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# Islamic State Online Recruitment: Narratives and Counter-Narratives

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Claremont McKenna College

**Islamic State Online Recruitment: Narratives and Counter-Narratives**

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SUBMITTED TO  
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and  
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for

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## Abstract

This thesis looks beyond the sensationalized coverage of Islamic State and instead utilizes Islamic State materials as a window into the remote radicalization and recruitment process of susceptible English-speaking individuals in the West. This thesis considers Islamic State's mode of operation in conjunction with the appeals made in its online materials to devise a framework for understanding how Islamic State materials interact with susceptible individuals. The framework lends insight into how the body tasked with creating counter-narratives within the U.S. State Department can more effectively disrupt the remote recruitment and radicalization process.

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I would also like to thank my friends and my family for supporting me through this year-long journey. Thank you for listening to me, for loving me, and for helping me to keep a positive perspective during even the most difficult of times. I could not have achieved this capstone without all of your love and support along the way.

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## **The Rise of Islamic State: Gauging the Threat**

In 2014, Islamic State made a dramatic debut on United States' radar. Although Islamic State has existed in some form since 2004, its moves to take large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria a decade later, and its style of doing so earned it international attention. This attention turned to serious concern when Islamic State was linked to multiple large-scale terrorist attacks in France and the United States in 2015 and 2016. Consequently, dealing with Islamic State moved to the top of the U.S. priority list. When addressing the issue, both of the 2016 Presidential candidates purported to have strategies that would "destroy" Islamic State. Although Islamic State's regional grip is on the decline, opposition forces have by no means destroyed it. Contrary to American political rhetoric, even a full-blown military defeat will not eliminate the threat posed by Islamic State. Its members may disperse, its name may change, and its power may decentralize, but the underlying forces that draw individuals to groups like Islamic State and enable it to succeed will remain. To fully address the threat of Islamic State, it is necessary to understand those underlying forces. In looking at Islamic State's mode of operation in this chapter, I explore the group's defining principles in order to contribute to a broad understanding of what makes individuals join IS and act on its behalf.

### *Modus Operandi*

The first step in outlining Islamic State operations requires identifying the group's explicit goals. The central aim of Islamic State is made evident largely by its name. First and foremost, IS aims to establish an Islamic Caliphate that functions under a Caliph and

in accordance with its version of Sharia law. In doing so, the group seeks to unite the Muslim people, the Ummah, under the “true” form of Islam.

Islamic State derives its conception of “true” Islam from several key sources. The first is 14th Century Islamic thinker, Ibn Taymiyya. The group refers to Ibn Taymiyya as “The Great Sheikh,” and it often cites his writings within its own materials such as its monthly magazine, *Dabiq*.<sup>1</sup> Ibn Taymiyya dealt harsh criticism to Sufis and Shia Muslims for bringing what he believed were Bad’ah, or innovations, to Islam which he claimed were a derision of true Islam.<sup>2</sup> Among his most influential doctrines for IS was his Second Fatwa in which he declares the legality of killing Mongols, an invading force during his time.<sup>3</sup> This Fatwa was the first of any to legalize the killing of Muslims and has been used and largely expanded by IS to justify its harsh treatment and killing of any Muslim groups, such as Shias and Sufis, that it claims have deviated from “true” Islam. The group has also used Taymiyya to justify its enslavement of Yazidi girls and women. For instance, in Issue 4 of *Dabiq*, Islamic State cites Ibn Taymiyya’s determination that enslavement is consistent with the practices of Muhammad and his companions.<sup>4</sup> Even though Islamic State skews Taymiyya’s teachings, the fact remains that Ibn Taymiyya plays a prominent authority figure in defining the group’s ideological platform.

The group also formulates its conception of Islam from what Professor Ahmad Moussali refers to as neo-Wahhabism. Wahhabism, as part of a broader Salafist movement, formed with the purpose of returning Muslims “to the pure Islam of the

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<sup>1</sup> Khwaja Khusro Tariq, “Lessons From Islamic History: Ibn Taymiyyah and the Synthesis of Takfir,” *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hoover, Jon, “Jihad and the Mongols,” Google Sites, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> “The Failed Crusade,” *Dabiq: Issue 4*, DATE, 15.

Qur'an and prophetic sunna.”<sup>5</sup> At its founding, Muhammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab—who was himself heavily influenced by the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya—demanded that “pure” Islam requires eliminating the orthodox Sunni practice of using intermediaries in prayer (Tawassul).<sup>6</sup> It also requires a literal reading of the Qur'an and prophetic sunna. Such a reading recognizes God as having anthropomorphic qualities and obligates all Muslims to partake in Jihad.<sup>7</sup> Jihad can be interpreted as an “internal struggle for righteousness,” but extremist groups who derive their ideology from Wahhabism see jihad as a call for an offensive and universal fight against unbelievers.<sup>8</sup> In the early 20th Century, Wahhabism shifted from “revolutionary jihad” to a “conservative” movement which worked to uphold the institution that kept the royal Saudi family in power.<sup>9</sup> In its efforts to establish a Caliphate, Islamic State is calling for a return to the original Wahhabi doctrine. In fact, Cole Bunzel of Brookings Institute writes that “Some Islamic State official publications are little more than long quotations from Wahhabi scholars.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and Wahhabi doctrine, Islamic State's operations are crucially defined and inspired by the now deceased Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Despite early ideological rifts between al-Zarqawi and bin Laden, al-Qaeda enabled the Jordanian to found al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004.<sup>11</sup> Although AQI remained only a terrorist organization and did not extend its efforts to the establishment of a state,

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Moussalli, “Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who Is The Enemy?” *American University of Beirut*, January, 2009, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Byman, “Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay,” *International Security*, 2016, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmad Moussalli, “Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who Is The Enemy?” *American University of Beirut*, January, 2009 7.

<sup>10</sup> Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of Islamic State,” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, March 2015, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Byman, “Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay,” *International Security*, 2016, 132.

al-Zarqawi's ideological motivations gave rise to the defining principles of Islamic State. Until his death in 2006, al-Zarqawi and AQI fought viciously against the occupying force of the United States, carrying out suicide bombings and beheadings. However, al-Zarqawi's primary focus was directed toward what he called the "apostate" Arab regimes and, most importantly, the Shi'ites.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to bin Ladin in 2004, Zarqawi wrote that the Shi'ites are "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom."<sup>13</sup> Even though al-Zarqawi did not make direct moves to establish a Caliphate, his use of sectarian violence with AQI could be seen as the initial steps toward its inception. Charles Lister of the Brookings Institute purports, "Zarqawi believed his organization could take advantage of the resulting chaos to cast itself as the defender of the Sunni community and to usher in the establishment of an Islamic state."<sup>14</sup> This fixation on eliminating regional opposition, particularly the Shia, is reflected in Islamic State's prioritization of its operations. The group has become notorious for its brutal treatment of Shi'ites and other minority groups in all of the places it operates. It also incites violent treatment of these groups in neighboring areas, including Saudi Arabia and Yemen in an attempt to "exploit a sectarian dynamic in these countries to attract followers."<sup>15</sup>

Notably, and in contrast with al-Qaeda, Islamic State does not see fighting the West as its number one objective. In a study comparing messaging materials of al-Qaeda, Celine Marie I. Novenario writes, "For Al Qaeda, the task at hand is attacking the far

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<sup>12</sup> Tomas Kavalek, "From al-Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State: The Story of Insurgency in Iraq and Syria in 2003-2015," *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 2015, 9.

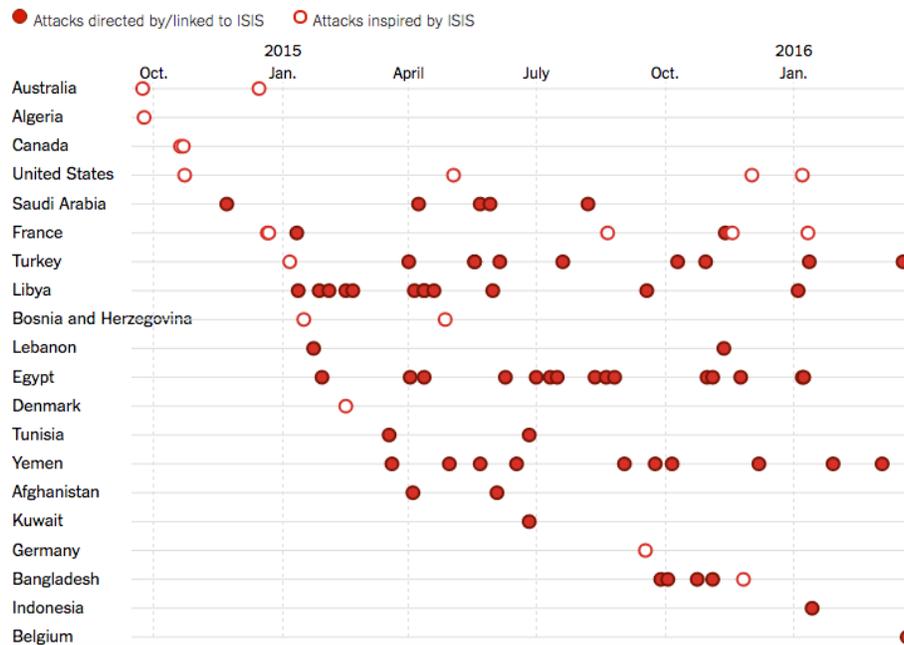
<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Lister, *Islamic State: A Brief Introduction*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Byman, Daniel, "Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016) pp. 127-165, 138.

enemy; building a Caliphate would come later. Islamic State, however, believes that the Caliphate is here; the end-of-days encounter with the far enemy comes next.”<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, IS spends most of its resources and focuses its strategy on the fight to protect and expand the Caliphate. This does not mean that the group neglects to pursue terrorist attacks on its neighboring enemies and enemies overseas. Since its inception, Islamic State has carried out numerous attacks across the world, including two large-scale, coordinated attacks in France that resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths. It has also inspired rogue actors to act on its behalf. These attacks include shootings in San Bernardino and Florida, carried out by individuals who pledged allegiance to ISIS. Below is a graphic created by *The New York Times* documenting all attacks inspired or coordinated by Islamic State from the group’s inception to March of 2016.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>16</sup> Novenario, Celine Marie I, “Differentiating Al Qaeda and Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:11, 953-967, March 15, 2016, 955.

<sup>17</sup> Yourish, Karen, Watkins, Derek, and Giratikanon, Tom, “Where ISIS Has Directed and Inspired Attacks Around the World,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2016.

Islamic State's use of terrorism serves several purposes, including intimidating enemies both near and far, broadening sectarian rifts, attracting sympathizers to join the fight, and inspiring sympathizers to carry out similar acts around the world. In his 2015 paper, Byman writes, "Its use of terrorism, therefore, should be considered within this context: most, but not all, of what Islamic State does with regard to terrorism is an adjunct to its effort to advance its state power by fomenting sectarian conflict and intimidating rivals."<sup>18</sup>

However, bolstered opposition and recent military defeats in Islamic State's territory could be forcing a shift in the group's operations. Islamic State's territorial hold is currently on the decline. Since the "peak" of Islamic State's territorial control in August 2014, a July 2016 report by *The New York Times* states that the group has lost "about 45 percent of its territory in Syria and 20 percent in Iraq."<sup>19</sup> Evidence of a possible shift in operations exists in IS' new magazine, *Rumiyah*, which the group started publishing in September 2016. The Clarion Project compares *Rumiyah* with *Dabiq*, calling it an "easier to read, less theological magazine," which in its first two editions focuses more heavily on "operations outside the group's heartland, including terrorist attacks carried out by the group in Kenya and elsewhere."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in a speech given by al-Adnani shortly before his death in May 2016, he encouraged IS sympathizers to carry out attacks in their home countries: "If the tyrants have closed in your faces the door of

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<sup>18</sup>Byman, Daniel, "Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016) pp. 127-165, 13.

<sup>19</sup>Sarah Almukhtar, Sarah Wallace, and Time Watkins, "ISIS Has Lost Many of the Key Places it Once Controlled," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Elliot Friedland, "Latest Issue of Rumiyah Magazine Released," *The Clarion Project*, October 11, 2016.

hijrah [migration], then open in their face the door of jihad and make their act a source of pain for them,” and further, “The smallest action you do in the heart of their land is dearer to us than the largest action by us, and more effective and more damaging to them.”<sup>21</sup> Continued losses in territorial control could necessitate a decentralization of IS, pushing it to function more as a terrorist group than an insurgency group. Even so, IS still explicitly maintains its principal goal of “*baqiya wa tatamadad*” (lasting and expanding).<sup>22</sup>

With its main objective remaining the establishment and expansion a Caliphate, Islamic State depicts its project as the “fulfillment of a prophecy.”<sup>23</sup> Among the prophetic sunna, Muhammad is recorded to have prophesied the coming of the Mahdi, a figure who would come and lead the Ummah in a fight to achieve an Islamic world peace before Judgment Day.<sup>24</sup> Islamic State sees the creation of a Caliphate as a necessary step in achieving the Islamic world order prophesied by Muhammad in recorded Hadith. Islamic State’s “apocalyptic strand” is evidenced throughout materials released by the group.<sup>25</sup> For instance, in Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani’s June 2014 speech declaring an Islamic Caliphate, Islamic State’s spokesman cites Hadith to iterate the promise of the group’s mission: “Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He

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<sup>21</sup> Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, and James McAuley, “Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Lister, “Profiling Islamic State,” *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, 2014, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Byman, Daniel, “Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016) pp. 127-165, 140.

<sup>24</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, “The Approach of the Armageddon? An Islamic Perspective,” [Islamsupremecouncil.org](http://Islamsupremecouncil.org), 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Byman, Daniel, “Understanding Islamic State - A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016) pp. 127-165, 137.

granted it to those before them” [An-Nūr: 55].<sup>26</sup> In establishing a state that unites the Muslim people under “true” Islam, Islamic State professes that God will grant the group success and cause a return to an Islamic world order that harkens back to the days of Muhammad and his followers.

This apocalypticism shows up in IS’ fight to gain control of Dabiq, the place where Muhammad said victory would be won over the Romans. Although the small town is not inherently tactically significant, the group has expended valuable resources and fighters in order to attain and hold onto it. The group also applies the prophetic claims of Muhammad to its depiction of its adversaries. In *Dabiq*, IS frequently refers to the U.S. and other opposition forces as “Crusaders,” thus maintaining the prophetic language of Muhammad, who was at the time using “Crusaders” to refer to the Romans. In accordance with Hadith, the group professes that the Mahdi will come once the crusaders are defeated at Dabiq.

Within the territory it holds, Islamic State has stayed true to its ambitions of establishing a Caliphate in which it imposes its version of Sharia law. Within this self-declared caliphate, IS attempts to carry out the basic functions of a state. While Islamic State relies heavily on fear to suppress those it rules, it has also set up a system in which it attempts to gain the trust and loyalty of local populations in hopes of making long-term gains in its pursuit of an expanding Caliphate. In her exploration of Islamic State’s state operations, Mara Revkin of *Foreign Affairs* writes that the group has set out to operate as legitimate state institutions do—on the basis of a “social contract”; Islamic State provides

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<sup>26</sup>“ISIS Spokesman Declares Caliphate, Rebrands Group as ‘Islamic State’,” *Site Intel Group*, June 29, 2014.

services and protections while imposing “reciprocal obligations” on the people.<sup>27</sup> Islamic State offers to provide what it deems “justice and accountability, protection, and services” to its *ri’ya* (the term the group uses to refer to the people living under its rule; its citizenry) if the people in turn pledge “exclusive allegiance” to the group and give “material support for governance and jihad through either tax payments or military service.”<sup>28</sup>

Islamic State’s execution of its promised law and order is highly suspect. The “justice” IS purports to provide those living under its rule is often nothing more than the use of regular public executions to deter opposition. Islamic State kills any who challenge it; this includes individuals speaking or acting out against the group in any way as well as people of minority groups whose very existence Islamic State sees as effrontery. In March of 2016, collected findings led the United States to declare that Islamic State is guilty of genocide.<sup>29</sup> Within areas it controls, IS has committed mass atrocities against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi’ites. It has also carried out brutal acts of violence against the Sunni population that it purports to support. Public executions, often by beheadings, are a daily occurrence. Islamic State has raided Yazidi settlements with the sole intention of taking women and girls to traffic and sell them to Islamic State members as sex slaves.<sup>30</sup> In areas taken from IS, government forces have discovered mass, unmarked graves where

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<sup>27</sup> Mara Revkin, “ISIS Social Contract,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 12, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> “U.S. Declares ISIS Guilty of Genocide,” *CBS News*, March 17, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2015.

men and boys were mowed down by gunfire.<sup>31</sup> However, the group still paints itself as a legitimate state that operates on the basis of a social contract.

On IS' side of this purported contractual exchange, the group attempts to provide goods and services as well as to promote and conserve its version of Sharia law and Islamic practices. According to a 2014 report released by the Institute for the Study of War, Islamic State "divides governance into two broad categories: Administration and Muslim Services."<sup>32</sup> The Muslim Services branch operates with varying degrees of efficiency depending on IS' level of control of particular cities. In Raqqa, for instance, the group created a body called the Department of Muslim Services which was designed to handle the distribution of goods and services as well as to carry out service projects, including "humanitarian aid, bakeries, water and electricity."<sup>33</sup> In Raqqa and elsewhere, much of IS' Muslim Service regional bodies are stymied by IS' own campaign against any and all opposition. The group frequently destroys pre-existing service-provision structures and fails to replace them due to a lack of resources and expertise.<sup>34</sup> On the other side of its governance structure, the administration branch deals with "Islamic outreach, Sharia institutes, elementary education, law enforcement (both local and religious), courts, recruitment, and tribal relations."<sup>35</sup> Regarding IS' use of taxation, the Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence stated, "Make no mistake: This is not taxation in return for services or even for real protection. It is theft, pure and

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<sup>31</sup> Arwa Damon and Raja Rezek, "CNN Exclusive: Syrian town left scarred by opposition group ISIS' brutal rule," February 17, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Charles C. Carris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 2014, 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

simple. The money ISIL pilfers is being exchanged not for a guarantee of safety but for the temporary absence of harm.”<sup>36</sup> IS also shows signs of technical inexperience when it comes to distributing resources. For instance, the group’s attempt to use a dam within its territory resulted in dropping water levels in a nearby lake, “threatening drinking water supplies” for parts of Aleppo and Raqqa in 2014.<sup>37</sup> In addition to inexperience, many of the projects undertaken by IS aim to provide material for its propaganda campaign to attract more members rather than to take into consideration the long-term impacts of its projects.<sup>38</sup> Materials released by Islamic State depict its Caliphate as a successful, highly functioning entity with well-cared-for citizens, but the reality of life within the Caliphate is much more grim. A video purportedly released by the group in April 2016 shows images of everyday life in Raqqa: a group of students being directed by a teacher in a classroom, roadwork and construction projects, thriving marketplaces, police enforcing Sharia Law, etc.<sup>39</sup> However, news reports depict a city rife with power outages, food shortages, brutality, and suppression.<sup>40</sup> Even if Islamic State does not come close to reciprocating the payment of its people in its provision of services, the group is able to maintain the minimal level of local support necessary to survive simply because it is able offer more than the corrupt or inept alternative factions in the region. IS can simply strive to be the “lesser evil” amongst the other military forces jockeying for power.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen at The Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, ‘Attacking ISIL’s Financial Foundation’,” *treasury.gov*, October 23, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Charles C. Carris and Samuel Reynolds, “ISIS Governance in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, July 2014, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> “Watch: New ISIS Video Attempts to Show Functioning Society in ‘Capital’ Raqqa, Syria,” *Heavy.com*, April 4, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> “Life under Isis in Raqqa and Mosul: ‘We’re living in a giant prison’,” *The Guardian*, December 9, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Mara Revkin, “ISIS Social Contract,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 12, 2016.

To maintain itself, Islamic State relies on multiple revenue sources. While the group receives some funding from individuals in the Gulf States along with ransoms for hostages, most of its revenue comes from black market oil sales, extortion, and taxation.<sup>42</sup> In a 2014 speech, the U.S. Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen, identified illicit oil trade as the key source for IS funding. He reported that the group was able to make full use of the oil fields captured in its territory by selling oil to a number of groups at reduced prices, including the Kurds, Turkey, and the Assad regime.<sup>43</sup> Even though Islamic State has explicitly declared all three of these forces an enemy of Islam and all that the group hopes to achieve, it does not refrain from selling them oil to profit by. By targeting oil infrastructure under IS' control, counterinsurgency efforts have greatly hindered IS' ability to produce and sell oil. Even so, the group was still estimated in July of 2016 to bring in approximately 23 million USD a month.<sup>44</sup> In contrast with earlier reports, a 2016 Foreign Affairs report notes that, "the organization is far more dependent on the cooperation of ordinary civilians than was previously believed." According to recent estimates, the diverse array of taxes collected by the group accounts for six times as much revenue as its oil revenue.<sup>45</sup> Islamic State has established what *The New York Times* refers to as a "predatory and violent bureaucracy."<sup>46</sup> This system of taxation and extortion includes a slew of religious, property, and agricultural taxes, traffic tickets, utility bills, and even "fines for smoking or wearing the wrong

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<sup>42</sup> "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen at The Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 'Attacking ISIL's Financial Foundation'," *treasury.gov*, October 23, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

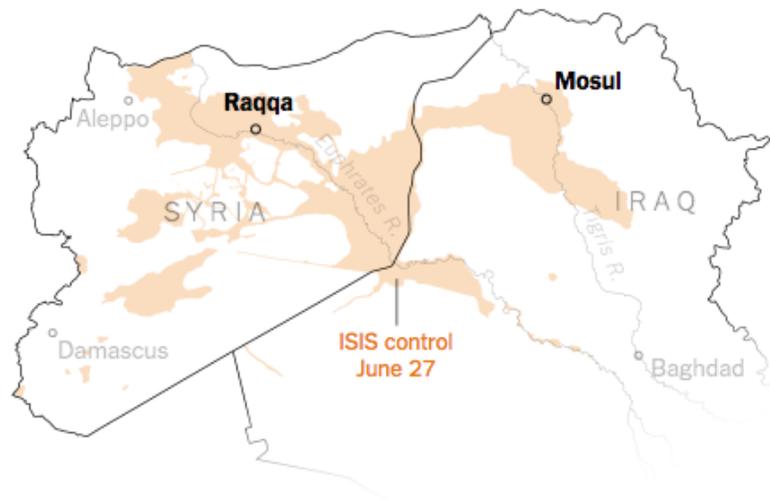
<sup>44</sup> Sarah Almkhtar, Sarah Wallace, and Time Watkins, "ISIS Has Lost Many of the Key Places it Once Controlled," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Mara Revkin, "Foreign Affairs: ISIS Social Contract," January 12, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Rosenberg, Nicholas Kulish, and Steven Lee Meyers, "Predatory Islamic State Wrings Money From Those It Rules," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2015.

clothes.”<sup>47</sup> As counterinsurgency forces continue to target IS infrastructure and oil fields, the group will likely continue to rely more heavily on the people within its areas of control.

Despite counterinsurgency efforts, Islamic State still maintains control of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. These include significant locations such as Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. The map below shows ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria as of June 27, 2016.<sup>48</sup>



The group has also expanded its reach to other parts of the globe by calling on remote Jihadist groups to pledge their allegiance to IS. As of December 2015, 43 groups have pledged their allegiance to Islamic State<sup>49</sup>, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. Rohan Gunaratna, an international terrorism expert at S. Rajaratnam School of Security Studies in Singapore projects that Islamic State will designate “a

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<sup>47</sup> Sarah Almkhatar, Sarah Wallace, and Time Watkins, “ISIS Has Lost Many of the Key Places it Once Controlled,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> ISIS Live UA Map, November 11, 2016.

<sup>49</sup>“Islamic State’s 43 Global Affiliates World Map,” *intelcenter.com*, December 15, 2015.

satellite of the caliphate” in the Philippines “in the coming year.”<sup>50</sup> Although Islamic State has burgeoning support abroad, its central command and central focus remain within Iraq and Syria and the near surrounding regions. It continues to call on individuals to make the journey to fight within the Middle East region to establish a caliphate stronghold.

Islamic State’s fighting forces within Iraq and Syria are essential to the group’s ability to hold onto its identity as a group striving to establish a Caliphate. The group’s fighters are comprised of an array of individuals from across the globe. As of June 2015, the intelligence community estimated that IS had a total number of fighters ranging anywhere from 20,000 to 31,000.<sup>51</sup> Although Islamic State identifies itself as a religiously motivated group, a considerable number of its ranks include former Ba’athists who were left jobless by the de-Ba’athification policy implemented by Iraq’s transition government in 2003.<sup>52</sup> Liz Sly of the *Washington Post* attributes much of Islamic State’s success to the de-Ba’athification policy, of which she writes, “At a stroke, 400,000 members of the defeated Iraqi army were barred from government employment, denied pensions — and also allowed to keep their guns.”<sup>53</sup> While al-Zarqawi remained critical of former Ba’athists due to their secularist associations, al-Baghdadi took full advantage of this disenfranchised force, appointing many who were prominent military figures under Saddam’s rule to leadership positions within Islamic State.<sup>54</sup> The heavy presence of

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<sup>50</sup>Per Liljas, “ISIS Is Making Inroads in the Southern Philippines and the Implications for Asia Are Alarming,” *Time*, April 14, 2016.

<sup>51</sup>“Robert Windrem, “ISIS By the Numbers: Foreign Fighter Total Keeps Growing,” *NBC News*, June 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Liz Sly, “The Hidden Hand Behind Islamic State Militants? Saddam Hussein’s,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

former Ba'athists within the highest ranks of Islamic State gives rise to questions regarding the group's self-purported religious dogmatism.

Foreign fighters also make up a large portion of the group's total fighters. According to the Brookings Institute, the influx of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria exceeds foreign fighter flows during any other conflict in modern history.<sup>55</sup> In a December 2015 assessment of foreign fighter flows to Syria and Iraq, the Soufjan Group reported that an estimated 27,000 to 31,000 individuals had entered the region to fight for IS and other warring factions.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to determine which groups these individuals join once they enter Iraq and Syria, but based on the size and strength of Islamic State, a large portion of these fighters undeniably make the journey to fight for IS. The majority of foreign fighters have come from Jordan, Tunisia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia.<sup>57</sup> However, fighters are by no means limited to these regions. The Soufjan Group report notes foreign fighters from "at least 86 countries" now fighting within Iraq and Syria.<sup>58</sup> A notable amount of individuals come from countries in the West, especially from Western European countries. From June 2014 to December 2015, foreign fighters stemming from Western Europe doubled, bringing the total number of foreign fighters coming from this region to an estimated 5,000.<sup>59</sup> Among these fighters, the majority have come from France, the UK, Germany, and Belgium.<sup>60</sup> Fighters stemming from North America also increased during this time, though their numbers remain well below 1,000 individuals.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Lister, "Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?" *Brookings Doha Center*, 2015, 1.

<sup>56</sup> "Foreign Fighters," *The Soufjan Group*, December 2015, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

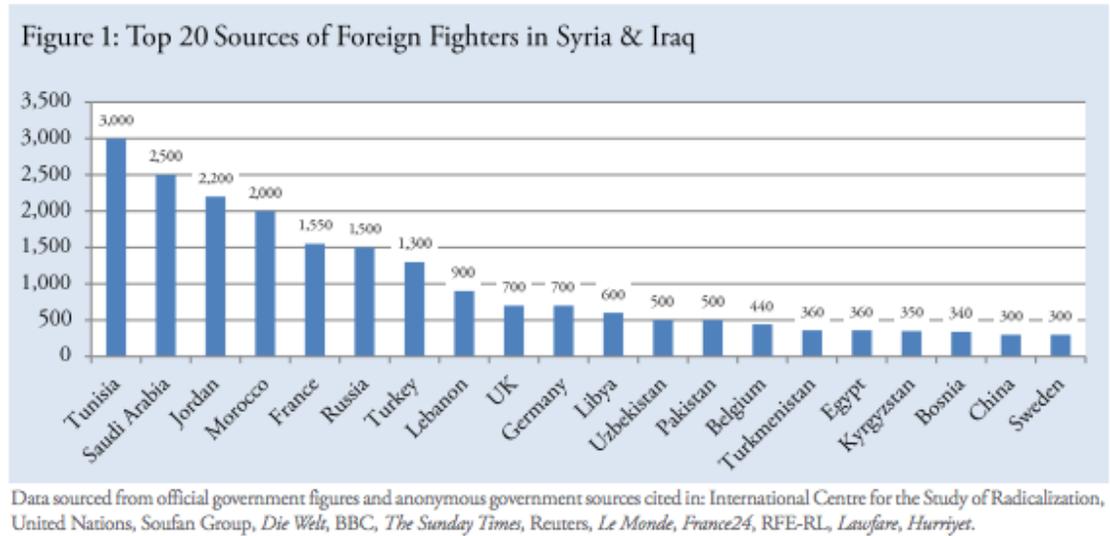
<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The graph below, created by the Brookings Institute, delineates the number of foreign fighters that journeyed to Syria and Iraq from the beginning of the conflict up until December 2015.<sup>62</sup>



Reports from U.S. military officials in late 2016 have claimed that the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria has significantly diminished and is likely to continue to do so.<sup>63</sup> Islamic State has relied heavily on pathways through Turkey for its foreign recruits to travel to join the group. IS made use of pre-existing trafficking networks in Turkey by pressuring and even threatening Turkish smugglers formerly engaged in the movement of small goods and fuel into smuggling in new IS recruits.<sup>64</sup> However, increased pressure from the West and the threat that IS poses to Turkey’s own border has led the Turkish government to bulk up its border control, cutting off many of the pathways formerly available to potential IS foreign fighters.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Lister, “Returning Foreign Fighters: Criminalization or Reintegration?” *Brookings Doha Center*, 2015, 2.

<sup>63</sup> “Is the Number of Fighters Joining ISIS Really Plummeting?” *Newsweek*, April 28, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, “A Path to ISIS: Through a Porous Turkish Border,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2015.

In addition to the decreased inflow of foreign fighters, Jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria are experiencing an outpour of foreign fighters returning to their home countries. With a return rate of 20-30% (as of December 2015) of foreign fighters from Western countries, Western governments have raised serious concerns about the threat these returnees pose.<sup>65</sup> While many foreign fighters return due to disenchantment with the jihadi movements they fought for and become inactive upon their return, not all returnees abandon jihad. One terrorist attack that killed four in Brussels and multiple foiled terrorist plots in the West have been carried out by individuals returning home after fighting for Islamic State.<sup>66</sup> Even if relatively few returning foreign fighters feel obliged to carry out attacks, the threat undoubtedly exists. The deadly nature of the threat conjures deep concerns irrelative to the number of likely active Jihadists amongst returnees. Even one present among hundreds of inactive returnees could mean the mass murder of innocent civilians.

The unprecedented flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria over the course of the past several years is likely attributed, at least in part, to Islamic State's heavy, well-organized, and skillful presence online. The group has taken complete advantage of social media platforms to disseminate its message worldwide. David P. Fidler of the Council on Foreign Relations compares IS' online activity to other terrorist organizations, stating, "Islamic State is more strategic online, demonstrates greater social media sophistication, and operates in cyberspace on a larger scale and intensity than previous terrorist groups."<sup>67</sup> The group is highly active on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, and other

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>67</sup> David P. Fidler, "Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet," *Council on Foreign Relations*,

social media platforms. It utilizes the structure of these platforms by employing a multilevel dissemination strategy. For instance, on Twitter, the group designates several media-experienced members to craft and post its content and then uses a second-tier group of members to post the content to accounts managed by the group which are then spread further by its followers and sympathizers.<sup>68</sup> The group also uses bots (artificial accounts) and apps designed to create more traffic to and from accounts it runs.<sup>69</sup> In addition to its social media operations, the group produces two monthly online magazines (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*) and videos (mostly through its production company, *al-Hayat Media Center*) that air in a multitude of languages in attempt to reach a wide audience. In June of 2016, the group started *al-Fatahin*, a newspaper aimed at conjuring recruits for the group from Southeast Asia.<sup>70</sup> Islamic State's videos, magazines, and newspaper are produced with high-quality equipment by individuals who clearly demonstrate experience in their fields of production.

These materials serve multiple purposes, often at the same time. For instance, by posting a video of the beheading of a captured rival militant, the group can simultaneously intimidate its adversaries and prove its ruthless dedication to its principles to win over potential recruits who may also be considering giving their support to rival Jihadi groups. Posting photos of students within its territory learning the tenets of Islam in a classroom portrays the state's functionality and its dedication to Islam. Scenes such as this may appeal to individuals whose prior options now seem a violent chaos in comparison to the order depicted within Islamic State's territory. Due to its dependence

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<sup>68</sup> J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census," *Brookings Institute*, No. 20, March 2015.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Jenny Kwok, "ISIS has started a Newspaper to Recruit Southeast Asian Fighters," *Time*, July 11, 2016.

on military numbers for its survival as an Islamic state, its primary objective when producing and releasing all of its materials is attracting susceptible individuals to come join IS ranks. Videos showing young men firing RPGs in slow-motion create a sense of action and adventure.<sup>71</sup> Passages within its magazine speak of the obligation to perform hijrah (migration) to Islamic State.<sup>72</sup> Messages about the enslavement of Yazidi women as sex slaves and wives appeal to potential recruits' sexual desires and a sense of security. As stated earlier, the group recognizes the hindrances put on the migration of potential groups and has encouraged those who can't make the journey to carry out attacks within their own countries. Shortly before his death in May 2016, IS spokesman al-Adnani did just that in a recorded speech. He stated, "If the tyrants have closed in your faces the door of hijrah [migration], then open in their face the door of jihad and make their act a source of pain for them."<sup>73</sup> The group prioritizes strikes against enemy civilians over enemy domestic military targets because it sees the former as more impactful.<sup>74</sup> Now that governments are enacting stricter travel policies, many who would have traveled to fight in Iraq or Syria but who are now unable to may feel the need to turn their frustrations on their own domestic population. Adnani's speech indicates that IS clearly understands this development and hopes to capitalize on it.

In outlining Islamic State's modus operandi, it is possible to draw several main conclusions about the nature of the group. Islamic State is clearly a widespread, organized, and successful movement. It has established a territorial stronghold with

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<sup>71</sup> "Flames of War," al-Hayat Media Center video, 55:13, Posted by Clarion Project, September 21, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> "The Return of the Kilafah," *Dabiq*, Issue 1, July 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan and James McAuley, "Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge," September 9, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

military numbers and resources that allow it—for the time being—to act of its own volition. In its pursuit of a Caliphate, Islamic State has committed genocide, mass rape, and countless other atrocities, all in the name of Islam. It has caused massive carnage, a refugee crises, starvation, and immense suffering. Further, it has fueled anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments worldwide. Perhaps most significant, IS has put forth an image which individuals around the world are buying into. They are buying into it enough to leave their homes to go and fight for IS, and they are doing so in great enough numbers that IS has been able to maintain its survival and continue committing widespread atrocities. Islamic State has successfully identified and reached out to individuals willing to fight IS' war, to slaughter Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to attack and kill civilians, and to end their own lives.

## **Islamic State Materials: Analyzing IS Recruiting Success in the West**

The significant support that Islamic State has received and the severity of the atrocities enabled by this support demand a closer examination of the factors that lead individuals to join its ranks. Islamic State materials provide a window by which to try and answer these questions. Building upon my analysis of IS materials in the previous section, I will explore the motivations of those who join this movement so that better countermeasures can be developed to weaken IS now and to protect against (or at least be better equipped to fight) future movements like it.

A bulk of news reporting exists on the issue of Islamic State's online materials. The quality and quantity of and the brutality depicted in IS videos, photos, and magazines have captivated and horrified the public, and news agencies have responded to this in full. Countless reports have been made detailing the contents of the latest Islamic State videos and statements released for Western audiences such as CNN coverage of the appearance of British hostage John Cantille in IS videos<sup>75</sup> and re-postings by Fox News of IS execution videos<sup>76</sup>. Beyond reports that simply inform readers of IS activity, some delve into an exploration of the tactics that IS uses to recruit fighters from the West and around the world. They often recount stories by individuals from the West who were recruited by or even joined the group and later returned to their home countries for one reason or another. For instance, *The New York Times* published a detailed account of one American woman's online encounters with IS recruiters and their attempts to convince her to travel

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<sup>75</sup> Emanuella Grinberg, "ISIS hostage John Cantille appears in ISIS propaganda video," *CNN*, December 8, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Kitty Logan, "ISIS Video Shows Children Murdering Prisoners," *Fox News*, January 9, 2017.

to Syria.<sup>77</sup> These reports relay detailed information about how Islamic State recruits, but they typically do not examine why these recruitment strategies see success.

Considering the recent rise of Islamic State, a fair amount of scholarly research has also been done with regard to the content contained in Islamic State materials, such as the messaging strategies in its magazine issues and videos. The bulk of this research is done with the intent to track the various appeals made by IS, either across the spectrum of the materials it produces or the shift in the appeals made in its materials over the course of the group's existence. Most of these reports categorize the types of appeals made in Islamic State materials in order to summarize the strategies of the group. For instance, in a 2016 study, Celine Marie I. Novenario does a quantitative analysis of the frequency of various appeals made in *Dabiq* and al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine.<sup>78</sup> Novenario parses the appeals into five categories: Attrition, Intimidation, Provocation, Spoiling, and Outbidding. She then sorts the appeals made in all existing issues of *Dabiq* and *Inspire* into the five categories to note their frequency of occurrence. Novenario uses this data to draw conclusions about the differences in overarching goals and defining principles of IS and al-Qaeda. In a 2015 report done through The Brookings Institute, Alberto M. Fernandez tracks the shift in tone and style of appeals made by Islamic State as indicators of broader changes in the group's priorities and identity.<sup>79</sup> Fernandez similarly sorts appeals made by Islamic State in its online materials. In his analysis of IS materials,

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<sup>77</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Celine Marie I. Novenario, "Differentiating Al Qaeda and Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, March 15, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Alberto M. Fernandez, "Here to stay and growing: Combatting ISIS propaganda networks," *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, October 2015.

including videos produced by al-Hayat media center and Tumblr posts, Fernandez cites urgency, agency, authenticity, and victory as the key methods of appeal.

The reports made by Novenario and Fernandez reflect the methodology and purpose of the bulk of scholarly research done on IS materials thus far. By categorizing IS appeals into broad categories, these scholars have been able to make sense of a downpour of emotive images and statements put forth by Islamic State. These studies have aided in the characterization of Islamic State—its goals, its relationship with rival jihadist groups, its perception of its enemies as well as its perceptions of its own identity and cause. However, these reports do not extend their analysis of IS materials to a consideration of how these materials interact with the minds of susceptible individuals that consume them.

Few studies take the next step in their analysis of IS materials to consider how their content shapes the affective state and the actions of potential IS recruits. Of course, there are exceptions. For instance, in 2016, Haroro J. Ingram produced a study which he rightly claims “diverges” from “trends in the current literature” on Islamic State in its focus on the psychological processes by which IS’ online materials work to recruit English-speaking individuals.<sup>80</sup> Ingram analyzes several issues of *Dabiq* to develop what he calls an “interpretative framework” for understanding the process of remote radicalization. Similar to the studies of Fernandez and Novenario, Ingram sorts the appeals made in each issue of *Dabiq* into two main categories: Pragmatic and Perceptual appeals. From there, Ingram narrows his study to an analysis of the perceptual appeals because, Ingram determines, IS focuses on pragmatic factors when “targeting local

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<sup>80</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, “An Analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* Magazine,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, June 13, 2016, 1.

audiences and perceptual factors when targeting transnational audiences.”<sup>81</sup> He then breaks down perceptual appeals into three subcategories: Value, Dichotomy, and Crisis. He believes that the trifecta of these messaging techniques (appealing to morals, establishing a strong “Us” vs “Them” dichotomy, and creating perceptions of immediate and large-scale crisis) work to encourage or even convince susceptible individuals to join the group, either by traveling to Syria or acting on its behalf. Ingram’s study presents a valuable framework for considering how susceptible individuals interact with IS appeals, but it is limited by two main factors. Ingram neglects to consult various mediums of online materials and instead only uses content from *Dabiq* magazine to craft his framework. Considering IS’ written magazine publication likely draws a different consumer audience than, say, a fast-paced video or a Tweet, Ingram crafts a framework for radicalization to a psychological profile that may not be representative of the whole population of susceptible English-speaking individuals. In addition, while Ingram attempts to focus on the radicalization of English-speaking individuals, he does not spend much time in his report discussing how the use of value, dichotomy, and crisis acts on an audience specifically remote from the conflict in Iraq and Syria. For instance, he does not fully develop how IS messaging works to create a sense of crisis for individuals who do not have direct exposure to the conflict. Although Ingram provides solid groundwork for considering why materials produced by IS garner recruitment success, the scope of his explanatory framework remains limited.

Anthropologist Scott Atran has also presented a framework in attempt to understand the radicalization process. In June of 2016, Atran produced a report titled,

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5.

“The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict Across Cultures.” In it, Atran devises what he calls the Devoted Actor Theory in attempt to track the psychological pathways to acts of terrorism. He argues that acts of self-sacrifice and extreme violence result from the interplay of what he calls sacred values and identity fusion. “Sacred values,” Atran writes, “refer to any preferences regarding objects, beliefs, or practices that people treat as both incompatible or nonfungible with profane issues or economic goods.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, Sacred values are those values that are impervious to what are understood as rational cost-benefit determinations and cannot be compromised by material incentives. Identity fusion is the process by which an individual’s identity becomes inseparable from that of a particular collective identity. Atran argues that a willingness for self-sacrifice and committing acts of violence arises “when self identity becomes fused with a unique collective identity and when identity itself is fused with sacred values that provide all group members a similar sense of significance.”<sup>83</sup> Atran argues that such a fusion of individual identity to a group and the fusion of group identity (and consequently individual identity) to sacred values comes about through “intimate social networks of ‘imagined kin’” and fuels acts of terrorism when there is a perceived “existential threat from outside groups” (198). Said differently, the formation of a tight-knit group with a strong collective identity shaped by uncompromisable values is most likely to occur when the intragroup relations emulate familial bonds. Furthermore, members of the group are more likely to engage in terrorism when they believe there to be a grave threat to the existence of their group and its sacred

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<sup>82</sup> Scott Atran, “The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict Across Cultures,” *Current Anthropology* 57, S13 (June 2016): 194.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

values. Atran's report, however, does not look specifically at Islamic State or the messages it produces.

My analysis of Islamic State materials expands on the work done by Ingram and Atran to create a fuller explanation of the workings of IS messaging on its audience in the West. To ensure that my analysis accurately considers the makeup of the group of susceptible English-speaking individuals, I consider two different mediums of IS materials: Issues of *Dabiq* and videos from the al-Hayat Media Center. Specifically, I take representative pieces from each medium (two issues from *Dabiq* and two videos produced by al-Hayat). The two mediums were chosen under the assumption that the magazine publications and film productions put forth by Islamic State present different appeals in differing forms and therefore likely attract different audiences. While it includes battlefront photojournalism, *Dabiq* is largely comprised of editorial pieces and scripturally-based religious arguments. In contrast, videos produced by al-Hayat primarily feature highly visual depictions of battlefront action and life as an IS fighter.

In line with methods used by recent scholars, I categorize the various appeals made by Islamic State in its magazine and videos into two broad categories: Individual Appeals and Group Appeals. Individual appeals are those made in direct relation to the fears and desires of the individual without explicit ties to a group cause or group identity. In contrast, Group appeals use messages that connect the individual's fears and desires to a group cause or group identity.

After analyzing IS appeals within the context of these two categories, I devise my own interpretive framework to explain how IS materials interact with susceptible individuals in the West that consume them. I utilize the information gathered in the

analysis and incorporate empirical knowledge outlined in the first section as well as explanatory hypotheses presented by Ingram and Atran to create a framework that focuses specifically on the effect of IS materials on English-speaking individuals living in the West.

### *Analysis*

Fewer messages from Islamic State fall explicitly into the Individual appeals category than into the Group appeals category. In fact, IS often uses messages which denounce the pursuit of selfish desires. For instance, there are two pages in Issue 4 allocated to the idea that men who battle for “booty and fame” will “get nothing” from Allah.<sup>84</sup>

However, a closer consideration of IS materials reveals that the group pays diligent attention to individual desires. Although *Dabiq* denounces fighting for the sake of “booty” or “fame,” it also argues that the prospers that a fighter *does* receive from the spoils of war are deserved gifts from Allah. One article states that the “people of tawhid and obedience to Allah are more deserving of wealth than the people of kufr in Allah and shirk.” So, although IS says one shouldn’t fight for the sake of seeking out material gain, it also implies that material gain is a product of worthy battle that shall be won by those who fight with the group.

One of the most prevalent individual appeals made by Islamic State is the utilitarian appeal to the pleasure or the pain one will experience in the afterlife based on his actions in the current life. These appeals often claim that sacrifices in this life will lead to greater wealth in the afterlife. For instance, one passage in *Dabiq* writes, “A battalion of soldiers who battles fi sabilillah (for the sake of Allah) and gets its share of

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<sup>84</sup> “Ghanimah and Niyyah,” *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 30-31.

the booty receives in advance two thirds of their reward from the Hereafter and only one-third will remain (for the Hereafter). If they do not receive any booty, they will get their full reward.”<sup>85</sup> On a similar note, one British fighter in an IS recruitment video titled, “There is No Life Without Jihad” claims, “If you sacrifice something for Allah, Allah will give you seven hundred times more than this.”<sup>86</sup> Rather than denouncing the desire of the individual to seek pleasure and prosperity, IS claims that withholding from pursuing selfish desires right away will result in an increase in pleasure later on. Islamic State also makes this utilitarian argument in negative terms in order to play on the fears of potential recruits. Islamic State claims that those who do not join the fight will suffer endlessly in the afterlife. One British fighter in “There is No Life Without Jihad” states, “Know that if you fear death and that’s what prevents you, death will reach you anyway, but it will be more painful for you than those who get Shahada.”<sup>87</sup> The combination of negative and positive incentives for outcomes in the afterlife reinforces Islamic State’s call to fight by encouraging fighters to avoid pain and seek out pleasure.

Similarly, instead of denouncing sexual desires altogether, IS offers recruits an opportunity to fulfill those desires in a way that is “legal” within Islam. In an article of *Dabiq* titled, “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” IS argues for the enslavement of Yazidi women and children as concubines. Among several arguments for the use of concubines, the article proclaims that “a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation towards sin.”<sup>88</sup> It explains that a man can

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>86</sup> “There is No Life Without Jihad,” al-Hayat Media Center video, 13:26, Posted by jihadology.net, June 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 17.

have sex with his concubine and evade the sin of having a sexual relationship that defies Islamic law.<sup>89</sup> Instead of encouraging its readers to repress their sexual desires, this *Dabiq* article validates those desires and offers its readers a chance to act on them without religious consequence. In fact, the article pushes for the idea that concubines are a necessary piece of Islamic State's approach toward "the Hour," meaning the prophesied last battle that restores the Islamic world order. A passage near the end of the article implies this: "...it is interesting to note that slavery has been mentioned as one of the signs of the Hour."<sup>90</sup> By granting an opportunity for individuals to have "legal" sex outside marriage, IS appeals directly to the individual's sensuous desires. This appeal is likely to strike a chord with young males who live in communities or families which shame such desires and force the repression of them.

In its materials, Islamic State not only offers individuals a chance to express their aggression through sexual acts but also through acts of extreme violence. Islamic State's video footage of combat does not shy away from blood and gore. To the contrary, it focuses heavily on this aspect of combat. The last nearly fifteen minutes of "Flames of War" shows Islamic State fighters piling up dead and wounded opposition soldiers and shooting them at point blank as well as a mass execution of P.O.W.'s. Near the end of "Flames of War," an English-speaking IS fighter stands in front of kneeling POW's, yielding a gun. He gestures with the hand that holds the gun while he speaks of Islamic State's superior power. Other scenes show close-up shots of individual IS fighters pumping their guns in the air and smiling in celebration. All of these scenes convey to

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 15.

potential recruits the chance to become untethered from repressive forces and act with unrestrained aggression.

The fast-paced, highly visual, and action-focused nature of the al-Hayat videos fetishize combat in a way that *Dabiq* cannot. Where *Dabiq* calls on individuals to fight on the basis of duty, videos like “Flames of War” fetishize military combat to make it seem like an adventurous, fulfilling experience. Islamic State depicts military combat in its videos in such a way that it offers individuals an opportunity to live out a video game-like fantasy. Throughout “Flames of War,” there are numerous slow motion shots of fighters firing RPG’s and other large-scale artillery. These shots are often followed by audiovisual techniques that aim to mirror shell-shock (high-pitched noise, muffled sounds of surrounding action, blurred camera focus, etc.). The combat coverage is also often taken from first-person perspective (jerky close-ups of running through trenches, noise of someone’s heavy breathing, etc.). Both of these techniques are used in many first-person shooter video games because they intensify the action. It is likely that many susceptible individuals of recruitment age in the West play these types of games. Islamic State offers them a chance to turn the game into a reality.

IS also makes appeals to the individual on the basis of respect and prestige. For instance, the first issue of *Dabiq* includes “A Call to All Muslim Doctors, Engineers, Scholars, and Specialists” to come join Islamic State.<sup>91</sup> It argues, “People are ignorant of their religion and they thirst for those who can teach them and help them understand it.”<sup>92</sup> IS offers educated individuals a chance to boost their status and become respected experts in their line of work with Islamic State. The appeal to ambitious professionals is reified

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<sup>91</sup> “The World has Divided into Two Camps,” *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 10.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

through *Dabiq*'s depiction of IS' state-building projects, such as constructing roads and bridges, providing healthcare to the needy, establishing relations with regional tribes, and interpreting and enforcing Sharia Law. *Dabiq* gives the illusion of career opportunities for large-scale projects for which educated individuals could lead the community. The al-Hayat videos selected for the analysis do not make direct appeals to respect and prestige, but they exemplify the appeals through the manner in which they portray IS fighters from the West. In "There is No Life Without Jihad," all of the individuals featured speak with a sense of authority and knowledge. They speak in a matter-of-fact tone and address the camera with a direct but calm conviction. They appear as important figures imparting wisdom on their audience. This depiction of IS fighters from the West as respected, keynote individuals makes the attainment of such prestige upon joining the group seem possible.

The majority of appeals made by Islamic State are made within the context of group identity and group values. To strengthen its own identity, Islamic State heavily depends on its perceived foes. The group has created a rigid "Us" and "Them" dichotomy, leaving no room for a middle ground. *Dabiq* undoubtedly builds on this dichotomy. In an article titled "The Fading Grayzone," Islamic State quotes Osama Bin Laden: "So the world today is divided into two camps."<sup>93</sup> It warns that anyone who does not fully recognize the significance of Islamic State's mission "should review his faith before death suddenly takes him while he stands with one foot in the trench of the crusaders and the other in the trench of the hypocrites whilst claiming he is in the

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<sup>93</sup> "The Fading Grayzone," *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 43.

grayzone! The mujahid knows no grayzone.”<sup>94</sup> It continues, “He who aligns with [the Crusaders] by a single word falls into apostasy—extreme apostasy.”<sup>95</sup> IS furthers this dichotomy in its videos. One of the very first statements made in “Flames of War” is that you are either “with us or against us.”<sup>96</sup> “The message is clear. Neutrality does not exist. If you don’t actively support Islamic State, you oppose it; the result is turmoil, death, and suffering in the afterlife. From a recruitment perspective, it condemns passivity in those who may be entertaining the ideas of Islamic State and requires that they commit themselves wholly to the group.

Islamic State bolsters its “Us” and “Them” dichotomy by crafting juxtapositions between the two. Where the ingroup is good, just, brave, and holy, the outgroup is evil, amoral, cowardly, and dirty. One of the places this becomes most evident is in *Dabiq’s* images of wartime casualties. Images associated with the enemy typically depict one of two scenes. The first are images of disfigured, often faceless corpses piled on top of each other. They give the impression that Islamic State’s enemies are “filthy” (a word frequently used in IS materials to describe its enemies) and subhuman. This dehumanization of enemy soldiers by IS members is demonstrated clearly when one IS fighter in “Flames of War” is seen rapidly firing at the corpse of an opposition fighter at point blank, shouting, “Be gone you dog, you filth!”<sup>97</sup> “Flames of War” employs the same tactics by putting a dark overlay on shots of George Bush and Barack Obama while brightening the exposure of its own fighters so that they seem bathed in light. In one part

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>96</sup> “Flames of War,” al-Hayat Media Center video, 55:13, Posted by Clarion Project, September 21, 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

of the film, the narrator even describes how “light glowed from the Mujahidin.”<sup>98</sup> The second kind of wartime images commonly shown are those of deceased Sunni women and children accompanied by text attributing the deaths to IS’ enemies. Islamic State capitalizes fully on the carnage resulting from U.S. airstrikes to paint the U.S. as a malicious entity that intends to degrade and to kill all Muslims.

In response, Islamic State frames itself as the defender of justice and the protector of innocent Muslims. In both Issue 1 and Issue 4 of *Dabiq*, images of dead children are followed by segments displaying “retaliation” through rocket launches and beheadings. The theme of Islamic State as protector is evident throughout *Dabiq*. It plays on a narrative of victimization in order to cast itself as the entity that is leading the fight for Muslim safety and dignity. One passage reads, “The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect - the time has come for them to rise.”<sup>99</sup>

By making those opposing the group look like villainous aggressors toward Muslims, Islamic State implores individuals who identify with those being oppressed to act. *Dabiq* plays heavily on a sense of duty to fight for one’s kin. One passage asks its readers, “How can you enjoy life and sleep while not aiding your brothers, not casting fear into the hearts of the cross worshippers, and not responding to their strikes with multitudes more?”<sup>100</sup> IS fighters from the West shown sitting in a conversational semicircle in “There is No Life Without Jihad” communicate similar messages. One

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “A New Era has Arrived of Might and Dignity for the Muslims,” *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 9.

<sup>100</sup> “Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful,” *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 9.

British fighter implores, “Ask yourself is this what I’ve selected and chosen?...While you know your brothers are out there on the front lines facing the bullets, the bombs, and everything the enemy of Allah has while you’re sitting in comfort, while you’re sleeping, while you’re going shopping, they’re giving their blood, they’re sleeping on the floor....”<sup>101</sup>

Islamic State further differentiates itself from other groups by centering its messages around its mission to create a Caliphate. In regard to establishing a Caliphate, one article in *Dabiq*’s first issue claims it is a feat that “many religious people have shunned and avoided on account of the hardship it entails itself and on account of the hardship entailed in working to establish it.”<sup>102</sup> *Dabiq* claims this is not so with Islamic State. The magazine puts forth the idea that IS’ willingness to pursue such a hard task proves it is the only legitimate force fighting for Islam.

Instead of making its military defeats look easy, IS plays up the asymmetrical nature of the fight (IS being the side with less force and numbers that “the crusaders”) to bolster the legitimacy of its mission. IS repeatedly notes that its foes have superior U.S.-supplied weaponry in its magazine and video coverage of military battles. One fighter in “There is No Life Without Jihad” speaks about Islamic State’s victories over its opposition: “They train their whole lives and they have got these new weapons and we’re wiping them...day by day...This is proof that Allah is with us.”<sup>103</sup> When IS rhetorically

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<sup>101</sup> “There is No Life Without Jihad,” al-Hayat Media Center video, 13:26, Posted by jihadology.net, June 2014.

<sup>102</sup> “Part 3: The Concept of Imamah is from the Millah of Ibrahim,” *Dabiq*, Issue 1, 24.

<sup>103</sup> “There is No Life Without Jihad,” al-Hayat Media Center video, 13:26, Posted by jihadology.net, June 2014.

pits itself against all the odds, its victories become miraculous; they become testaments to Allah's support for the group's mission.

### *Framework*

My own analysis of group appeals made in IS materials reveals a radicalization process of susceptible English-speaking individuals that reifies the work of Ingram and Atran. Evidence in my analysis suggests the importance of Ingram's trifecta of messaging techniques (Value, Dichotomy, and Crisis) in convincing susceptible individuals to join Islamic State. Further, evidence brought out in my analysis suggests that the interplay of value, dichotomy, and crisis in Islamic State's messages mobilize radicalization through a process that can be explained by Atran's Devoted Actor Theory.

The nature of the group appeals in IS materials indicate a process of identity fusion, namely the fusion of susceptible individuals' identities to Islamic State's group identity. IS clearly works to draw a distinct line between itself and the rest of the world. It removes the "gray zone" of neutrality and claims that all who are not with the group are against it. In turn, Islamic State paints itself as good, just, brave, and holy, and its foes (which include everyone not supporting the group) as evil, amoral, cowardly, and dirty. In the West, this rigid dichotomy works to alienate individuals from the local, regional, and national societies from which they likely already feel distant. Someone who identifies himself as "other" within his society and is likely treated by those around him as an outsider may find more similarities with the community that Islamic State depicts in

its online materials. Islamic State renders distinct identities for itself and its foes that push susceptible individuals to align their own identities with that of the ingroup in order to escape the isolation and shame that comes from affiliation with the outgroup.

In accordance with the Devoted Actor Theory, Islamic State has adopted sacred values which cannot be compromised and which are essential to the group's identity. Foremost in Islamic State's values is the creation of a Caliphate. Establishing a physical Caliphate is the crux of Islamic State's mission, as well as the key characteristic differentiating it from rival factions. Most importantly, the Caliphate is the key factor in fulfilling the prophetic narrative (establishing a Caliphate, spreading "Islam" all over the world," defeating the Crusaders in one final battle, and restoring Islamic world order before the Final Hour) summoned heavily throughout IS materials. Consequently, Islamic State depends on the possession of land for its existence as the legitimate force it claims to be. This dependence necessitates violent action when its land (and therefore its mission) is threatened.

As both Atran and Ingram discuss, Islamic State's materials evoke a sense of crisis. For English-speaking individuals who do not interact directly with the conflict, Islamic State creates an acute sense of crisis by portraying Muslims as victims and the West and its regional allies as villains. Islamic State crafts a conspiratorial narrative that makes it seem as though Western powers and what it refers to as its "regional puppets" are waging a crusade against Muslims.<sup>104</sup> People in the West are seen as either committing or condoning horrible atrocities against innocent Muslims. It then becomes

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<sup>104</sup> "Flames of War," al-Hayat Media Center video, 55:13, Posted by Clarion Project, September 21, 2014.

the duty of those individuals living in the West who identify with Islamic State to stop the Crusaders and restore peace and dignity to Muslims.

While my analysis of group appeals proves consistent with the work of Ingram and Atran, my analysis of individual appeals made by Islamic State suggests that individual-based incentives play a larger role in convincing recruits from the West to join the group than Atran or Ingram pay note. My analysis of IS materials indicates that, while the process of radicalization laid out by Ingram and Atran explains the pathway for individuals to carrying out violent action for a group cause, some susceptible individuals in the West may initially join the group out of a desire for personal gain as much as, or perhaps more than, out of identification with the particular group they are joining.

Islamic State advertises to individuals in the West a chance to escape the hollow, aimless feeling that often accompanies life within a materialistic society to experience an action-packed adventure with a clear objective. One British IS fighter in “There is No Life Without Jihad” states, “To all my brothers living in the West, I know how you feel...when I used to live there...In your heart, you feel depressed...the cure for the depression is Jihad fi sabilillah (for the sake of God). You feel like you have no honor...come to Jihad and feel the honor we are feeling. Feel the happiness that we are feeling.” Individual appeals made by Islamic State offer potential recruits the chance to experience happiness, a sense of purpose, power, and license to express their aggression. Instead of only appealing to susceptible Muslim individuals on the basis of Islam, Islamic State casts its web to reach thrill-seeking individuals who may not even be religious at the time of their encounter with IS materials but who feel aimless, underappreciated, or oppressed in their current existence.

Within the lens of individual appeals, it could be argued that Islamic State's limited-time-offer for glory is just as important, if not more important, than evoking a sense of crisis to the process of pushing susceptible individuals to actually take the step to join the group. My analysis of IS materials indicates that a perceived significance of this particular moment in history may lead English-speaking individuals to take it upon themselves to travel to IS' territory or to act on its behalf. Islamic State's prophetic narrative marks the present moment as one of historic significance, one that all previous events have been leading up to. As such, Islamic State creates a sense of urgency in those who are considering joining the group, and the decision to join becomes time-sensitive. If one does not join Islamic State in time, he will be grouped in with the Kufir (the disbelievers) and suffer at the hands of Islamic State (and ultimately Allah), whose victory has been predestined. One IS fighter captured this perfectly when he said, "You can be here in these golden times...or you can be on the sidelines..."<sup>105</sup> This sense of urgency leads individuals living in the West who subscribe to the significance of this time in history to demonstrate their support for Islamic State in order to reap the benefits of the group's rise to power and to evade eternal suffering.

### *Conclusion*

Islamic State is not crafting new sentiments out of thin air. It is capitalizing on pre-existing frustrations, notions of identity, and fundamental characteristics of human nature in order to deepen the divide between susceptible individuals and the Western societies in which they live. The messaging used in *Dabiq* and al-Hayat videos hits on the

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<sup>105</sup> "There is No Life Without Jihad," al-Hayat Media Center video, 13:26, Posted by jihadology.net, June 2014.

elements identified by previous scholars as crucial to the radicalization process. For instance, IS uses a strong “Us” and “Them” dichotomy to push individuals who have already experienced a sense of otherness within their country of residence to adopt Islamic State’s online community as their own. Islamic State uses the Anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments burgeoning in the West—some of which stems directly from IS’ own attacks—to its full advantage in order to guide alienated individuals to its online community.

Islamic State defines itself through its mission to establish a Caliphate, making the pursuit of its cause necessary to the group’s survival and therefore nonnegotiable. It differentiates itself from all other groups by identifying itself as the sole group that is truly dedicated to Islam in its quest to establish a Caliphate. It then bolsters its legitimacy by capturing land and displaying its “miraculous” military victories as signs of Allah’s support.

Its mission has also not come out of thin air. Although Islamic State is using ruthless and sacrilegious means to establish what it deems a Caliphate, the desire to create an Islamic State in itself has long existed across the Islamic world. It is backed by sentiments that regard today’s territorial boundaries in the Middle East as arbitrary borders shaped by colonialist powers in the Sykes-Picot Agreement post-WWI.

Islamic State utilizes the sense of crisis triggered by intense and ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq to urge individuals in the West to do something about it. For instance, it uses the atrocities committed by Assad and the civilian deaths caused by U.S. airstrikes to paint itself as the force that can end the slaughter of Muslims. It focuses its messaging on

its foes' violence toward Muslims and paints its own cause as one to restore honor and power to Muslims, who have long been slaughtered, humiliated, and put down.

Islamic State not only capitalizes on sentiments regarding Islam and geopolitics, it also uses the sense of aimlessness and alienation experienced by almost all young people at one point or another to its full advantage. IS attributes this aimlessness to the West's hedonistic materialism and portrays itself as the solution to the emptiness felt by young, alienated individuals. Its videos and magazine appeal directly to these individuals with fast-paced coverage of combat and depictions of a life of sacrifice for a cause greater than oneself, and one that leads to a blissful afterlife. At the individual level, IS advertises a chance to yield power, express aggression, and go on a purposeful adventure.

## **Counter-Narratives: Efforts of the U.S. State Department**

The success of Islamic State's online messaging has triggered attempts around the world to create counter-narratives. In the United States, the attempt to challenge Islamic State's narrative took the form of an online campaign by the State Department called "Think Again, Turn Away." The campaign met its demise after its production of a short video in 2014 titled, "Run, Do Not Walk to ISIS Land." The video takes the same images depicted in videos made by Islamic State and attempts to point out the sacrilege of the group. For instance, the video displays text like, "Where you can learn useful new skills for the Ummah!" and proceeds to show Islamic State blowing up mosques, carrying out suicide bombings inside mosques, and crucifying Muslims.<sup>106</sup> The video and the program received extremely negative flack from the press and governmental officials for its callous use of graphic images and its sardonic tone.

The U.S. State Department then launched the "Global Engagement Center" (GEC) in March of 2016. The State Department website describes GEC as an "interagency entity" that is "charged with coordinating U.S. counterterrorism messaging to foreign audiences." The website writes that the GEC is "focused on partner-driven messaging and data analytics." Due to the classified nature of the GEC's work, it is difficult to track down which groups it is partnering with and the methods it is using to carry out and apply its data analysis. However, the GEC has also produced its own public content with the intention of "decreasing the allure of ISIL and preventing the

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<sup>106</sup> "Run, Do Not Walk to ISIS Land," YouTube video, 1:09, Posted by Global Engagement Center, August 22, 2014.

recruitment of new extremists.”<sup>107</sup> This content exists in the form of several video series on the Global Engagement Center’s YouTube channel.

The availability of this content has enabled me to evaluate the State Department’s counter-messaging strategies in relation to the recruitment strategies of Islamic State laid out in the second section. The GEC’s YouTube channel features two video series (“Life Under Daesh” and “Daesh Defectors/Why They Left Daesh”) as well as several other videos that don’t fall into a specific series. To most efficiently evaluate the GEC’s efforts, I will consider the general counter-narrative approaches taken in each of the video series as well as in a few of the non-series videos. In evaluating this material, I will determine in what ways, if any, the State Department’s counter-narratives act to appeal to susceptible individuals and to challenge or break down IS’ framework of recruitment identified in the second section.

The following evaluation and recommendations are content-focused and do not assess the effect of the source of the content. Specifically, I do not consider whether the videos’ overt production by an entity of the U.S. State Department hinders or rules out their attempts to reach and appeal to susceptible individuals.

### *Evaluation*

The “Life Under Daesh” video series compares the reality of life in IS territory with the quality of life depicted in Islamic State materials. The videos—all under two minutes—cover seven topics related to life under IS rule: Extortion, violence, healthcare, food, energy, education, and infrastructure. Each of the videos juxtaposes the images of life in IS-held cities released by Islamic State with images and videos recorded covertly by

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

civilians and reporters in the area. Typed text at the bottom of the screen and voiceover testimonials from defectors supplement the video footage and underline the inefficiencies, injustices, and corruption that go on under IS rule. The text in one video states, “Bodies of victims are often left displayed for days at a time...serving as a chilling reminder of Daesh’s brutality and injustice.”<sup>108</sup> A narrator in another video states, “Daesh has published photos of its fighters and supporters enjoying bountiful feasts. Every day, however, people living under their rule are forced to wait in line at the local soup kitchens.”<sup>109</sup> With each video covering one aspect of city life, the “Life Under Daesh” video series is designed to point out the false reality of life in the Caliphate advertised by Islamic State in its own materials.

These videos attempt to foil a key facet of Islamic State’s identity—its claim to its ability to create a utopian Caliphate. Although the videos depict the unattractive truths of civilian life within IS-held territory, they do not get at the heart of the forces driving individuals in the West to join Islamic State identified by the framework in the second section. The current level of functionality of the Caliphate is not fundamental to Islamic State’s identity. The group’s slogan is “lasting and expanding,” and its current existence is one of a constant state of war to protect its territory and to gain more. Its priority is to recruit individuals willing to fight for the protection and expansion of this territory. As discussed in the first section, Islamic State’s territories are characterized by corruption, coercion and ineffective governance, but effective governance is not a linchpin of its sacred values; possession of land for the continued construction of the Caliphate is.

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<sup>108</sup> “Violence,” YouTube video, 1:51, Posted by Global Engagement Center, April 15, 2016.

<sup>109</sup> “Food,” YouTube video, 1:37, Posted by Global Engagement Center, April 15, 2016.

This is not to say that the “Life Under Daesh” videos are not effective in some respects. They work to delegitimize Islamic State’s materials by pointing out the major discrepancies between the life IS shows in its materials and the actual reality of life on the ground. Pointing out these discrepancies may work to break down the level of trust susceptible individuals have in the Islamic State materials they engage with. Introducing even a small amount of skepticism hampers Islamic State’s ability to align its own identity with that of susceptible individuals.

The “Daesh Defectors” and “Why They Left Daesh” series focuses more closely on the brutality of Islamic State toward Muslims. Each video features one defector and begins with a jarring quotation from him or her. One video begins with a quotation from female defector: “The worst thing I ever saw was a man getting his head hacked off right in front of me.”<sup>110</sup> Another video covers a male defector recounting gruesome killings such as seeing very old Emir executed, a young boy beheading a prisoner, and regular civilian executions.<sup>111</sup>

The “Daesh Defectors” and “Why They Left Daesh” video series has the advantage of creating an intense personal viewpoint from which stories of violence are recounted. Defectors share their emotions and thoughts in relation to their experiences with Islamic State. A female defector recounts, “At the start, I was happy. I was carrying a gun. It was something new. I had authority. I didn’t think I was frightening anyone, but then I started asking myself where am I? Where am I going? I could feel the tides

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<sup>110</sup> “Khadija,” YouTube video, 1:59, Posted by Global Engagement Center, June 12, 2015.

<sup>111</sup> “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh,” YouTube video, 2:02, Posted by Global Engagement Center, September 29, 2015.

dragging me someplace ugly.”<sup>112</sup> A defector captured by FSA states that he feels “deceived” by Islamic State.<sup>113</sup> Text at the end of this video writes, “After seeing how he was manipulated, betrayed, and sent to face his death, Abdullah has come to realize ISIS has little value for human life, even for its own members.”<sup>114</sup> Several of the videos dramatize feelings of confusion, regret, and remorse through distorted footage of a young male sitting with his head in his hands and asking forgiveness from Allah for what he had done while he was an IS fighter.<sup>115</sup> By voicing the experiences of disaffected defectors, these videos attempt to show (as in the “Life Under Daesh” videos) that Islamic State is not what it says it is.

The shortcomings of this video series are similar to those of the “Life Under Daesh” series. Again, the videos do not wholly target the elements of Islamic State that are essential to its identity. While displaying Islamic State’s violence against Muslims does work to blur the line between the “Us” (protectors of Muslims) and “Them” (aggressors toward Muslims) dichotomy depicted in Islamic State materials, the series’ focus on Islamic State’s acts of gruesome violence toward any population is not time well spent. Islamic State promotes itself as a violent and merciless group. The fact that Islamic State beheads and severely punishes people who it accuses of transgressions against Islam (Muslims included) is not unknown to susceptible individuals. It is a part of Islamic State’s MO.

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<sup>112</sup> “Khadija,” YouTube video, 1:59, Posted by Global Engagement Center, June 12, 2015.

<sup>113</sup> “Abo Abdullah,” YouTube video, 1:37, Posted by Global Engagement Center, June 2, 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> “I knew it was time to get out,” YouTube video, :50, Posted by Global Engagement Center, October 16, 2015.

These videos assume that individuals in the West who leave to join Islamic State do so out of a desire to experience a sense of piety and heroism that operates within the parameters of traditional moral constructs. To the contrary, Islamic State is defined by moral and religious codes that encourage and even require violence, and the group makes these codes evident in its own messaging. This is part of the attraction for susceptible individuals. The group's acts of violence demonstrate its steadfast dedication to its cause.

Focusing on IS' violence toward and killing of Muslims within its territories may work to challenge its advertised identity as the protector of innocent Muslims, but the empirical realities of the region lend support to IS' ability to maintain its image as protector in the eyes of susceptible individuals. For instance, the atrocities committed by Assad and the civilian deaths caused by U.S. airstrikes make it difficult to derail the group's image as protector. Islamic State's purported mission to restore dignity and power to Muslims is backed by its opposition to the Assad regime and other forces deemed predatory to Muslims and Islam. In addition, the violence against Muslims within IS territory may work to reiterate the group's dedication to "true" Islam through its execution of those who defy it and the instatement of Sharia Law (as IS understands it) through the strict enforcement of draconian punishments.

### *Recommendations*

Assuming that content overtly produced by the U.S. State Department through the Global Engagement Center has the potential to reach and to dissuade susceptible individuals from joining or acting on the behalf of Islamic State, there are several ways in which the GEC can produce more effective video content. Appeals should be made with the intent to break down the fundamental values adopted and advertised by Islamic State. These include IS' possession of land, its identity as the sole group pursuing "true" Islam in the form of a Caliphate, and its claims of invincibility resulting from the support of Allah.

Islamic State's use of a prophetic narrative, its reliance on possession of land for its identity, and its self-legitimization through military victories makes the group's defining principles vulnerable to attack from empirical realities. The GEC should use these empirical realities to chip away at the group's identity. The GEC has done this in some respects by showing the failures of IS' governance within its territories and its coercive treatment of Muslims, but it can do much more. Instead of focusing on IS' acts of violence, counter-narrative content should visually demonstrate Islamic State's loss of territory over the course of the past several years. It should highlight military victories against Islamic State as they occur. In this approach, there is no need to "create" a narrative, rather the idea is to present the on-the-ground facts in such a way that demonstrates the rising pattern of military losses incurred by Islamic State. One "Think Again, Turn Away" video on the GEC's YouTube Channel, titled "ISIS Inside the Tent" attempts to do this but fails to reach its full potential. This video features IS fighters gathered inside a tent, boasting their military strength and victories and then cuts to photos and videos of mangled or exploding IS vehicles and tanks as well as photos of

opposition fighters taking down IS flags in recaptured territories. However, the footage only depicts singular victories and does not distinctly map out an overarching trend of losses for Islamic State. It also uses a photo of a tent—an image not verifiably linked with Islamic State—as a visual representation of where the Islamic State fighters featured in the video are speaking from within. This adds a level of fictitiousness that is not necessary and weakens the reliability of the factual information presented. Counter-narratives should avoid visual representations of actualities whenever possible to keep from appearing as though they are stretched truths or altogether contrived.

To break down the “Us” and “Them” dichotomy built up by Islamic State in its materials, counter-narratives should voice the contempt and fear of Muslims living under IS rule for the group. As the “Life Under Daesh” and “Daesh Defectors” series aimed to do, new content should challenge IS’ identity as “protector.” However, videos should not show images of corpses hanging from city squares; rather, they should show testimonials from men, women, and children who have been treated brutally by IS in order to humanize the many victims of Islamic State. The GEC produced a video titled, “In an ISIS Prison: Rescued Daesh Captives Speak,” which shows rescued captives speaking about IS’ horrific treatment of them and their desire to return to their families. This video is particularly powerful because it uses real footage with little to no supplementary text or images. The captives’ testimonials demonstrate IS’ inhuman treatment of Muslims with sincere emotion and specific, true stories. An effort should be made to feature more testimonials from those who experience IS’ indiscriminate brutality. Again, the videos should not use visual representations of this brutality; they must use real and personal content.

The lack of on-the-ground video footage presented in the GEC videos as well as the poor quality of the GEC videos (often more PowerPoint-like than film-like) is something that also needs to be addressed if the State Department hopes to challenge the appeals made in Islamic State's well-polished and intimate films and magazine issues. If the State Department intends to continue producing its own counter-narrative to Islamic State, it must do so with full commitment, meaning with increased resources—funding, equipment, and staff—to create a media team that gives strong counter-narratives a chance to be seen and trusted.

Effectively challenging IS' recruiting framework requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond the production of counter-narrative materials online. For such counter-narratives to take hold, the on-the-ground reality must support the messages that the Global Engagement Center puts forth. The best way to depict Islamic State as the losing side is to ensure that it continues to face military losses that indicate an increasing pattern of defeat. The group's identity and its legitimacy depend on its ability to sell itself as the founders of a Caliphate and the fulfiller of the prophetic narrative. If the group loses all of its territory and is forced to go into hiding, it will have a much more difficult time advertising itself as such.

Additionally, the U.S. should consider applying more stringent criteria when determining whether or not to carry out drone strikes. For instance, it should reduce its use of signature strikes. Signature strikes demand an extremely low level of distinction when identifying targets as legitimate, and they result in increased civilian casualties, which Islamic State uses fully to its advantage in its online recruitment materials. By depicting images of innocent victims in U.S. drone strikes, Islamic State is able to rally

support both regionally and globally for its cause. Additionally, continued use of drone strikes by the U.S. should be supported by an on-the-ground military presence, which will allow the U.S. to more closely control the narrative that arises surrounding airstrikes. It is probable that IS sometimes stages civilian casualties in its materials to look as though they resulted from U.S. strikes when they may have actually resulted from another fighting force or from IS itself. Should the U.S. continue its military activity in the region (which it shows no signs of stopping), it should supplement its airstrikes with a heavier presence on the ground to better get a handle on such narratives.

These recommendations aim to address the most immediate challenges faced by the United States in preventing remote recruitment of its citizens by Islamic State. Losing control of the crucial regions IS currently possesses will surely weaken the group's ability to produce online recruitment materials using the line of appeals it currently employs. However, the underlying forces that have enabled Islamic State's recruitment success will continue to enable the group's survival (if only in a different form) as well as the rise of other future extremist groups.

These underlying forces still have to be addressed. To do so, the State Department should not only focus on counter narratives and military victories, it should also build alternative narratives and support programs that seek to compete with the individual appeals made by IS. These narratives and programs need to go beyond the provision of financial stability and security; they must reach into the same deep desires of young hearts—desires for a sense of purpose and adventure—that Islamic State appeals to. Scott Atran stressed this point in his address to the UN Security Council in 2015. He asked, “When did moderate *anything* have wide appeal to youth yearning for adventure, for

glory, and for significance?”<sup>116</sup> Those tasked with countering violent extremism in the U.S. should find ways to offer susceptible individuals a chance to have meaningful and exciting experiences within a community that allows them to shape their identity. The best way to do this is by supporting what Atran refers to as “local initiatives,” rather than by attempting to create nation-wide policies. These initiatives can take many forms—sports leagues, weekly dialogues, outdoors clubs, theater and arts centers—but they should be run at the local level in order to enable the formation of more intimate connections between young individuals in the community. Locally fueled initiatives will allow for the cultivation of tight-knit bonds, thus reducing susceptible individuals’ need to seek out an online community in the first place.

Lastly, efforts to prevent remote radicalization have to extend past narratives and programs designed to reach susceptible populations by addressing another key contributing force to the radicalization process: xenophobia. The U.S. State Department has to put forth an equally committed effort to create narratives and programs that challenge xenophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments. Islamic State thrives off of anti-Muslim sentiments in the West; these sentiments cultivate perfect candidates for IS recruitment by alienating young Muslim individuals from their communities and breeding animosity. There should be strong efforts made to better educate Americans from a young age about Islam as a religion and culture in order to combat the false perceptions of Islam promoted day in and day out in the media and on the news. Through what Atran calls “the unholy alliance of narrow, xenophobic nationalism and militant jihad,” Islamic State and other extremist groups are able to fuel the fire of anti-Muslim

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<sup>116</sup> “Scott Atran: The Youth Need Values and Dreams,” YouTube video, 15:45, Posted by Nizar Abboud.

sentiments by carrying out attacks on Western soil, consequently wedging a deeper divide between susceptible individuals and their communities and pushing them closer to Islamic State's online community.<sup>117</sup> By engaging in xenophobic policy and heightening Americans' fears of Islam, the U.S. will only continue to feed into the vicious cycle of fear and contempt that extremist groups so vitally depend on for their continued existence.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

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