⁶³ Al-Khanssaa Brigade, *Women of the Islamic State*, Translation and analysis by Charlie Winter, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

women from countries in the region as confirmed by the fact that it remained unnoticed by the western audience, until it was translated by the Quilliam Foundation.¹⁶⁴

Even though the primary function for women is the household, it is sometimes allowed for them to leave the house if they are going to study theology; if they are women's doctors or teachers or if it has been ruled by fatwa that they must fight, engage in jihad because the situation of the *Ummah* has become desperate.¹⁶⁵

However, for those women without husbands, it is possible to join the al-Khanssaa Brigade, which is an all-female armed police equipped with infrastructures where women live separate from men. The Brigade was designated primarily as complementary forces to checkpoint male guards, to discover anti-IS male fighters disguising themselves as women, since IS members were reluctant to inspect under garments to verify the womanhood of the wearers.¹⁶⁶ The corps then extended its scope, and became a moral police in cities (also known as a propaganda group and recruitment organization),¹⁶⁷ fuelling the – false – concept of a nascent “jihadi girl power” subculture among the international female supporters. It is false because the aforementioned fatwa has not yet been issued, however there are hints that this might change at some point.

In fact, IS announced the establishment of a special institute named al-Zawra, which is designed to “prepare sisters for the battlefields for jihad”¹⁶⁸ and equip them with skills such as sewing and cooking, first aid, Islam and Sharia law, weaponry, and training in social media and computer programs for editing and design.¹⁶⁹ Skills which are necessary to support the caliphate and its fighters.

Moreover, al-Zawra has its own website and Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts from which women can download the tutorials to train on their own.

Unofficial Channels

Finally, we have arrived to the unofficial channels. These are composed of supporters and sympathizers of IS, which operate independently of the directives of the caliphate, but are unquestionably, a very valuable resource to IS. They download, re-post, re-tweet the official IS content, sometimes reworked or translated, or they upload their own creations (which are often of lower standards than IS-creations).

¹⁶⁴ Al-Khanssaa Brigade, *Women of the Islamic State*, Translation and analysis by Charlie Winter, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Gilsinan, Kathy, *The ISIS Crackdown on Women, by Women*, The Atlantic, July 25, 2014. See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>

¹⁶⁷ Al-Khanssaa Brigade, *Women of the Islamic State*, Translation and analysis by Charlie Winter, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Kulze, Elizabeth, *ISIS Opens A Jihadi Finishing School For Women*, Vocativ, October 17, 2014. See: <http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/isis-opens-jihadi-finishing-school-women/>

¹⁶⁹ Haaretz, *Cooking and Killing: Islamic State opens finishing school for girls*, October 18, 2014. See: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.621380>

Such unofficial channels represent nodal points for the caliphate's online activity since they amplify the reach of their messages and mutually influence each other.

Moreover, IS had developed and released an app¹⁷⁰ on the Google Play store,¹⁷¹ named "Dawn of Glad Tidings"(or "Fajr al-Bashaer").¹⁷² This app was designed to maximize the reach of IS messages on Twitter and get IS topics trending. Once subscribers downloaded and installed the app onto their smartphones, a centralized body of the caliphate could post tweets from the subscribers' personal Twitter account, synchronizing them with other IS supporters without the user having to do anything,¹⁷³ flooding Twitter with IS propaganda without triggering its spam-detection algorithms.¹⁷⁴ However, this app was reported to Google which removed such app shortly after.

It is important to note that among these independent channels, are some Islamist preachers, that have outspoken their support for the caliphate. Some examples are Australian Musa Cerantonio,¹⁷⁵ American preacher (of Palestinian origins) Ahmadd Musa Jibril or British Anjam Choudary.¹⁷⁶ Such support has important implications for the radicalization process because they have established themselves as reliable sources of information providing both moral and political support to IS.¹⁷⁷

Hackers

Among the online supporters of the caliphate, we also find groups of hackers. This category is of extreme importance since it has a disruptive power which empowers IS in the eyes of its enemies.

The aim of these groups is to take over major media, government, business and school websites, defacing their websites and accounts (usually with images of fighters holding IS's black flag) and phrases that usually say "Hacked by Islamic State" or they hijack their social media accounts, temporarily controlling them to further spread their messages.¹⁷⁸

Some of these groups are Cyber Caliphate, the Islamic State Hacking Division, Terrorists Team for Electronic Jihad, and AnonGhost, a Palestinian hacktivist¹⁷⁹ group that attacks Israeli websites.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁰ An *app* is an application downloaded by a user on a mobile device.

¹⁷¹ Google Play store is a digital distribution platform operated by Google, which serves as the official app store for the Android operating system.

¹⁷² Ajbaili, Mustapha, *How ISIS conquered social media*, Al Arabiya News, June 24, 2014. See: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/06/24/How-has-ISIS-conquered-social-media.html>

¹⁷³ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹⁷⁴ Veilleux-Lepage, Yannick, *Retweeting the Caliphate: The Role of Soft-Sympathizers in the Islamic State's Social Media Strategy*, 6th International Symposium on Terrorism and Transnational Crime. Antalya, Turkey. December 4-7, 2014.

¹⁷⁵ Saltman, Erin M., and Charlie Winter, *Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism*. Quilliam Foundation, 2014.

¹⁷⁶ Maggioni, Monica and Paolo Magri, *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale (ISPI), 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Carter, Joseph et al., *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2014.

¹⁷⁸ BatBlue, the Cloud Security Company, *Terror goes cyber: the Cyber Strategies and Capabilities of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram*, Bat Blue Special Report, April 2015.

¹⁷⁹ Hacktivism (portmanteau of hack and activism) is the act of hacking for political or social motivations.

Examples of launched attacks are the wave of cyber-attacks on about 19,000 French websites occurred right after the attacks in Paris in January 2015 (the so-called cyber-tail),¹⁸¹ the hacking of the U.S. Military Central Command's (CENTCOM) YouTube and Twitter accounts or the alarming release of a list of some 100 U.S. military service members – complete with their pictures, names and home address, obtained using the information featured on the social media profiles of the victims¹⁸² – with an appeal to lone wolves to “deal with them.”¹⁸³

We have seen how the variety of outlets assures a constant flow of information, making IS omnipresent on the internet, extending its reach (such ubiquity is also fruit of the ample coverage by western media, which will be discussed later on). The diversity of content and its related messages, ranging from violent threats (beheading videos), to battlefield images and everyday life scenes, ensures that the narrative remains relevant and that its broad reach doesn't dilute such relevance.¹⁸⁴ Finally, as a result of its wide reach and high relevance, IS Information Operations also have a very high degree of influence: resonance. This is true especially if we think about those lone-wolf terrorists that – swayed and incited to attack the enemies – link themselves to IS and carry attacks such as the infamous Paris kosher market attack and the most recent one in Garland, Texas.¹⁸⁵

Thus, we have seen how IS maneuvers its IOs to simultaneously hit “friends and foes.” The ample reach of the caliphate's narrative is due to its army of users, which is estimated to be composed of several thousands of supporters, both in and out of IS territories.¹⁸⁶

Synchronization of Narrative And Action

Such trait is fundamental for the aforementioned resonance. Speed is an essential feature of Web 2.0 and social media allow real-time communication and documentation of events. This enables a synchronization of narrative and action (be it military or political) which serves multiple purposes.

First of all, it provides truthfulness to what they claim. With regard to local populations, this helps to strengthen its legitimacy. Hence they accompany any social service provided with the appropriate multimedia proof, to give out the perception of an accountable and transparent authority.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁰ BatBlue, the Cloud Security Company, *Terror goes cyber: the Cyber Strategies and Capabilities of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram*, Bat Blue Special Report, April 2015.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Belyeu, Jeremiah, *Cyber jihad waged against military via social media*, Blue Force Tracker, March 25, 2015. See: <http://www.blueforcetracker.com/article/Cyber-jihad-waged-against-military-via-social-media>

¹⁸³ BatBlue, the Cloud Security Company, *Terror goes cyber: the Cyber Strategies and Capabilities of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram*, Bat Blue Special Report, April 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁸⁵ Two gunmen, one of which apparently affiliated to IS fired outside a controversial Muhammed-cartoons event in Texas. Shoichet, Catherine and Michael Pearson, *Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets*, CNN, May 5, 2015. See:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/04/us/garland-mohammed-drawing-contest-shooting/>

¹⁸⁶ Berger, J.M, Jonathan, Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter*, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper, No. 20, March 2015.

This is true also with regards to supporters. The correspondence between narrative and reality on the ground or the actions of the messengers themselves,¹⁸⁸ enables a high degree of trustworthiness in what they communicate, hence increasing the degree of resonance of such messages.

On the battlefield, instead, such synchronization is used as a tool of psychological warfare. Various productions – multimedia and multilingual – are released to promote IS's military operations and successes, as the Islamic State Report titled "Islamic State Liberates the City of Mosul," published after the seize of Mosul. Moreover, fighters contribute to such strategy by giving real-time updates from the front-lines, with photos and videos. All this serves to magnify their actions thus, increasing their perceived threat.

Synchronization of narrative and action is also widely used for terrorist attacks carried out by lone wolves, first of all to claim the attacks – or even when the attack (successful or not) isn't affiliated to IS but is still of Islamic matrix¹⁸⁹ – there is the so-called *cyber-tail*, which is the surge in cyber activity, following geopolitical events.¹⁹⁰ This was the case after the Paris attacks in January 2015, when pro-IS hackers launched a wave of cyber-attacks on about 19,000 French websites, which amplified the effect of such event.

Finally, a last example of such trait of IS's information warfare is the use of *hashtag campaigns* (as the one started on June 19, 2014, called 'A billion Muslim the Islamic State')¹⁹¹ or the hijacking of trending hashtags,¹⁹² which is a way to piggyback onto popular trending conversations¹⁹³ (examples of hijacked hashtags are the ones used during the 2014 FIFA World Cup or the ones concerning the riots in Baltimore in April 2015).¹⁹⁴

Centrality of "IS' Brand"

IS doesn't leave anything to chance and each of its moves is highly calculated and analyzed. One of these strategic moves is the creation the 'IS' brand, which is embodied in the caliphate.

We've seen in chapter one, the many evolutions of the group that we now refer to as IS, and we've seen how there has been a name-change every time. Each name-change corresponded to the group's

¹⁸⁷ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Lupo, Stefano, *Cyber Isis: la Strategia Mediatica del Califfato*, Intelligence and Fraud Investigation, Cyber Defense Symposium 2015.

¹⁹⁰ BatBlue, the Cloud Security Company, *Terror goes cyber: the Cyber Strategies and Capabilities of Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al Shabaab and Boko Haram*, Bat Blue Special Report, April 2015.

¹⁹¹ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, *ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization*, November 26, 2014.

¹⁹² A *hashtag* is a word or phrase which is preceded by a hash sign (#), and it is used on social media platforms such as Twitter to identify messages on a specific topic (that is marked with the #).

¹⁹³ Barret, Richard, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, October 28, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ ISIS Fighters, Supporters Hijack #BaltimoreRiots Twitter Hashtag, Discuss Race Issues, Urge Attacks On Policemen, The Counter Jihad report, April 28, 2015. See: <http://counterjihadreport.com/2015/04/28/isis-fighters-supporters-hijack-baltimore-riots-twitter-hashtag-discuss-race-issues-urge-attacks-on-policemen/>

transformation, hence to the change of the strategic operational rationale that underpinned it.¹⁹⁵ These swings enshrined important statements such as the group's uniqueness and total independence from al-Qaeda Central (when it changed name from al-Qaeda in Iraq)¹⁹⁶ or as the sign of receptivity to the needs of its potential supporters – the extremist Sunni community – and its eternal commitment to fight the enemies.¹⁹⁷

The establishment of the caliphate is thus, the outcome of such “brand production.” It has been a strategic move that has surely been effective. Ideology and jurisprudence both compel Muslims to migrate towards the caliphate and defend it, and this in fact is the basis of their campaign.

The *Ummah* living under the borderless¹⁹⁸ caliphate is the partially achieved project that IS wants to complete: after all, its motto is “Remaining and expanding.” Promoting the caliphate as a real, successful State with a pure mission,¹⁹⁹ is definitely a distinctive trait of IS which has been essential for gaining support.

Thus amongst the many gruesome pictures, we find accounts of daily life in the caliphate and its statehood such as images of distribution of food or children in schools. Moreover, the IS flag – “the oneness flag”²⁰⁰ (rayat al-tawhid) or the “the flag of the caliphate”²⁰¹ – is omnipresent as the main symbol of the caliphate.

Apocalyptic Framing

IS ideology hinges upon apocalyptic Islamic theology. IS spices its messages and contents with loaded language, myths and strict ideology²⁰² which are fundamental for the fulfillment of its objectives.

They preach that the “End of Days” is forthcoming, a narrative that is omnipresent – an example is the title of IS's magazine, Dabiq – and which creates a sort of “imaginary world in which jihadist heroes prepare for the apocalypse.”²⁰³

¹⁹⁵ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁹⁶ Ligon, Gina S., et al., “*The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction*,” Final Report prepared for the Department of Homeland Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs, award number #2012-ST-061-CS0001. College Park, MD: START, 2014.

¹⁹⁷ Ingram, Haroro J. *Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*. The RUSI Journal, 159.6: 4-11, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ One of IS's infamous videos is titled the *End of Sykes-Picot*, which refers to the 1915 Treaty that divided the defeated Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces into areas under British or French influence.

¹⁹⁹ Ligon, Gina S., et al., “*The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture and Lethal Attraction*,” Final Report prepared for the Department of Homeland Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs, award number #2012-ST-061-CS0001. College Park, MD: START, 2014.

²⁰⁰ Oneness stands for the ‘Oneness of Allah’ (kalimat al-tawheed): “There is no god but Allah; Muhammad [is] the Messenger of Allah.”

²⁰¹ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, *ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization*, November 26, 2014.

²⁰² La Palm, Marita, Concerning Features of an Apocalyptic Cult in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Foreign Policy Journal, October 28, 2014. See: <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/10/28/concerning-features-of-an-apocalyptic-cult-in-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-the-levant-isil/>

²⁰³ Ibid.

Jihad is an eschatological battle between good and evil,²⁰⁴ and dying in the battle gives fighters the honorific title of *martyr* – or *shahid*²⁰⁵ – which comes with many virtues such as having a seat in Paradise or marrying seventy black eyed virgins.²⁰⁶ They believe they have been appointed by *Allah*, hence they are carrying out a divine duty.²⁰⁷ There is a reconceptualization of death as a transition from the earthly world to the next eternal one.²⁰⁸ Thus, as Wicktorowitz notes, “there is no life and death, but just ideology,”²⁰⁹ which drives jihadists to fight with no fear of death.

Such lack of fear entails a greater use of violence and brutality, as the many videos and images have documented, and it allows to carry out the – extreme - purification of the *Ummah*, not only from the infidels *kafir*, but also from the apostates, following the *takfiri* doctrine.²¹⁰ The use of such doctrine is one of the reasons why al-Qaeda has disavowed IS, since the main victims are Muslims.

However, the ideological message sent out to supporters outside IS territories – especially Western audiences – is more blunt than the stricter version imposed on the local population. This is to ensure the maximization of the reach of the message, making it more exportable and easier to absorb.²¹¹

Thus, we have seen the complexity of the caliphate’s Information Operations (IOs), which manage to target both friends and foes, with differentiated messages according to age, sex, and geographical origin. Its information warfare is multilingual, multidimensional, founded on ideology and the promotion of the caliphate and it uses all social media platforms available, with its absolute favorite remaining Twitter.

²⁰⁴ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *A Genealogy of Radical Islam*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28:75–97, 2005.

²⁰⁵ *The Concept of Martyrdom in Islam*. See: <http://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-12-1986/concept-martyrdom-islam/concept-martyrdom-islam>

²⁰⁶ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *A Genealogy of Radical Islam*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28:75–97, 2005.

²⁰⁷ CELSO, Anthony N. *Cycles of Jihadist Movements and the Role of Irrationality*. Orbis, 58.2: 229-247. 2014.

²⁰⁸ Torok, Robyn, *The Syrian Calling: Western Jihad Recruitment and Martyrdom*, Australian Counter Terrorism, Conference Security Research Institute Conferences, Edith Cowan University Research Online, 2013.

²⁰⁹ Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *A Genealogy of Radical Islam*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 28:75–97, 2005.

²¹⁰ Wood, Graeme, *What ISIS Really Wants*, the Atlantic, March 2015.

²¹¹ Lupo, Stefano, *Cyber Isis: la Strategia Mediatica del Califfato*, Intelligence and Fraud Investigation, Cyber Defense Symposium 2015.

4. WESTERN SOCIAL MEDIA ON IS

What Islamic State is conducting through its use of social media is a *war of ideas*.

The caliphate has invested a large part of its human and financial resources in order to control such perceptions, by crafting and promoting its narrative. Its Information Operations targeting the enemies aim to fulfill four objectives: find new supporters, recruit fighters and migrants, spread terror and amplify its force.

Currently, IS's deft use of social media has proved to be very effective, especially with regards to its Western audiences: about 4,000 foreign fighters have been recruited from Western countries²¹² (i.e. Western Europe, the US, Canada and Australia) and terror has been widely spread. Thus, IS seems to be winning the war of ideas, thanks to the hype of its meticulously constructed narrative. But is it really all thanks to its own capabilities?

In the opening speech for the 2014 Abu Dhabi Media Summit, Queen Rania of Jordan has said that IS has been using social media to rewrite the Arab world's narrative, giving their vision of the Arab world story to the world. She also said that the Arab world's silence is the biggest gift IS could receive, hence it is necessary to create a counter-narrative and broadcast it to the world.²¹³ However, the task of creating such counter-narrative doesn't only depend on the Arab world: it is everyone's duty to subvert the caliphate's message.

A further question then arises: has the West been using social media wrong?

The chapter will provide an answer to these two questions.

Comparison Between Western and Arab Media Portrayal of IS and its Spillover in Social Media

To win the war of ideas, one must control its enemy's perceptions. In this war we are witnessing, the media play the fundamental role of medium between the caliphate's narrative and the perceptions of its audiences. Thus, the way Islamic State is portrayed by the media is decisive in moulding the general perception of the caliphate and its threat.

Acknowledging that IS should, by no means be underestimated, it must neither be exaggerated. However, it seems that Western media is precisely doing so.

²¹² In total, the number of foreign fighters seems to exceed 20,000. Neumann, Peter R., *Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s*, ICSR, January 26, 2015. See: <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>

²¹³ Queen Rania Al Abdullah. See: <http://www.queenrania.jo/media/speeches/queen-rania-delivers-opening-speech-abu-dhabi-media-summit-2014>

The aim of the caliphate's psychological warfare is to create a syndrome of terror, but to do so, IS not only has to sell terror, but needs someone who buys it. As journalist and social media specialist, Fabio Chiusi said,²¹⁴ IS is taking advantage of the vulnerability of Western media system, which lies in its constant chase after the most spectacular news, of which the caliphate has shown to be a great producer. Thus, Western media not only buys the caliphate's terror narratives, but also acts as repeater and loudspeaker.²¹⁵

Where's the line between reporting and acting as an amplifier of such propaganda? Such line lies in the way news are released.²¹⁶

Journalism has changed in many ways with the advent of social media. From the moment in which everyone became a reporter by documenting an event and uploading their own UGC,²¹⁷ journalists have become "managers of an overabundance of content."²¹⁸ By managing, it is meant that journalists give authority to the content in question, by checking and verifying it: they "separate news from noise."²¹⁹ However content management is often sacrificed (or postponed) in the name of immediacy. Journalists seem to use social media as one of their main source of information,²²⁰ overlooking fact-checking for crowd-checking – which is the use and acceptance of public's opinion as true²²¹ – for the sake of real-time news.²²² People want real-time information so journalists respond to such demands.

Moreover, there has been a further change in the consumption of news: consumers now go online. People seem to prefer Facebook and Twitter – for their brief and direct character – to the traditional TV and newspapers, which are seen as additional means to get a deeper view to news.²²³ Consequently, real-time news are released on social media platforms – mostly on Twitter²²⁴ – which means that information is condensed in 140 characters.

²¹⁴Fabio Chiusi. Ricucci Amedeo, *ISIS: il Nemico Perfetto, Speciale TG1*. See: <http://www.rai.tv/dl/replaytv/replaytv.html?day=2015-05-17&ch=1&v=516057&vd=2015-05-17&vc=1#day=2015-05-17&ch=1&v=516057&vd=2015-05-17&vc=1>

²¹⁵ Gen. Fabio Mini. Ibid.

²¹⁶ Tinnes, Judith, *Although the (Dis-)Believers Dislike it: a Backgrounder on IS Hostage Videos*, Perspectives On Terrorism, Volume 9, Issue 1, August - December 2014.

²¹⁷ User Generated Content (UGC).

²¹⁸ Mark Little, Dredge, Stuart, *Social media, journalism and wars: 'Authenticity has replaced authority'*, November 5, 2014. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/05/social-media-journalism-wars-authenticity>

²¹⁹Chiusi Fabio, *ISIS propaganda: between social media and God*, International Journalism Festival, February 19, 2015. See: <http://www.journalismfestival.com/news/isis-propaganda-between-social-media-and-god/>

²²⁰ ING, *2014 Study impact of Social Media on News: more crowd-checking, less fact-checking*, 2014. See: <http://www.ing.com/Newsroom/All-news/NW/2014-Study-impact-of-Social-Media-on-News-more-crowdchecking-less-factchecking.htm>

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ingram, Mathew, *Social media and breaking news: Why authenticity trumps authority almost every time*, November 6, 2014. See: <https://gigaom.com/2014/11/06/social-media-and-breaking-news-why-authenticity-trumps-authority-almost-every-time/>

²²³ Alejandro, Jennifer, *Journalism In The Age Of Social Media*, Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2010.

²²⁴Morejon, Roy, *How Social Media is Replacing Traditional Journalism as a News Source [Infographic]*, Social Media Today, June 28, 2012. See: <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/how-social-media-replacing-traditional-journalism-news-source-infographic>

Drawing on what stated at the beginning of the chapter – the quest for spectacularity – reporters have 140 characters available to attract the attention of followers and to do so, they often use alarming sentences, sometimes combined with IS's pictures.

Even when consumers consult traditional media, they often encounter newspaper articles and newscast services with alarming titles and tones. This is the West's fallacy: drama sells more. Such behavior of (some) journalists and (some) news outlets is widespread, and the views they portray are re-tweeted and re-posted – just like IS content – extending their reach. This involuntarily helps the caliphate win the war of ideas, which ultimately rests on the control of perceptions. First of all, IS's power is magnified, making it seem bigger and stronger than it actually is. This, in turn, further spreads terror, creating a climate of general hysteria.²²⁵ While some consequences of such hysteria are harmless, like mistaking everyday objects for IS paraphernalia – two balloons shaped as the number 21 which viewed in reverse looked like IS²²⁶ or a black jacket windswept on a tree mistaken as the caliphate's flag²²⁷ – there are far worse consequences.

As seen after 9/11, terror hysteria calls for oppressive counter-terrorism measures, that always end up hitting minorities, hence Muslims, which are seen as the near enemy. This wrong vision creates the conditions for *Islamophobia*²²⁸ (anti-Muslim sentiment), which causes marginalization, wrongdoings and injustices, increasing Muslims' grievances and, in extreme cases, driving some to sympathize, support or – in extreme cases – join terrorist organizations. Thus, Western media ends up fuelling a vicious circle from which the caliphate benefits.

Moreover, the West's obsession with IS narrative ends up – unintentionally – exalting and glorifying the cause of the caliphate. The continuous display of its well-staged content and ample coverage on some of its prominent western foreign fighters, like the renown British fighter Jihadi John, helps glamorize jihad fuelling the concept of *jihadi cool*,²²⁹ responsible for luring young vulnerable minds. As Briggs and Silverman note, the dangerous implication is that media may “contribute to a perceived social norm that young western Muslims must fight for the caliphate, and social norms are incredibly powerful in influencing behavior, especially that of young audiences.”²³⁰ Suffice it to say that in some European countries – Belgium, Britain and France – the

²²⁵ Marco Minniti, Ricucci Amedeo, *ISIS: il Nemico Perfetto*, Speciale TG1.

²²⁶ Toppa, Sabrina, *Swedish Police Raid Apartment After Mistaking 21st Birthday Party Balloons for ISIS Initials*, Time, February 25, 2015. See: <http://time.com/3721642/islamic-state-sweden-police-21-birthday-balloons-isis/>

²²⁷ Seneghini, Federica, «Aiuto, c'è una bandiera dell'Isis» Arrivano i carabinieri: è una giacca, Corriere della Sera, March 11, 2015. See: http://www.corriere.it/cronache/15_marzo_11/aiuto-c-bandiera-dell-isis-ma-giacca-stesa-ad-asciugare-2fea8cc4-c7dc-11e4-a75d-5ec6ab11448e.shtml

²²⁸ Ricucci Amedeo, *ISIS: il Nemico Perfetto*, Speciale TG1.

²²⁹ Picart, Caroline Joan S., “Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic”: *The Roles of the Internet and Imagined Relations in the Self-Radicalization of Colleen LaRose (Jihad Jane)*, *Societies*, 5, 354–383; 2015.

²³⁰ Briggs Obe, Rachel, Silverman Tanya, *Western Foreign Fighters. Innovations in Responding to the Threat*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014.

support for IS among Arabic-speaking social media users is higher than the Arab world in the frontline.²³¹

While western social media is permeated with terror and describes IS as a “bunch of tech-savvy barbarians who inspire repulsion but also a sort of fascination – and appeal – for their activities in the cyber world and on the ground,”²³² Arab media has reacted in a different way.

It has been discrediting IS narratives with parody and irony.²³³ Satirical videos (for example the video “Dawlat al-Khurafa” published by Al Iraqiya TV²³⁴), cartoons (e.g. “Dashaw” again produced by Al Iraqiya²³⁵) and pictures²³⁶ appear both on traditional and social media, with the aim to reject the caliphate’s extremism and mitigate its purpose to instill fear. However, such efforts have –unfortunately – remained circumscribed to the Arab world since they often aren’t translated.

The intent to discredit the caliphate is also strongly present among Arab social media users. Efforts have been carried out both from inside IS-held cities and from outraged Arabs living elsewhere in the region.

Websites, blogs, Facebook pages and hashtag campaigns on Twitter have been launched to counter misinformation and lies spread by IS. Mosul Eye (@Mosul_Eye),²³⁷ Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (@Raqqa_SL),²³⁸ Iraqi Network for Social Media (@INSM_IQ)²³⁹ and Anbar Daily²⁴⁰ are all composed of local activists which risk their lives to leak news of IS actions and insights on the not-so-glamorous life in the caliphate.

The strict and suffocating laws imposed by IS, the public punishments for not abiding by such laws (which are often executions) and the act of arbitrary madness of the fighters, are the daily news that are reported, often also in English.

Finally, also outraged Arabs, not directly involved in the conflict, have reacted to IS.

In August 2014,²⁴¹ Lebanese social media users launched the *#BurnISISFlagChallenge*, after the beheading of a Lebanese soldier. It entailed the burning of the caliphates flag and posting the video

²³¹ *ISIS: perception on news on-line and social media considering only posts and articles written in Arabic language*, VOICES from the Blogs, October 27, 2014.

²³² Della Ratta, Donatella, *ISIL and western media: Accidental allies?*, Al Jazeera, September 25, 2014. See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/isil-western-media-allies-2014924121817329713.html>

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ *Satan and Jewish Woman give birth to ISIS*, translation by MEMRI. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx0Gu0PINjI>

²³⁵ Inquistr, *The Middle East Is Making Fun Of ISIS, New Satire Mocks Terrorists*, November 12, 2014. See: <http://www.inquistr.com/1603705/the-middle-east-is-making-fun-of-isis-new-satire-mocks-terrorists/>

²³⁶ McLaughlin, Jenna, *The Case for Making Fun of ISIS*, MotherJones, March 6, 2015. See: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/03/sn1-dakota-johnson-isis-middle-east-satirical-cartoons>

²³⁷ Mosul Eye. See: <https://mosuleye.wordpress.com/>

²³⁸ Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently. See: <http://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/>

²³⁹ Iraqi Network for Social Media. See: <http://insm-iq.com/>

²⁴⁰ Anbar Daily. See: <http://anbardaily.blogspot.it/>

²⁴¹ Al Arabiya News, *ISIS militants behead captive Lebanese soldier, video shows*, August 30, 2014. See: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/30/ISIS-militants-behead-captive-Lebanese-soldier-video.html>

or picture of it on social networks.²⁴² However, this campaign ceased due to the fact that the flag contains the *Tawhhid* (“No God but Allah and Mohammad the prophet of Allah”) and the burning of it created controversy.²⁴³

Another example – perhaps more constructive – is the *#No2ISIS* campaign,²⁴⁴ launched by Iraqis in June 2014 and which has been used to spread messages against IS’s perverse distortion of Islam and its sectarian extremism²⁴⁵ and to diffuse news of the caliphate’s vileness.

The Arab world – and in general Muslims everywhere – have to fight a battle against a wicked group that is hijacking their identity and staining their religion. However, this is not a task they are to carry out alone, but it is everyone’s duty to contribute for the success of a counter-IS narrative.

Western Social Media Efforts Against IS

Despite Western media – involuntarily – fuelling and disseminating the caliphate’s messages, there are some counter-narrative efforts on social media platforms. Such efforts can be divided in three categories, depending on the entity that produced it, namely civil society and organizations, governments, and hackers.

Just like the Iraqi *#No2ISIS* campaign, Muslims living in the West – to be precise, British Muslims – have been proactive and have initiated their own counter-narratives on social media. However, while the purpose of the aforementioned initiatives was primarily one of counter-information, discrediting the portrait IS manufactured for itself, British-born *#MuslimApologies* or *#MuslimRage* are, first and foremost, an answer to Western *Islamophobia*.²⁴⁶ Western Muslims, in fact, are the only victims of IS in the West (besides the victims of IS-linked lone wolf attacks). They are victims of the growing *Islamophobic* sentiment, fuelled by Western media, which IS takes advantage of, for potential radicalization and recruitment.²⁴⁷

Hence through satirical tweets in defense of their religion, Muslims try to mark out the difference between their civilized and peaceful religion and IS’s inhumane and heinous ideology.

²⁴² Al Arabiya News, *Is ‘Burn ISIS Flag Challenge’ the new Ice Bucket?*, September 7, 2014. See: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/09/07/Lebanon-s-Burn-ISIS-flag-challenge-goes-viral.html>

²⁴³ Newman, Marissa, *#Burn ISIS Flag Challenge goes viral*, September 7, 2014. See: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/burnisisflagchallenge-goes-viral/>

²⁴⁴ Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, *Iraq and ISIS: Waging war with hashtags*, The Washington Post, June 24, 2014. See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/06/24/iraq-and-isis-waging-war-with-hashtags/>

²⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, *Iraqis worldwide say #No2ISIS*, June 18, 2014. See: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201406182053-0023852>

²⁴⁶ Ahmed, Ammar Ibn Aziz, *#MuslimApologies is a witty and informative response to Western Islamophobia*, The Independent, October 3, 2014. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/muslimapologies-is-a-witty-and-informative-response-to-western-islamophobia-9772439.html>

²⁴⁷ Maggioni, Monica and Paolo Magri, *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale (ISPI), 2015.

In February 2014, a former extremist,²⁴⁸ launched a website – *Abdullah-X*²⁴⁹ – with the aim of preventing young British Muslims from joining jihadist groups. His website is supported by its Facebook page (*Abdulla-X*), its Twitter account (@*TheAbdullahX*) and its YouTube channel (*Abdullah-X*) where he uploads his two-minute long cartoons which propose a counter-narrative to dissuade young Muslims and – again – dispel the prejudices that non-Muslims have about Islam²⁵⁰ (some of his cartoons are: *The Real Meaning of Jihad*, *Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria*, and *Media Hysteria*²⁵¹).

While the aforementioned initiatives have been initiated by individuals, there are others launched by Organizations and Foundations, which have websites, again supported by their own Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and YouTube channels, which are used to spread their messages and content and engage in constructive interaction with their audience.

After the killing of aid worker David Haines,²⁵² a London-based group – Active Change Foundation²⁵³ – gave voice to the Muslim condemnation of IS through its *#NotInMyName*²⁵⁴ and *#AllStandTogether* (*against terrorism*) campaigns.

In September 2014, some 100 Muslim scholars and leaders have issued an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁵⁵ While the recipients of the letter – al-Baghdadi and his followers – probably have ignored it, the letter represents another example of counter-narrative. In its 27 pages, the senders meticulously discuss (through due reference to literature) every aspect of the caliphate, from the reason behind jihad to its rules of conduct, from the treatment of Yazidis to the use of punishments, and finally, the conditions for the existence of *the* caliphate.²⁵⁶ However, as mentioned, the Muslim community must not be the only one having to battle this war of ideas.

Satirical sketches, as the ones produced by middle eastern televisions, have appeared on Western televisions too: the popular American comedy show Saturday Night Live has featured skits on IS,²⁵⁷ even though they have ignited opposed reactions from the public.

²⁴⁸ Simpson, Jack, *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. See: <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>

²⁴⁹ Abdullah-X. See: <http://www.abdullahx.com/>

²⁵⁰ Farrell, Jason, *Abdullah-X Cartoon Aims To Deter Jihadists*, Sky News, July 14, 2014. See: <http://news.sky.com/story/1300364/abdullah-x-cartoon-aims-to-deter-jihadists>

²⁵¹ Abdullah-X YouTube Channel. See: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2yfok6i9oMULvUbbo55ZLA>

²⁵² Griffin, Andrew, *David Haines beheading: Brother's tribute to British aid worker who was 'just another bloke'*, The Independent, September 14, 2014. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/david-haines-brothers-tribute-to-british-hostage-beheaded-by-isis-9731741.html>

²⁵³ Twitter account: @Action_Change_F

²⁵⁴ #NotInMyName. See: <http://www.isisnotinmyname.com/>

²⁵⁵ Letter to Baghdadi. See: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ *Father Daughter Ad*, Saturday Night Live. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_L2fazw5Y9k and *Shark Tank*, Saturday Night Live. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4DOyAwN13U>

A different approach for providing a counter-narrative has been that of giving space to former extremists, relatives and victims of violent extremism and former members of radical (Islamist) groups. The Against Violent Extremism (AVE) Network, ideated by Google Ideas²⁵⁸ at the 2011 Summit Against Violent Extremism empowers – through the use of technology – the aforementioned categories “to work together to push back extremist narratives and prevent the recruitment of 'at risk' youths.”²⁵⁹

Another example is the Extreme Dialogue campaign, funded by the Canadian Government and launched in February 2015, which aims to offer young people, a positive alternative to extremist material available online. The campaign is centered on short documentaries that tell “personal stories of Canadians profoundly affected by violent extremism, like a mother whose son was killed fighting for ISIS in Syria.”²⁶⁰

Among these organizations are, the People Against Violent Extremism (PAVE),²⁶¹ the Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE)²⁶² or the Counter Extremism Project,²⁶³ which are all engaged in enhancing public awareness on radicalization – especially of the young ones – and providing counter-measures and alternative messages.

The latest project has been Mothers for Life,²⁶⁴ launched in May 2015 and run by the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS). It is a global network – present on social media platforms – of Muslim and non-Muslim mothers “who have experienced violent jihadist radicalization in their own families.”²⁶⁵ The network has published an “Open Letter To Our Sons And Daughters In Syria And Iraq”, recalling Islam’s preaching on honoring the parents and sparing them suffering.²⁶⁶ Moreover, the letter is also an invitation for families that need support in dealing with radicalization situations at home.

Governmental Efforts

Until now, we’ve seen private responses (of groups of citizens and organizations) to IS messaging and narrative.

²⁵⁸ Google Ideas. See: <http://www.google.com/ideas>

²⁵⁹ Against Violent Extremism (AVE). See: <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/about>

²⁶⁰ Extreme Dialogue. See: <http://extremedialogue.org/about/>

²⁶¹ People Against Violent Extremism (PAVE). See: <http://www.pave.net.au/what-we-do>

²⁶² Women Without Borders, Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE). See: <http://www.women-without-borders.org/aboutus/>

²⁶³ Counter Extremism Project. See: <http://www.counterextremism.com/mission-statement>

²⁶⁴ German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization studies (GIRDS), *Mothers for life*. See: <http://www.girds.org/projects/mothers-for-life-network>

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Jordans, Frank, *Mothers call on children who've joined IS to come home*, The Washington Post, June 3, 2015. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mothers-call-on-children-who-joined-is-to-come-home/2015/06/03/09f361da-09ea-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html

In October 2014, anti-IS coalition members²⁶⁷ participated in a conference in Kuwait that focused on the caliphate's online threat. The result was the acknowledgment of the necessity of an information coalition to complement the military one.²⁶⁸ Such need was then restated during the Washington Summit on Countering Violent Extremism held in February 2015, which “*emphasized the importance to intensify efforts to counter violent extremist messaging and narratives[...] using strategic communications, including via social media, by delegitimizing the violent extremist ideology and build a global movement to offer positive, alternative pathways for vulnerable groups, especially youth and women.*”²⁶⁹

However, despite the generally recognized importance of countering the online dimension of the caliphate, governmental measures have been slow to materialize.

The only exception is the U.S. which, since 2011, has a Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), originally set up to fight al-Qaeda's online presence, through its Digital Outreach Team (DOT). The DOT operates in different languages such as Arabic, Somali, Urdu, Punjabi and English and serves to counter terrorist propaganda and misinformation about the United States.²⁷⁰ In 2013, the DOT launched the *#ThinkAgainTurnAway*²⁷¹ campaign – entirely in English – which has two purposes: counter-message terrorist propaganda on the internet and hold direct conversations with users of jihadist accounts.²⁷²

However, such campaign has been widely criticized. Despite the fact that it is impossible to assess its effectiveness (how many people it managed to *turn away* from violence), the campaign has been accused to engage in futile verbal crossfire with users steadfast on their ideology and which certainly won't accept a counter-narrative coming from an authority they don't recognize and don't deem credible, especially regarding religious matters.

Following the American example, the British military has planned to set up a special force in order to “respond to the ever changing character of modern conflict and to be able to compete with agile and complex adversaries,”²⁷³ which involves forms of psychological warfare to be carried out in social media. The Brigade 77 – named after the one specialized in unconventional warfare during

²⁶⁷ The U.S., Britain, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq and the Gulf States. Canada was absent.

²⁶⁸ Hagagy, Ahmed, U.S. unveils new cyber coalition aimed at combating ISIS, Haaretz, October 28, 2014. See: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.623096>

²⁶⁹ Statement from Summit on Countering Violent Extremism , IIP Digital, U.S. State Department of State, February 19, 2015. See: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2015/02/20150220313708.html#axzz3b4bFRVKq>

²⁷⁰ U.S. Department of State, Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/csccl/>

²⁷¹ Under the Twitter account @ThinkAgain_DOS

²⁷² Van Ginkel LL.M, Bibi T., *Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, March 2015.

²⁷³ Sengupta, kim, *New British Army unit 'Brigade 77' to use Facebook and Twitter in psychological warfare*, The Independent, January 31, 2015. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/return-of-the-chindits-mod-reveals-cunning-defence-plan-10014608.html>

WWII – is set to debut in April 2015 and it is designed to help Britain’s troops “fight in an information age.”²⁷⁴

The French government, instead, has launched a website ‘Stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr’ which is dedicated to the fight and prevention of terrorism. It is an educational website which allows citizens to understand the threat of terrorism, of its propaganda and manipulation techniques. The website is complemented by a telephone hotline which helps friends and families deal with possible indoctrination,²⁷⁵ however it doesn’t have a social media dimension on platforms such as YouTube or Twitter.

In 2011, the European Union’s Commission set up the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN),²⁷⁶ to counter violent radicalization. In 2014, the Commission published a communication²⁷⁷ in which it stated that “*The Commission is willing to offer support to Member States, third countries, the private sector, civil society, and individuals in their efforts to create positive online counter-messaging.*”²⁷⁸ The afore mentioned Abdullah-X project is a result of the Commission’s and RAN’s engagement in the production of online counter-narratives.²⁷⁹

Hacktivists’ Response to IS

On June 21, 2014, *hacktivists*²⁸⁰ from Anonymous launched cyber attacks – #OpNo2ISIS and #OpIceISIS – against countries believed to be financially supporting IS (Turkey, Saudia Arabia and Qatar were mentioned²⁸¹), by disrupting the use of machines and networks (DDoS – distributed denial-of-service) and by defacing governmental websites.²⁸² The campaigns were a response to the hacking of one of Anonymous’ Twitter accounts, which was ascribed to IS.

In January 2015, in the wake of the Paris attacks, Anonymous lunched #OpCharlieHebdo or #OpISIS. This time, the campaign’s purpose was to take down social media accounts and websites affiliated with IS.²⁸³

²⁷⁴ Jones, Sam, *Army revives Chindits as ‘Facebook warriors’ for smart battle*, Financial Times, January 31, 2015. See: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/537c7436-a892-11e4-ad01-00144feab7de.html#axzz3b96RvVFF>

²⁷⁵ Stop-Sjihadisme. See: <http://www.gouvernement.fr/en/stopjihadism-everyone-on-alert-and-taking-action-against-jihadism>

²⁷⁶ Radicalization Awareness network (RAN). See: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/index_en.htm

²⁷⁷ ‘A Communication is a policy document with no mandatory authority. The Commission takes the initiative of publishing a Communication when it wishes to set out its own thinking on a topical issue. A Communication has no legal effect.’ See: http://ec.europa.eu/civiljustice/glossary/glossary_en.htm#Communication

²⁷⁸ European Commission, Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions Preventing Radicalisation To Terrorism And Violent Extremism: Strengthening The EU’s Response, January 15, 2014.

See: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation/docs/communication_on_preventing_radicalisation_and_violence_promoting_extremism_201301_en.pdf

²⁷⁹ RAN State of Play, 2014. See: <https://sportsyard.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/briefing-the-commissioner-for-plenary.pdf>

²⁸⁰ Hacktivism (portmanteau of hack and activism) is the act of hacking for political or social motivations.

²⁸¹ Kumar Jha, Abhishek, *Anonymous Hacktivists to target the Countries supporting the ISIS group, OpNo2ISIS*, TechWorm, July 1, 2014. See: <http://www.techworm.net/2014/07/anonymous-hacktivists-to-target.html>

²⁸² Operation ISIS /#OpISIS. Part of a series on Anonymous, Know Your Meme, 2015. See:

<https://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fknowyourmeme.com%2Fmemes%2Fevents%2Foperation-isis-opisis&ei=Zy5jVfyfFcf-ygPo-IDADA&usq=AFQjCNEAmqr5Bic-AP13RFuW9qM3GZDH3w>

²⁸³ Wei, Wang, *Hacktivist Group anonymous (#OpISIS) Takes Down Islamic State (ISIS) Social Media Accounts*, The Hacker News, February 28, 2015. See: <http://thehackernews.com/2015/02/anonymous-isis-cyber-attack.html>

Since then, Anonymous together with other *hacktivist* groups – such as GhostSec and CtrlSec – have carried out several waves of attack and have managed to take down several thousands of Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and websites linked to IS.

In a video announcing their intentions, Anonymous clarifies that the battle is carried out by everyone: “*We are Muslims, Christians, Jews[...]hackers, crackers, Hacktivist, phishers, agents, spies, or just the guy from next door[...]students, administrators, workers, clerks, unemployed, rich, poor[...]young, or old, gay or straight[...]We come from all races, countries, religions, and ethnicity.*”²⁸⁴ The universality of their actions is also confirmed by the release of step-by-step instructions to personally track-down IS Twitter accounts.²⁸⁵

Despite the disrupting effect that such cyber attacks cause to IS, such effect is only temporary since new accounts and websites easily take the place of the old ones in no-time: as Schori Liang notes, “IS online supporters are like Hydra; cut off ne head and two more shall take its place.”²⁸⁶ Moreover, these *hacktivist* attacks have been criticized, due to the fact that the take-down strategy affects intelligence information gathering, which is strategically necessary to fight IS.²⁸⁷

In this chapter, we’ve seen how Western social media have reacted to the caliphate’s online threat. The efforts are diverse, coming from the government, organizations, civil society and also *hacktivists*. Nevertheless, they are still far from reaching the effectiveness of IS’s propaganda machine, hence the caliphate is still the undisputed winner of this war of ideas and continues to dangerously dominate the narrative.

²⁸⁴ Video, Anonymous, #OpISIS Continues...Round 2. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPE_sRhZp6M

²⁸⁵ Gilber, David, Anonymous #OpIsis: Hacktivists publish how-to guide for identifying Islamic State Twitter accounts, International Business Times, April 14, 2015. See <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/anonymous-opisis-hacktivists-publish-how-guide-identifying-islamic-state-twitter-accounts-1496378>

²⁸⁶ Schori Liang, Christina, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, GCSP Policy Paper 2015/2, Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP), February 2015.

²⁸⁷ Cuthbertson, Anthony, *Anonymous #OpISIS: CloudFlare refuses to block service to pro-ISIS websites*, International Business Times, April 10, 2015. See: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/anonymous-opisis-cloudflare-refuses-block-service-pro-isis-websites-1495758>

5. THE CREATION OF A POWERFUL WEAPON: AN EFFECTIVE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The war of ideas against IS is an asymmetric war, in which the caliphate is – for now – the stronger side.²⁸⁸

Chapter two has described the caliphate's skillful use of social media in its war. The complexity of its propaganda machine is its strength. The caliphate produces great quantities of high-quality multimedia content (images, audios, videos, reports...), whose subjects and narratives, as well as the language, differ according to the audience it is designated for. Such content is then deftly disseminated throughout the internet by a network of members, supporters and sympathizers, which upload, share, post, tweet and re-tweet the caliphate's productions, expanding their reach and influence.

In turn, the previous chapter, has shown the West's response using social media. Despite the increasing awareness of the threat, the campaigns, attacks and efforts to discredit the caliphate's narrative are still few and haven't measured up to IS's capabilities.

Taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses observed from the aforementioned efforts, the present chapter will provide some suggestions which should be taken into consideration for the ideation of an effective counter-narrative strategy against IS.

The measures to counter the caliphate's online threat can be divided in two general categories: repressive and proactive.

Repressive Measures

Taking down jihadist websites and suspending pages, profiles and accounts of users linked to IS are repressive measures. Such measures however aren't effective means to undermine the caliphate's strength. As said, they only have a temporary disruptive effect, which is quickly overcome by setting up new websites, profiles and accounts and by moving to alternative social media platforms, such as Diaspora and Quitter.²⁸⁹

Moreover, due to the volume of UGC present on such platforms, its supervision is *delegated* to users, which have the possibility to report and flag content they deem offensive and inappropriate.

²⁸⁸ McCauley, Tom, *The war of ideas on the Internet: An asymmetric conflict in which the strong become weak*, Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways toward terrorism and genocide, Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, 2015.

²⁸⁹ Barret, Richard, *The Islamic State*, The Soufan Group, October 28, 2014.

Thus, before anyone files the claim, the content remains in place and whenever it is reported, the review team removes it if – and only if – there is a breach of its terms and conditions.

The take-down strategy has also been considered detrimental to the overall fight against IS. Shutting down websites and accounts entails the loss of important sources of information²⁹⁰ about the group's organization, structure and functioning.

Another example of repressive measure has been the blockage – by the Iraqi government²⁹¹ – of several websites and social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in IS-controlled provinces.²⁹² The purpose was to impede the dissemination of IS material; nevertheless, the decision proved to be counterproductive and ended up affecting local populations more than it affected IS,²⁹³ since it also included the blockage of mobile data (needed for instant messaging services).²⁹⁴ While the militants are equipped with encrypted radio communications systems, seized from the Iraqi Army and which are used for mobilization and coordination²⁹⁵ and have the possibility to use satellite links and fiber-optic lines belonging to Jordanian, Turkish and Iranian telecommunications providers,²⁹⁶ which cover other areas of Iraq, to fight their online war, IS-controlled populations cannot resort to alternatives hence remaining isolated. Furthermore, blocking the population's use of such platforms prevents their viewpoint from reaching local and international audiences, which is fundamental to counter jihadist propaganda.²⁹⁷

Thus, repressive measures – as the ones carried out by *hacktivists* and governments – aren't the appropriate strategy for this war. However, at most, *selective* measures may be helpful thwarting the diffusion process (hence, reducing the reach of IS content), yet without affecting the sources, which are needed both for intelligence purposes – as proved by a successful American airstrike that hit one of IS's headquarters after a member of the group posted a *selfie*²⁹⁸ online²⁹⁹ – and as the foundations on which to base a solid counter-narrative.

²⁹⁰ Obviously the truthfulness of the information about IS provided by the group itself or by its supporters cannot be verified easily, however it is still of great importance.

²⁹¹ Farwell, James P., *The Media Strategy of ISIS*, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 56:6, 49-55, 2014.

²⁹² *Iraqi government blocks internet to disrupt insurgents*, Telecompaper, June 17, 2014. See: <http://www.telecompaper.com/news/iraqi-govt-blocks-internet-to-disrupt-insurgents-1019767>

²⁹³ Lamy, Stephanie, *Censorship In Iraq: Websites Still Blocked Amid Security Threat*, Internet Sans Frontières, June 18, 2014. See: http://www.internetsansfrontieres.org/Censorship-In-Iraq-Websites-Still-Blocked-Amid-Security-Threat_a540.html

²⁹⁴ *Iraqi government blocks internet to disrupt insurgents*, Telecompaper, June 17, 2014. See: <http://www.telecompaper.com/news/iraqi-govt-blocks-internet-to-disrupt-insurgents-1019767>

²⁹⁵ Gibbons Neff, Thomas, *Advanced radios captured by Iraqi insurgents could spell trouble*, The Washington Post, June 16, 2014. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/06/16/advanced-radios-captured-by-iraqi-insurgents-could-spell-trouble/?Post+generic=%3Ftid%3Dsm_twitter_washingtonpost

²⁹⁶ Timber, Craig, *Iraq tries to censor social media to disrupt ISIS communication, but its success is limited*, The Washington Post, June 13, 2014. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/iraq-tries-to-censor-social-media-but-its-success-is-limited/2014/06/13/19e1e918-f325-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f_story.html

²⁹⁷ Lamy, Stephanie, *Censorship In Iraq: Websites Still Blocked Amid Security Threat*, Internet Sans Frontières, June 18, 2014.

²⁹⁸ A *selfie* is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and then shared on social media platforms.

²⁹⁹ Ernst, Douglas, *Terrorist 'moron' reveals ISIS HQ in online selfie, U.S. Air Force promptly destroys compound*, The Washington Times, June 4, 2015. See: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/4/air-force-bombs-islamic-state-hq-building-after-te/>

Proactive Measures

It has become clear that merely confronting the externalizations of violent extremism is not enough. It is necessary to ‘address the underlying sources that feed violent extremism’,³⁰⁰ which can only be done through proactive measures aimed at undermining the appeal of the violent narratives, offering credible alternatives.³⁰¹

An effective proactive approach must mirror the complexity of the caliphate’s propaganda machine, hence it must manage to speak to different audiences – appealing to both their rational and emotional sides – through different narratives. Just as the caliphate has different messengers to disseminate their ideology (foreign fighters, women and supporters), also the counter-narrative must have different origins – be it religious figures, civil society, organizations and governments. Moreover, the support of multimedia content to complement the messages is essential, since images speak louder than words. Finally, the counter-narrative’s reach must be enhanced so that the message’s relevance increases and resonates more.

This war requires an international interplay between governments, civil society, religious communities, organizations and internet-related technology companies, which can empty the caliphate’s words from any appealing meaning.

Different Messengers for Different Messages

The effectiveness of a counter-narrative depends on the credibility of the messenger. In turn, the credibility of the messenger depends on the consistency between its professed words and its social role. The Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism,³⁰² published by The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, discerns the different types of counter-narratives and the respective messenger.

Governments

When the US government’s #ThinkAgainTurnAway campaign uses Islam’s principles to respond to jihadists’ rhetoric, their words aren’t taken seriously – they have no value – given that the US government has no competence in the matter.

³⁰⁰ Schori Liang, Christina, *Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda*, GCSP Policy Paper 2015/2, Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP), February 2015

³⁰¹ Neumann, P. ,*Countering Online Radicalisation in America*. Bipartisan Policy Center, 2012.

³⁰² Briggs, Rachel, Sebastien, Feve, *Review Of Programs To Counter Narratives Of Violent Extremism*. What works and what are the Implications for government?, Institute For Strategic Dialogue, July 2013.

It is important that religion – and other topics – are invoked and safeguarded by the competent authorities that infuse credible meaning to what they declare, otherwise the risk is “being backed into a defensive stance of rebuttals that can serve to reinforce the extremist discourse.”³⁰³

Thus, it is advised that governments limit the scope of their narratives to their field of expertise. Governmental messages shall be based on the democratic values of the rule-of-law such as respect for human rights. Their narrative shall address misinformation and misinterpretation of the government’s positions, policies, actions and inactions.³⁰⁴ Transparency and coherence shall be achieved through the communication and explanation – when possible – of matters such as foreign policy and counter-terrorism measures.

However, the government’s frontline role is limited to these “government strategic communications.”³⁰⁵ Nevertheless, it is of fundamental importance that governments complement their frontline efforts with backstage actions, such as funding, supporting and promoting counter-messaging initiatives, where this does not jeopardize the credibility of the product. Moreover, governments should be receptive of the counter-narratives provided by religious entities and civil society, perhaps reinforcing them with government policies and practices.³⁰⁶

Religious Figures, Civil Society , Organizations (and Hacktivists)

Any actor in society can take part in this war of ideas. Just as some Italians, British, French and so on, have sided with IS in disseminating and strengthening their message, so can anyone contribute to contrast it .

Promoting positive messages based on social and democratic values such as equality, freedom, tolerance, human rights, etc.. or deconstruct, discredit and demystify³⁰⁷ the caliphate’s words can be done by anyone, and everyone is an important cogwheel necessary for the creation of a powerful weapon against IS.

Religious figures have the duty to debunk the distorted interpretation of Islam given by IS. Sifting IS’s action, one by one, defining how a true Muslim acts with regards to women, children, minorities and other religions. These voices must be amplified so that they reach Young Muslims and non-Muslims. Discrediting the caliphate’s arguments is highly effective especially if carried out

³⁰³ Briggs, Rachel, Sebastien, Feve, *Review Of Programs To Counter Narratives Of Violent Extremism*. What works and what are the Implications for government?, Institute For Strategic Dialogue, July 2013.

³⁰⁴ Van Ginkel LL.M, Bibi T., *Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, March 2015. See: www.icct.nl

³⁰⁵ Briggs, Rachel, Sebastien, Feve, *Review Of Programs To Counter Narratives Of Violent Extremism*. What works and what are the Implications for government?, Institute For Strategic Dialogue, July 2013.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

on platforms such as Twitter or extremist online forums and websites, where a direct confrontation facilitates the unmasking of lies and an interactive exchange of narratives has more influence.

Civil society – individuals – are an important resource. Simply sharing and tweeting content against IS – hence extending its reach – is of great salience, and they shall be encouraged to do so. Moreover, being individuals unconstrained by any norm tied to an institutional role, they contribute with their personal creativity,³⁰⁸ by producing outside the box content which may be humorous or sarcastic, or appeal to the emotional side of audiences. Cartoons, parodies and photo-shopped images circulating on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are a severe blow to the caliphate's self-constructed invincible image.

Finally, testimonies, stories and insights by former extremists, victims of extremist violence and survivors of terrorism are the most powerful counter-narrative messengers.³⁰⁹ Organizations, such as the mentioned Against Violent Extremism (AVE), help these people voice their experiences, broadcasting them to the world. Providing the necessary conditions, such as psychological support and protection is a necessary investment. This is especially true for IS defectors, few of which are lucky to escape and reach the West. Despite their controversial position, they must be encouraged to speak about their disappointment, disillusion, and the atrocities witnessed.

Social Media Companies and Internet Corporations

The role of social media companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, and internet corporations as Google, is essentially that of support to these counter-messages. They are the mediums through which they will be spread and the milieu where the battle is fought.

They are necessary for the capacity building, namely social media training, for organizations and governments: *“Trainers should provide guidance on techniques as that can help web content rise in Google search rankings, and help religious scholars and institutions understand the importance of proper sound bites that can play well on Twitter and Facebook.”*³¹⁰

Moreover, they can provide free in-kind support and services to civil society organizations.³¹¹ Google³¹² and YouTube³¹³ offer Ad Grants, which empower nonprofit organizations, by advertising their missions and initiatives on Google search result pages or YouTube videos. While platforms

³⁰⁸ *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism*, International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) and Hedayah, Meeting Note, September 2014.

³⁰⁹ Briggs, Rachel, Sebastien, Feve, *Review Of Programs To Counter Narratives Of Violent Extremism. What works and what are the Implications for government?*, Institute For Strategic Dialogue, July 2013.

³¹⁰ Helmus, Todd C. et al., *Promoting Online Voices for Countering Violent Extremism*, Rand Corporation, 2013.

³¹¹ Briggs, Rachel, Sebastien, Feve, *Review Of Programs To Counter Narratives Of Violent Extremism. What works and what are the Implications for government?*, Institute For Strategic Dialogue, July 2013.

³¹² Google Ad Grants. See: <http://www.google.ie/intl/en/grants/index.html>

³¹³ YouTube Nonprofit Program. See: <https://www.youtube.com/nonprofits>

such as Facebook still don't offer such aid, targeted advertising could further increase the reach of counter-narratives.

Hypothetically speaking, if a young boy were to search for IS-related content on google – for example “How to join IS” – and then an ad for a video titled “Confessions of a jihadist” (again, hypothetically produced by a counter violent extremism organization) were to pop up as first result of his search, the curious boy would watch the advertised video featuring a hypothetical IS defector, there would be a high chance of dissuading him from joining such barbarians.

This of course is an exaggeration, however, one must bear in mind that any person snatched from the caliphate's claws, weakens IS. Without its supporters and sympathizers, the caliphate's projected strength will shrink, and without the flow of foreign fighters, its ranks won't be restocked and its actual battlefield capabilities will be scaled down.

If IS, a small group of individuals, has been able to take advantage of social media to increase its power, a larger group – the rest of the world – can do the same and easily suffocate its threat.

Thus, a broad counter-narrative coalition is needed to win this war. The interplay between messengers will be able to deconstruct the caliphate's narrative piecemeal, stripping IS of its controversial appeal.

CONCLUSION

A year after the establishment of the caliphate, it has become clear that Islamic State is a hybrid threat³¹⁴ and consequently needs a hybrid response.

Jihad is no longer only fought militarily, but it also has a cyber dimension that must be confronted. IS has been carrying out an ideological warfare through tweets and videos, and given the thousands of foreign fighters that have joined the group, the many teenage girls that have traveled there, the ever more frequent lone wolf attacks and the widely spread terror hysteria, the caliphate is winning this war.

Despite the international acknowledgment of such threat, measures to counter it have, so far, been sporadic and ineffective. An example are the so-called repressive measures, which have also proved to be counterproductive.

Thus, the key to win this ideological war lies in proactive measures: counter-narratives.

Mimicking the caliphate's propaganda machine structure, effective counter-narratives should employ different messengers in order to safeguard their credibility, depending on the content – religious, political, humorous or a testimony. Governments, Religious authorities, civil society and organizations shall all tailor their messages according to their field of expertise.

Interplay and mutual support is necessary especially to avoid falling prey to the vision that this is a religious war. The Muslim community must not be left alone fighting against the caliphate: this war is everyone's.

Moreover, these narratives shall be disseminated on social media platforms so that they can directly confront the already existing IS ones. To this regard, internet and social media companies shall cooperate in providing technological support and know-how in order to maximize the reach, visibility and quality of these counter-messages. A new-born project, such as the aforementioned Mothers for life, would highly benefit from a wide advertising campaign which would amplify its voice and boost its reach from a few hundred followers to maybe thousands.

Wide-reach constructive dissuasion is the result to be achieved: Western sympathizers and supporters must be lured away from the clutches of IS.

At the anti-IS coalition Summit held in Paris in June 2015, Iraq's prime minister Haider al-Abadi clarified that IS was "not created in Iraq" and added "If it is due to the political situation in Iraq,

³¹⁴ Scott, Jasper, Moreland, Scott, The Islamic State is a Hybrid Threat: Why Does That Matter?, Small Wars Journal, December 1, 2014.

why are American, French and German [fighters] in Iraq?” – referring to the stream of Western recruits that increase IS – “It is a failure on the part of the world.”³¹⁵

Avoiding human restock of IS ranks will eventually help physically weaken the group, and deterring lone wolf terrorist attacks will play down their spread of terror, circumscribing the threat to the battlefield region.

This soft power strategy is thus a necessary precondition for the military defeat of IS. Ideology is the driving force of the fighters and whoever is willing to employ vile violence in the name of the caliphate. The sooner the group’s ideological foundations are demolished, the sooner everything that depends on it crumbles.

The cases of defection that continue to surface³¹⁶ show that life under IS isn’t the best of all possible worlds. Thus, Playing on such weakness is the best shot the West – and the world – has for defeating the caliphate.

³¹⁵ Jones, Sam, Erika Solomon, Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, *Iraq calls for increased military support in battle against Isis*, Financial Times, June 2, 2015. See: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/ca97a11c-0931-11e5-881f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3cB4V4dd4>

³¹⁶ Wood, Paul, *Isis defector speaks of life inside brutal jihadist group*, BBC News, July 14, 2014. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28269596> and Dearden, Lizzie, *Isis defector speaks on why he left militant group after six months fighting in Syria*, The Independent, February 11, 2015. See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-defector-speaks-on-why-he-left-militant-group-after-six-months-fighting-in-syria-10038206.html> and Perez, Chris, *Defector left ISIS after being ‘shocked’ by beheadings*, The New York Post, March 17, 2015. See: <http://nypost.com/2015/03/17/defector-left-isis-after-being-shocked-by-beheadings/> and Joshi, Priya, *Isis runaway brides: Experts fear British Isis brides could face public execution*, International Business Times, May 13, 2015. See: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-runaway-brides-experts-fear-british-isis-brides-could-face-public-execution-1501198>

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