



THE FAILED CRUSADE

EDITED BY MONICA MAGGIONI AND PAOLO MAGRI

TWITTER AND JIHAD: THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF ISIS

ISPI

Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS

Edited by Monica Maggioni and Paolo Magri

ISPI

ISBN 978-88-98014-67-5 (pdf edition)

© 2015 Edizioni Epoké
Firs edition: 2015

Edizioni Epoké. Via N. Bixio, 5
15067, Novi Ligure (AL)
<http://www.edizioniepoke.it>
epoke@epokericerche.eu

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5
20121, Milano
www.ispionline.it

Graphic project and impagination: Simone Tedeschi

I edition.

All Rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISPI

The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) is an independent think tank dedicated to being a resource for government officials, business executives, journalists, civil servants, students and the public at large wishing to better understand international issues. It monitors geopolitical areas as well as major trends in international affairs.

Founded in Milan in 1934, ISPI is the only Italian Institute – and one of the few in Europe – to place research activities side by side to training, organization of international conferences, and the analysis of the international environment for businesses. Comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis is achieved through close collaboration with experts (academics and non-academics alike) in political, economic, legal, historical and strategic studies and through an ever-growing network of think tanks, research centers and Universities in Europe and beyond

Contents

Introduction by <i>Paolo Magri</i>	5
Part I The Message	
1. The Caliphate between History and Myth <i>Paolo Branca</i>	13
2. The Centrality of the Enemy in al-Baghdadi's Caliphate <i>Andrea Plebani, Paolo Maggiolini</i>	27
Part II Communication Strategies	
3. The Islamic State: Not That Surprising, If You Know Where To Look <i>Monica Maggioni</i>	49
4. IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate's Communication Project <i>Marco Lombardi</i>	83
Part III The Objectives of the Propaganda	
5. The Caliphate, Social Media and Swarms in Europe: The Appeal of the IS Propaganda to 'Would Be' European Jihadists <i>Marco Arnaboldi and Lorenzo Vidino</i>	125
6. The Discourse of ISIS: Messages, Propaganda and Indoctrination <i>Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee</i>	145
About the Authors	167

Introduction

The capture of Mosul in the summer of 2014 by the self-styled ‘Islamic State’ appears today much more than a significant military event in the complex scenario of the Middle-East and in the tangled situation of Iraq and Syria. Close observers were not surprised. The establishment of the ‘Islamic State’ has characterized most of the recent history of this part of the world and has shown the ability to benefit from the inability to provide a clear answer to all the deep political and social unrest in this region.

The symbol of this constant evolution and transformation is found in the various names that have been adopted over the years, from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI); Islamic State in Iraq (ISI); Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS); to the current Islamic State (IS). This aspect should not be overlooked.

IS has deliberately designed this ‘naming’ process as a clear sign of its slow-paced evolution all the way to the final stage with the proclamation of the caliphate and the autonomous definition of a state. No longer an organization, formation, front and what-not, it has evolved into the ‘Islamic State’, thus overcoming all the ‘doubts’ and ‘hesitations’ of other jihadist movements, including al-Qaeda, and showing that the re-establishment of the caliphate would be viable today and at the very heart of Islam’s classic history no less.

This is how – even before achieving the dimension of images, proclamations, the spectacularization of military and terrorist operations and, lastly, dreadful executions – IS has shown a determination to face the enemies on an even footing since its inception. In fact it has built on one of the tenets of the modern West:

the capacity to define and to name, inexorably imposing its own categories on the outside world.

Since the very beginning IS has taken away from the enemy the 'right' to define its nature, engaging in direct, outrageous and provoking exposition as the flag for all its actions. Communication lies in the DNA of this organization, regardless of technological savviness and familiarity with the times and the rituals of the media. It was the only option, in line with the proposed objective. Any political power or regime aspiring to impose its rule as a state authority in a specific context and in an international scenario has invariably claimed, along with military, coercive and cultural power, the right to freely define relevant time and space references and the names of the territory and the community over which it intends to exercise its sovereignty, thus coming to embody its identity and essence.

In the case of IS, this operation has proved to be particularly effective. IS has successfully used as leverage the cultural concepts of religious Islamic tradition, so that it has become operational in the everyday life of its supporters, in future new recruits, and naturally, among its enemies. Until now IS has proved able to control and to convey a wealth of different messages and symbols, that sum up and follow a communication strategy that is, shall we say, 'institutional' – at least in its intentions – and a more 'informal' one, that is left to the initiative of individual supporters. IS has proclaimed itself to be the caliphate, acting or portraying itself as a modern state for all Muslims, being active on the ground and communicating in the virtual space of the Internet, looking every individual in the eye (be them Muslims and non-Muslims) while aspiring to guide the entire Islamic community. In this way IS has brought together times and spaces that are only apparently apart through the effective use of words, images and dissemination instruments that provide coherence, or at least prove clearly effective.

This is how IS is waging a war that is both psychological and physical in the Middle East and around the world. It is a psychological war made of texts, images, iconographies that the organiza-

tion intends for widespread distribution. It aims to generate a multiplier effect that magnifies and celebrates its exploits, as well as its tangible results on the ground and its capacities, that should not be overlooked, but that would require a more in-depth and thorough evaluation.

This volume was inspired by the desire to examine critically the narrative that IS is proposing and imposing through a rational approach, taking apart and analyzing IS's messages, communication means and strategies, and its target audience.

In the first chapter, Paolo Branca retraces the long-term story of the caliphate as an institution, shedding light on the most challenging issues that have marked its evolution and bringing out the remarkable differences that set it apart from the current claims of IS. The self-proclaimed caliphate does not appear to be a genuine alternative to current forms of state organization, but brings to light the deep political and identity crisis of the globalized world – not limited to Arab or Middle-Eastern countries. In the absence of credible alternatives, any convincing identity or proposal becomes appealing.

In the second chapter Andrea Plebani and Paolo Maggiolini analyze the relationship between IS, the enemy and communication. What is clear is that IS was able to make its message more strikingly compelling through a careful representation of the enemy, its humiliation, elimination and defeat. IS has shown its skills at using the times and instruments of modern communication by synchronizing activities at local, regional, and international level. Thus the enemy and its manipulation become the instrument of this operation for the purpose of continuing recruitment and to spread terror at all levels.

In chapter three, titled “The Islamic State: Not That Surprising, If You Know Where to Look” Monica Maggioni travels in time and space to outline the relations between jihadist movements and communication. As she points out, the proclamation of the caliphate was accompanied since the very beginning by a skillfully directed media campaign both locally and globally. The document with which IS proclaimed the ‘rebirth’ of the caliphate is charac-

terized by numerous registers and symbols that sum up its communication strategy and the natural call to all Muslims of the world, while containing a not-so-veiled threat to all those who will not respond to the invitation. Al-Baghdadi's speeches, the announcements entrusted to different spokespersons, the images of the executions of those who stray, are edited and packaged by specific communication units and 'agencies' run by the caliphate for the purpose of releasing them on the world media to convey a potent message.

Nothing in IS's communication is left to chance. Everything is carefully thought-out and focused on reaching out on the inside (to gain credibility) and on the outside (to proselytize). Most significantly, it is intended to associate with the Islamic State a sense of inevitability on a global scale that is imposed on our narratives, on newscasts and front pages worldwide.

In the fourth chapter Marco Lombardi examines IS communication in the context of the Internet's media space. There is no doubt that IS is perfectly at ease online and able to use the Internet's multiple languages and instruments. On the one hand 'institutional' communication is imbued with the 'emotional' dimension; the Web becomes a terrain where to lay communication 'traps' for the aim of promoting the idea of a generalized and widespread conflict that brings the level of the fight up a notch and that consolidates its clout and prestige. On the other, IS has proven that it has fully understood the potential of *gamification*. Role-play and combat games against the infidel are spread online to provide minimum training, to recruit and to build loyalty, but mostly to tear down the ethical barriers that govern life.

In the fifth chapter, titled "The Caliphate, Social Media and Swarms in Europe: The Appeal of the IS Propaganda to "Would Be" European Jihadists", Marco Arnaboldi and Lorenzo Vidino focus on the appeal of IS communication on young Muslim generations in Europe. The two authors provide a different point of view on the IS online presence, underscoring the role of the social networks and swarms. Social networks allow young aspiring jihadists to engage in a horizontal communication environment

where every recipient and every consumer is a potential sender and producer of propaganda and information materials. The shared material is able to circulate according to decentralized patterns, leading to a striking increase in the number of potential recipients and creative know-how.

In conclusion, the chapter by Harith Hasan al-Qarawee emphasizes the local dimension of IS communication in Syria and Iraq. It is here that IS was called to develop more sophisticated and differentiated communication solutions to face the challenge of evolving from a jihadist movement to an ‘almost’ state. Having understood very early on that legitimacy cannot be earned exclusively through violence, IS relied on the instruments of propaganda to represent itself as an appealing administrative model, as shown by the satisfaction of the inhabitants of the territories under its control.

In this way, by combining global and local communication – the latter directed at the context and the population where it operates – IS has shown its natural inclination towards expansion, both symbolically and physically. It is an ideological war and a military conflict in which the IS propaganda becomes a fundamental testing ground for its might and effectiveness.

Paolo Magri
Executive Vice-President and Director of ISPI

Part I
The Message

1. The Caliphate between History and Myth

Paolo Branca

In the Koran the Arabic term *khalifa* designates Adam himself as the ‘vicar’ of God on earth (2, 30) and the regal-prophetic authority of David (38, 26). The designation of a substitute for the Prophet – that is not envisaged by any of the provisions issued by the latter or in the Holy Book – is the expression of a need to ensure continuity to the work undertaken by Muhammad by providing a successor. Thus his function becomes no longer the transmission of the revelation, but rather the safeguarding of the unity of the newly-established Islamic community (*ummah*) and its loyalty to the divine teachings and the example of its founder. The creation of the caliphate was immediately challenged by all sorts of tensions. As is known, the first caliph, Abu Bakr, was called to fight the centrifugal forces through which the Bedouin spirit attempted to loosen its ties from the center of power after the Prophet’s disappearance and things did not improve under his successors, due to the clashes between different factions. The conflict between the fourth caliph, Ali (the last of the first four caliphs in chronological order), and his adversaries, heir to Uthman (his murdered predecessor), marked the end of unity for the *ummah*. This breakup led to the establishment of different and competing formations that not only vied for titles and roles, but that put forward arguments that presented different views of their nature and the exercise of supreme authority, supported by diverging interpretations of the sources and original paradigms that were, at times, diametrically opposed.

Islamic tradition itself celebrates the golden age of the first four caliphs, who were “Rightly Guided” (*rashidun*). On the one hand, this shows a desire to preserve an idealized picture of those early days which is, at times, at odds with reality but all the more paradigmatic. On the other, it is the expression of the awareness of the subsequent fracture that resulted from an event regarded, in some way, as irreversible. Theories and diatribes on the figure and the functions of the supreme chief of the community stem precisely from this crisis, its various interpretations and those that followed in later times, often for the purpose of supporting a contemporary trend rather than reestablishing historical accuracy. Moreover, it should be noted that throughout history, as is often the case, practice and theory started to drift apart and the caliphate, that was officially abolished only at the beginning of the past century, was in fact flanked or even replaced by authorities in other forms. These found their legitimacy more in the need to recognize the roles and functions of those who, in practice, held the power rather than in the adherence of the latter to qualities and requirements that were theoretically attributed to those who were supposed to hold the destiny of the Community in their hands.

From a historical point of view, the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 was certainly perceived in the Islamic world as a sort of ‘Apocalypse’. In spite of the fact that the title of caliphate was ‘handed down’ first to the Mamluks of Egypt and then to the Ottomans, no universal caliphate ever followed. This last glorious and centuries-old historical manifestation, that at least in its name is a direct reference to the caliphate, never exercised control over Morocco and on the Eastern front reached no farther than Iraq, leaving outside of its influence vast areas of the Islamic world like Iran, the Central-Asian region, continental India and its islands, and most of Africa’s Muslim Countries. With the fall of the Ottoman empire both the sultanate and the caliphate were eventually abolished *de iure*, thus putting an end to the centuries-old history of the caliphate as an institution and immediately leading to the establishment of modern nation-states where the

reinstatement of a supranational authority was never an option, least of all by means of political or military action.

How and why the restoration of the caliphate – an objective that was probably never ruled out, as some maintain, but that was never identified as a practical objective to be achieved in the short term – has returned to the fore remains an open issue.

First of all, it should be considered that Islamic terrorism has selected symbolic targets in the West but was never so naïve as to claim that it would bring down the American superpower and Israel directly. It has always aimed, instead, at the destabilization of various Arab and Islamic regimes. Witness the escalating tension between the Sunnis and the Shias and the deterioration of the situation in Iraq and Syria that evolved into full-blown civil war. The chaos that followed the period of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ mostly concerned the two countries that are traditionally the seats of the Umayyad caliphate of Damascus and the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad. The two also emerged as nation-states around a century ago after World War I, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the iniquitous distribution of the Arab territories between France and Great Britain following the Sykes-Picot agreement. The latter was reached precisely at the time when Lawrence of Arabia convinced the governments to join forces with the future winners against the Turks and their allies of the time. It was tempting to try and obtain as many advantages as possible in one stroke:

- doing away with Arab nationalism or what little remained of it, in spite of its merit in achieving independence from colonial power, denouncing its external and therefore illegitimate and even pernicious origin for having promoted the fragmentation of the great *ummah* into fragile and litigious entities;
- the accusation against all the regimes that have been in power since then, as co-conspirators of foreign powers and responsible of selling off the Arab cause and Islamic pride that were systematically and deliberately prevented from returning to their ancient splendor;

- the bypassing of a whole galaxy of Islamist movements that, in the past decades, have in some way ‘accepted’ to take the ‘institutional’ road while abandoning – in full or in part – the armed option. These were guilty of treason, mainly for coming to terms with a ‘system’ that is formally and gradually pursuing a pluralization of political and social forces called to compete in a political arena based on the despised Western models;
- reaching out to a number of disenchanted and discouraged militants through an all-out call for action; a connection to symbols that may seem archaic but that are in fact the least touched by globalization and the economic crisis that have taken most of the shine off recent ideologies. And, lastly, through a skillful and no-holds-barred media campaign that brings together the most advanced technological instruments and the return to ancient messianic expectations that refer to the black flags of Muslim fighters coming from the East before the end of times and the coming of the awaited *Mahdi*, the Muslim version of the Messiah.

The end of nationalism?

The very concept of nationalism is a product of modern Western thought. Its affirmation among peoples who regard relations between ethnic identity, language and state in different terms was not devoid of issues and contradictions. In the Muslim world in particular – where one’s belonging to the only *ummah* was rooted in religion – for a period of time the pan-Islamic ideal represented an alternative to the penetration of nationalism. However the latter eventually prevailed for a number of reasons. Whole areas of the great Islamic empire had preserved, over the centuries, a specific nature that brought together many elements that could be regarded as part of a peculiar national identity. Moreover, the progressive weakening of central power was accompanied by a revival of local literary and cultural traditions that, while not questioning adherence to the Islamic community, are the most recent representations of the ancient uneasiness towards a process of ‘Arabization’ that

never truly came to be (as was the case with the Persians and the Berbers) and the hegemony of a specific ethnic group within the *ummah* itself (as was the case with the Arabs vis-à-vis the Turks). Nationalism was also an integral part of the culture of those European countries that progressively started to flex their muscle and to impose their power on the rest of the world. As such it was regarded as the most suitable means to follow the Western lead in the hope of bridging the gap that had widened over the past centuries, and to face it on its own terrain. Thus the concepts and ideals of nationalism entered the Arab and Muslim world. Paradoxically, they found a more fertile ground in those countries where the fight for independence from those who had contributed to introducing those very concepts and ideals had required greater efforts. The ambiguity of the relationship with the West, regarded both as a model and an obstacle, originates in this paradox and was enriched by other factors over time. Later developments would not be understandable without considering that the elements of western culture, no matter how innovative, did not entirely replace traditional ones nor did they amalgamate with them harmoniously. Instead, they overlapped creating yet another stratification that would prove quite precarious.

It should also be considered that, while epic and exciting, the fight for national independence produced only partial results, and other questions remained unsolved: nationalism – that had brought colonial occupation to an end – had in fact legitimized, again paradoxically, the territorial entities created by colonial powers, splitting up what remained of the Ottoman empire according to national interests. Which instances would be given priority in the political arena of the newly created states? Perhaps those aiming to overcome the unnatural fragmentation through a pan-Arabist or pan-Islamic solution? Or additional autonomy would need to be granted to groups that had not yet benefited from the battle for independence (ethnic groups – like Berbers and Curds – or religious communities, like the Druze and the Maronites)? In this way, just like the Islamic movements had had no choice but to adhere to the nationalist campaigns while rejecting their ideology,

after the independence the governments of the new states, in spite of their alleged non-confessional nature, were called to appeal to Islam as a legitimizing factor to ensure cohesion more effectively against the complexity and the delicate state of affairs that they were experiencing. Too many failures over a long period of time have progressively devoid nationalism also of its main source of legitimation: the prestige of achieving independence. Among the adult population this memory remains alive, but the younger generations have no direct recollection of those events and disillusionment over unfulfilled expectations grows.

The importance of nationalism, however, should not be hastily dismissed, because it seems to have maintained some sort of relevance. Significantly, some figures of modern-day Islamic radicalism go to great lengths to criticize the concepts of the subsequent phase, the time of the revolution. The latter did not extend to all Arab-Muslim countries, but only to a part, it was shorter and of a more intellectual and elitist nature. However, as is evident from the events of the late Twentieth century, nationalism compared to other ideologies was not the one to suffer the most, but rather the one that appeared to feed off the crisis of the others, which appears to be more menacing and inexorable.

‘Religious’ delegitimation

Any form of government that does not depend directly on Islamic norms is allegedly devoid of any legitimacy. There is nothing new in this argument, if one considers (in addition to the *kharijiti*¹) that

¹ This movement issued from the contrasts between the followers of Ali after he accepted to end the fight in Siffin, in 657, and to resort to arbitrate in order to settle the controversy that opposed him to his adversaries. While there is little doubt that this was the immediate cause of the defection of the *kharijiti* from Ali’s camp, the vicissitudes of this dissident movement are much more complex and revealing of the deep-set positions that were rightly mentioned by specialists. What is particularly interesting for the purpose of this publication is that the very name of this movement and its ‘passwords’ contained seeds of the positions that are still found today in radical Islam, to which they refers more or less deliberately. The founding principle was the one contained in the expression “There is no rule but that of God”

even the Umayyad caliphate of Damascus (that came to an end in the year 750) was accused of being only a means to exercise power (*mulk*) and to have abandoned the correct practice based on religion (*din*) of the first four “rightly guided” caliphs. But it is only in more recent times that the anathema (*takfir*) against the entire society regarded as ‘no longer Muslim’ or ‘apostate’ tried to justify the recourse to terrorism whose indiscriminate targets include innocent civilians. No compromise appears likely, as was stressed by the IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami in an open letter made public at the start of the month of Ramadan in 2014² in which any authority other than the caliph is “a mere reign, the fruit of conquest and consequently a herald of destruction, corruption, injustice, terror and the reduction of the human being to an animal”. The same letter also announced the change of the acronym ISIS into the simple IS, the only form of state that is admissible for the believers who have not been led astray by “democracy, secularism, or nationalism”, and who are therefore invited to recognize it as their own and to side with it. The recent response of official Islamic institutions confirms the problematic nature of an open question that is exclusively internal: consider that the barbaric execution of the Jordanian pilot who was burnt alive by ISIS triggered the military reaction of his country, and al-Azhar University voiced its condemnation in unequivocal terms calling for “death, crucifixion or the amputation of their hands and feet”. This very strong statement comes from the Koran, but repeating these words *verbatim* and out of context may lead some to associate the language of the Holy Book to that of the fanatics it is intended to subdue. The punishment laid down

(*la hukma illa li-llah*) and that one of the verses of the Koran that was most often quoted was “And fight them until there is no unbelief and [until] the religion, all of it, is for Allah” (Koran 8, 39). At the opposite end are those who deemed it preferable to leave (*ijja*) the judgement on the faith of individuals to God, thus taking the ideological edge off the controversies in favor of the interest of the Community that aspired to live in peace and ensuring order under a single authority. This authority was recognized more in light of the need of its existence than because of the legitimacy of its origin and the impeccable nature of its behavior.

² http://myreader.toile-libre.org/uploads/My_53b039f00cb03.pdf.

in the Koran is reserved to brigands and would be interpreted today more as a threat against organized crime – without forgetting that in the Prophet’s time there were no prisons and that society was not regulated by the rule of law but rather by the application of the principle of “an eye for an eye”.

Even if one were to regard the Koran as God’s word “to the letter”, it should not be forgotten that no text can be read without turning one’s head on (unless one is expected to repeat it like a parrot) and it would be useful to reflect on the reason that led the Creator to place the head at the very top of the human body. Otherwise one runs the serious risk of using other parts of the body for reasoning, which are far less noble than the body itself, and may end up losing one’s mind and implicitly agreeing with the adversaries simply because by placing ourselves on the same footing, thus legitimizing their language and the logic that lies behind it. It is a perverse and destructive logic for both sides, two faces of the same (fake) coin.

Ambiguous ‘Springs’

During the recent uprisings in many Arab countries to bring down corrupt and authoritarian regimes, large masses of people have mobilized in the name of principles and values that we believed were foreign or at least distant from largely Muslim populations. Many were also surprised by the absence of slogans against the West or Imperialism, Neocolonialism and Zionism. Those who were able to follow the debate that started in those days in the original language certainly noticed that it hinged on highly meaningful neologisms. The concept of secularism, that is generally expressed in Arabic by the term *‘ilmaniyya* (from *‘ilm*, “science”, or *‘alam*, “world”) – which is markedly connected to rationalist or secularist concepts that are typically European and rather outdated – was replaced by *madaniyya* (together with *dawla*, that is, “state”) which means “civilian” – as opposed to ‘military’, but also as the opposite of ‘clerical’ or ‘religious’ in a confessional

sense. This also explains the participation to the demonstrations of Arab Christians and non-radical Muslims.

The fact that, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist movements carried the first rounds of elections may appear contradictory, but it was partly inevitable that the situation would be exploited by existing movements that were rooted in the local territory and that for a long time have represented the only opposition in those countries. The transformation process that started with the 'Arab Springs' has therefore contributed to bringing to the fore a number of unresolved issues rather than their solution. Trends that had long been repressed or underestimated came to light and may still bear fruit in the medium term.

This is supported by a number of provocations that representatives of the more traditionalist groups have staged and that, while paradoxical or precisely because of it, question some crucial points concerning the position of individuals and groups towards a modern state that is respectful of the human rights of its citizens. The presumed return to the intransigent and fundamentalist application of the so-called Islamic law – that was never codified and that established itself rather as jurisprudence than as a positive law – provided the pretext for some to propose not only the revival of polygamy (for example in Tunisia, where it was banned) but even concubinage. The Koran, like the Bible, envisages slavery as a practice that should be moderated in its most extreme forms, but that is not openly forbidden. Clearly the status of legally admissible 'non-wives' would depend on the reintroduction of slavery, which is not readily achievable or advocated by the supporters of this restoration, because it is unacceptable also to those who propose it. Similarly, proposing to return to the submission tax for minorities like Christians and other religious faiths is an implicit regression to feudal customs and times, where the lack of the rule of law would legitimize the perception of the status of a citizen as lower for the followers of religions other than the dominating one, who were not subject to the draft and for this 'privilege' were expected to pay a special tribute.

When some propaganda insists on regarding Islam as ‘theocratic’ and therefore incompatible with democracy, two mistakes are being committed: first, the wrong term is used. In a Muslim context the risk does not lie in theocracy but in caesaropapism, whereby the political power uses religion as an instrument but not vice versa (at least in the Sunni camp, which accounts for about 90 per cent of the Islamic world). Second, it is taken for granted that all Muslims agree that it is right, or even essential, to reintroduce the norms contained in the traditional sources, disregarding the fact that many would dismiss as inconceivable a return to slavery or discrimination against religious minorities, once faced with this very concrete possibility.

However it is clear that the overall failure on the part of ‘historical’ radical Islamic groups in managing consensus in cases like Egypt may have contributed to the resurgence of extremist and subversive movements like IS.

Decadence and Messianism

Last but not least, the apocalyptic atmosphere has consolidated: widespread and growing chaos and the awareness of living at a time of deep crisis brings back to the fore “end-of-the-world” symbols and slogans. The very black flag of the new caliphate is connected, in the letter mentioned above, to the one that true believers will raise as the Final Judgement approaches to “hand it to the Messiah” in the decisive confrontation between good and evil forces.

It is no wonder that such a jumble of catastrophism and epochal expectations attracts militants both from inside and outside the Islamic world, while the actual relevance of the *foreign fighters* is more symbolic and media-related than factual.

On 19 September 2014 more than one-hundred-and-twenty Muslim scholars issued an ‘open letter’ addressed to the self-styled caliph, generally known by a name that in fact does not appear anywhere, *You Don’t Understand Islam*. This text aims to reject the arguments of al-Baghdadi’s ‘inauguration speech’ by

resorting to Koran verses and prophetic quotes. This was, to some extent, inevitable, but it also shows how the pseudo-caliph has forced his adversaries to confront him on an even terrain, which is emblematic in itself. A conflict on the interpretation of the Sources reveals that they remain extremely powerful, but also that there is a dreadful lack of any alternative in political speech, as a result of stagnation and an intellectual regression that is absolutely pernicious.

It is however relevant that many IS practices were condemned precisely on the basis on those sources, like the killing of innocent and unarmed civilians or diplomatic envoys, the inadmissible ‘excommunication’ of other Muslims, the lack of respect for religious minorities, forced conversions, the indiscriminate application of corporal punishment and the destruction of places that are important to popular piety. On the political level, however, there appears to be little doubt that the caliphate is an institution that the Muslims should restore, but without recognizing to al-Baghdadi the authority required to do it. Much less clear is who and under which conditions could actually do it. The love for their homeland – regarded not as the Arab or Islamic *ummah* – is defended without hesitation, and the call for all Muslims to come live under the protection of an Islamic state proper, to support and defend it is regarded as outrageous. Historical reasons and the experience of millions of believers who for centuries have lived their life perfectly in line with the principles and the precepts of Islam in the most diverse socio-political conditions is not enough to dismiss a mythical model that appears immune to any attempt at contextualization or critical articulated analysis.

Conclusion

Some of the ‘classic’ issues that characterize the relation between religion and politics in the Islamic world are returning to the fore, if under new guises and with a new spirit. It is a question that, by its very nature, is never going to be resolved, but that will be constantly re-examined and reinterpreted in light of its most

ancient premises and of the changing needs and anxieties of the present time.

Article 6 of the recent Tunisian Constitution (2014) on freedom of religion is a perfect case in point³.

The climate is obviously quite heavy but reality in the modern nation-states that have been created in the Muslim region is unlikely to be questioned, let alone by sectarian and extremist groups that are strongly localized and motivated by contingent conflicts. While the resurrection of the caliphate – at least as the supreme moral authority of the immense and articulated Muslim *ummah* – still lacks the minimum requirements, all the rest plays in favor of further dramatic fragmentation, both ethnic and religious. It is a nightmare, not a dream, that comes at a very high price to be paid not only by the minorities living in the Middle East but by the population as a whole, that risks losing in the Islamic faith that ethical and spiritual guidance that has been available for centuries to millions and millions of believers.

For Arabs in particular everything happens as if all the achievements of the past two centuries and the rich and versatile experience of previous times has never existed.

The same Islamic reformism that during the *nahda* effectively paved the way for unexpected openings in the name of renewal soon clashed against authoritarian involutions. And this happened amidst contrasting needs and with no real independence from political power. The religious buzzwords that are making a comeback are too worn out to function and vainly pretend to respond to the anxiety that calls for national redemption and rebirth to determine its success, in the absence of viable alternatives. What failed to materialize in the institutions and the practices of states that are

³ The article of the recent Tunisian Constitution concerning freedom of religion is an impressive case in point: “L’État est gardien de la religion. Il garantit la liberté de croyance, de conscience et le libre exercice des cultes; il est le garant de la neutralité des mosquées et lieux de culte par rapport à toute instrumentalisation partisane. L’État s’engage à diffuser les valeurs de modération et de tolérance, à protéger les sacrés et à interdire d’y porter atteinte, comme il s’engage à interdire les campagnes d’accusation d’apostasie et l’incitation à la haine et à la violence. Il s’engage également à s’y opposer”.

modern only in appearance, has no better chance of becoming reality through demagogical – rather than charismatic – slogans. These are unrealistic in their intention and outrageous in their practice. They target once again people that are struggling to be recognized as citizens and who appear condemned to remain forever subjects. The presumed caliphate does not present a credible alternative, no more than it would a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe. However, it speaks volumes of the credible alternatives that are found in this ‘globalized’ world, that is clinging to any identity (more as *belonging* than *believing*), no matter how fake or unrealistic (like marriage at the source of the Po river, that the Celts never did practice). And yet it is a useful harbor for the misfits of ‘liquid society’, as the destiny of the nearby Balkans has eloquently and painfully shown not so long ago, just outside of our doorstep.

2. The Centrality of the Enemy in al-Baghdadi's Caliphate

Andrea Plebani, Paolo Maggiolini

The idea of analyzing the theme of conflict and the relationship with the other with reference to the self-styled Islamic State (IS)¹ may appear as a merely rhetorical, almost tautological exercise. The violence underlying IS activities and its all-out expansionist attitude are, indeed, the aspects that most significantly characterize the actions of the movement under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also in light of the fact that IS makes no distinction between adversaries (*inimicus*) and enemies (*hostis*). IS leaves no room whatsoever for the right to exist of others in a shared social or political space, except in submission and deprivation. This principle inspires the IS narrative, starting from its peculiar concept of caliphate, as clearly explained in the previous chapter, all the way to the definition of and relationship with the “other”.

This is true not only with regard to the non-Muslim world, but also towards the Muslim universe itself, as shown by the constant application of *takfir*², even for those jihadists who are not willing to recognize the authority of the ‘new caliph’. It is clear that any

¹ In Arabic *Dawla al-Islamiyya* or also *Dawla Islamiyya fi Iraq wa Sham* Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - Isil/Isis or *Daish*.

² The term *takfir* identifies the act of declaring that a person or a practice is a nonbeliever or non-Muslim (*kaafir*, on which the term *takfir* is based). For Islam, a declaration of *takfir* is a serious accusation and entails severe consequences for both the accuser, who may be in turn accused of the same should his own declaration be judged to be false, and for the accused, who may be sentenced to death. According to IS, the question of *takfir* applies directly to the Muslim world, thus becoming an instrument to legitimize the killing of Muslim believers accused of blasphemy or of rejecting the ‘true’ faith.

diversity, otherness or juxtaposition, either internal or external to the world in which these subjects operate, falls within the category of the enemy rather than the adversary.

The pages that follow aim to reflect on the concept of the caliphate in the IS message and to provide an analysis of the relationship that IS has established between the enemy – in its numerous guises – and media communication. More specifically, it will focus on the identification of the ultimate target of the group's violence and why it was lumped into the category of the *hostis*. Interestingly, IS has not only achieved results in the field, but has been able to resound its overbearing message through a careful representation of the enemy as humiliated and defeated. With a view to fueling this vision of the enemy, IS has been careful to synchronize its activities across the local, regional and international dimensions, while also engaging in a campaign for recruitment and an effort to spread terror across the board³.

The IS/violence connection

There is no doubt that the brutal use of violence by *Dawla al-Islamiyya* and its aesthetic representation marks a qualitative leap forward in the direction of an activity that contemporary jihadism has appeared particularly concerned with since the early appearances of al-Qaeda. With IS this relation has acquired even greater weight. The enemy is not just the obstacle on the way to the achievement of a political project, or simply the summation of everything against which the group is called to fight, or a structural threat that may be either near or far. The enemy becomes, in fact, the object and the subject of the group's doctrine, eventually coming to embody its very founding element, without which IS's overall doctrine would fall apart and lose most of its meaning.

³ I. Eido, "ISIS: The Explosion of Narratives – The Land of the Revolution Between Political and Metaphysical Eternities", *Jadaliyya*, 3 October 2014 [ONLINE].

From an ideological point of view, the peculiar interpretation of the relationship between the religious message and the political objective (the reestablishment of the caliphate and the imposition of sharia) promotes in a sort of short-circuit what is almost a 'reification' of violence, turning the religious dimension and affiliation into a political matter. This result is achieved through a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, violence thrives on the power of the media and refers back to the traditional patterns of the monopoly of power (war, punishment of the enemy, punishment of those who do not comply with the law, etc.)⁴. On the other, the constant and terrifying exposure to violence renders it banal and readily dismissed. Through the reification of violence IS aims to appeal to new recruits and to terrorize its 'enemies'.

In its attempt to propose itself as the physical representation of the ideal Islamic State, IS brings this reflection to its most extreme consequences, rejecting the very concept of compromise with anything 'other', both outside and inside the territory under the group's control. At the same time, the interpretation of the sources of the Koran that lies at the basis of the fundamentalist attitude of entities like al-Qaeda and IS leads to a vision of the world rooted in the need to fight the enemy, wherever he might be. In this sense, there is no substantial difference between al-Qaeda and IS in their doctrines towards the enemy, which are structured around a peculiar interpretation of the Holy Book for a specific political purpose. The West (identified as the home of the new crusaders and of their Jewish allies), the several religious minorities of the Middle East but also Muslims not adhering to the jihadi message (both Shia and Sunni) are the enemy *par excellence*.

Additionally, compared to the traditional vision that dominated the political arena of the Muslim world over the last centuries, jihadist movements tend to view this classification according to an ethical and de-territorialized approach. The battlefield is everywhere, because the distinction between friend and foe applies to all places at all levels. That is because these movements propose a

⁴ C. Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13, November 2014, p. 26.

view of the world that is no longer based on a separation between the territory of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the land of war (*dar al-harb*). IS itself stressed this view in the first issue of *Dabiq* describing a “world clearly divided into two camps”: on one side are Islam and the *mujaheddin* supporting its laws. On the other disbelief (*kufur*) and hypocrisy, namely Jews, crusaders and, “with them the rest of the nations and religions of *kufur*, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the Jews”⁵.

There are, however, some distinctions to be made in terms of priorities when facing the numerous enemies of the jihadist cause and in the tactical decisions about how to channel violence against them. According to bin Laden and al-Zawahiri the fight must be oriented primarily against the so-called *far enemy*: the West led by the United States, indicated as the new crusaders and their Jewish allies⁶, with which no association or alliance is ever allowed. Clearly, however, there are also *near enemies* exerting control and occupying Muslim countries. But these are tactically secondary according to al-Qaeda when compared to the far enemy. Fully at ease in this scenario, IS takes this reasoning in a new direction in its predisposition to violence and in the importance of the destruction of the near enemy. IS supports a radicalization of the Qaedist cosmology that is turned upside-down, where the priority is assaulting the ‘near’ enemy, without forgetting the ‘far’ one. In this context communication and media-fed psychological warfare become strategically important because they allow IS to bring the clashes in Iraq and Syria to an international plane⁷. This global vision is evidence of IS’s dreadfully contemporary dimension.

⁵ *Dabiq*, n. 1, 1435, *Ramadam*, pp. 11-12.

⁶ Cf. G. Kepel (ed.), *Al-Qaeda. I testi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006.

⁷ E. Brooking, “The ISIS Propaganda Machine Is Horrifying and Effective. How Does It Work?”, *Defense in Depth*, 21 August 2014, <http://blogs.cfr.org/davidson/2014/08/21/the-isis-propaganda-machine-is-horrifying-and-effective-how-does-it-work/>.

A world ruled by enemies

Starting from these premises, the process for creating an enemy represents the very foundation of the self-styled Islamic State, so much so as to almost exclusively dominate its doctrine and propaganda. Significantly, al-Baghdadi and his cohorts managed to reverse the decline that affected the group at the end of the past decade⁸. This was inevitable, considering the heavy and long-lasting marks that the conflict within the Arab-Sunni galaxy in Iraq had left on the ground. The collapse of ISI (the acronym used as one of the early names of IS, meaning “Islamic State in Iraq”) between 2006 and 2009 had deteriorated in the framework of growing hostility to the movement among those who had once been its main allies. It was the exploitation of these divisions that had allowed the U.S. command to break up the axis that up to that point had held together the Arab-Sunni-Iraqi community, the insurrection and ISI. This led to the formation of awakening councils⁹ (*sahwa*) that were fundamental in defeating the jihadist forces. However, it was not an easy conflict, nor was it fought in the light of day: the opposing sides were turning on each other after sharing for years the same fight against the new Iraqi institutions and their international patrons/protectors. These events, together with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq (completed in 2011 and unanimously regarded as one of the main reasons for the success of the Islamic State), called for an internal revolution that could no longer be delayed. To ensure its revival, the group could no longer engage in a fight against old ghosts or non-existent enemies: its strategy needed to be adjusted to the new local conditions, while remaining coherent with the guidelines presented by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

As for other jihadist movements more or less directly connected to the al-Qaeda camp, al-Baghdadi's group could never exist

⁸ See A. Plebani, *The unfolding legacy of al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, in Idem (ed.), *New (and old) patterns of jihadism: al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State and beyond*, ISPI Studies, October 2014.

⁹ On this point see J. MacCary, “The Anbar Awakening: an Alliance of Incentives”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2009.

without an opposing *hostis*. This approach builds on the themes that have been expressed by a vast number of thinkers that dominated the Islamist scene in the past century, including Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and Ayman al-Zawahiri himself. Who is the enemy that the self-styled Islamic State intends to strike anywhere, using any means, until “it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq?”¹⁰. While in theory this category includes all those who do not adhere to the plan of IS, the movement devoted a large part of its doctrine and propaganda to clarifying who shall be regarded as an enemy, which characteristics the foe should possess, and based on which arguments it is legitimate to regard the foe as such. According to this reasoning, it has often been the case that theological elements have been lumped together with more practical considerations, often in connection with specific tactical and strategic interests.

The enemy within

In this sense, one major distinction could be made based on the *hostis*' belonging – real or alleged - to the Islamic community. As is the case with other jihadist movements, the enemy is not necessarily and exclusively coming from outside *dar al-Islam* and the circle of believers, but can be found also among those who appear to be an integral part of the *ummah* (Islamic community) and that the IS doctrine unequivocally labels as non-believers – and as such, punishable with death. In fact the group founded by al-Zarqawi stood out in the early days of its establishment precisely because of the fierce battle it engaged in with a number of Islamic communities accused of having distorted the message of the Prophet. By virtue of their positions, these groups were regarded as even more dangerous than non-believers and the *far enemy* that al-Qaeda had identified as its ultimate nemesis.

¹⁰ This is the formula from which *Dabiq*, an IS magazine, takes its name. The sentence, that opens every issue, is attributed to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and sums up the millenarianist vision of the group whose mission pursues the ultimate goal of the apocalyptic battle at the end of time.

Among the first names on IS's 'black list' there are certainly the Shia communities in the regional area. Generally indicated as *rawafid* ("those who reject"), the Shias soon became the main target of the operations launched by what was then al-Qaeda in Iraq because of their positions considered diametrically opposed to those of orthodox Sunni Islam. The massacres perpetrated by al-Zarqawi's fighters against the Shia community in Iraq were mostly based on tactical rather than theological considerations. However, they contributed significantly to the emergence of a sectarian drift that, while present and historically rooted in the Middle-Eastern scenario and connected to precise geopolitical dynamics¹¹, was thus reawakened and amplified. The group's position did not coincide with that of the mainstream jihadist galaxy, which may not have particularly appreciated the Shia community as such but that repeatedly voiced harsh criticism of the group's conduct¹². Similar considerations – mainly limited to the theological plane – also accompany the fight undertaken by IS against the Sufis and their sanctuaries. This position is not exclusive to the movement founded by al-Zarqawi and adopts a vision of the world guided by a dichotomy whereby the Sufis are regarded as heterodox, an unmistakable expression of the contamination to which the Islamic faith had been exposed for centuries.

However, the self-styled caliphate does not devote its attention solely to those forms of Islam that are traditionally accused of being heterodox, but includes also a whole series of actors that, while belonging to the Sunni Islamic world, do not recognize al-Baghdadi's authority. A doctrinal position that has led many

¹¹ In this instance, there is a clear reference to the geopolitical competition triggered by what King Abdullah II of Jordan had at the time indicated as the *Shia crescent*, meaning the growing political weight of Iran in the early 2000s. This theory is also supported by the fact that the term *rafida* was often accompanied or replaced by Persian-Safavid (*safawi*), thus anchoring the fight against the Shia enemy not only on the religious and doctrinal plan, but also to geopolitics. Cf. V. Nasr, *The Shia revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, W. W. Norton & Co, 2007.

¹² Cf. S. Brooke, *The Preacher and the Jibadi*, in H. Fradkin, H. Haqqani, E. Brown (eds.), *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute Publications, vol. 2, 2005.

scholars to associate IS with the *kharijite* movement¹³. The same treatment is reserved for those Islamist movements that, while sharing part of the same doctrinal background, are not willing to accept the authority of the caliphate and its supremacy. One case in point is the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, as well as the Qaedist network that was repeatedly accused of having lost its way¹⁴.

The enemy outside

As regards the enemy outside, IS whole-heartedly embraces the jihadist view whereby the West, its allies and, in general, any subject that is not a follower of Islam are its natural and necessary targets. As noted earlier, IS does not contribute any significant ‘innovation’ to the definition of the enemy according to the peculiar interpretation of jihadist groups. In this sense, the selection of references in the Holy Sources is limited exclusively to those passages that support and justify their armed and political struggle. For this reason, every element or excerpt of the Koran that encourages coexistence with or acceptance of the other is ignored or prosaically played down. Consequently, the overall Islamic reflection concerning the other brutally plummets into the ideological abyss created by IS and leads to a tunnel vision that inevitably regards the other as the enemy, classified according to the categories of non-believers (*kuffar*), polytheists (*mushrik*) or apostates (*murtad*), as clearly expressed in the various videos and articles released by the IS propaganda units. In fact this tripartite distinction may be misleading and should not be regarded only according to the references found in the sources. If on the theoretical plane it is possible to define the consequences of classifying the enemy

¹³ It is not easy to briefly explain the meaning of *kharijite* since this term has characterized the whole history of Islam, referring to forms of religious and political dissidence and attitudes defined by official powers as heretic vis-à-vis the Sunni orthodoxy. In short, the use of this term aims to underscore the ambition of jihadist movements to achieve the violent and militant overturn of the established religious power and authorities, regarded as corrupt and rejecting the true principles contained in the sources.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Plebani, (2014).

according to such distinctions, in actual fact the IS propaganda and the abundant use of vilification and violence makes them almost interchangeable, depriving them of any contextual or theological context.

In the framework of IS propaganda, the importance of the category of *kuffar* follows two directions that remain separate in spite of occasional interconnections and overlaps. On the one hand the use of this term identifies a whole external world – roughly corresponding to the West and its (Muslim and non-Muslim) allies – to which the jihadist galaxy and IS are clearly opposed. It is the enemy that, according to the movement, is besieging Islam, threatening its existence and requiring a defensive *jihad*. On the other, the use of the *kuffar* category serves to blend together the question of the enemy and the ethical and existential threat for the Muslim believer. Thus transfigured, the *kuffar* becomes a scourge that corrupts the Muslim believer himself: the “bad company”, as noted in *Dabiq*¹⁵, that leads astray even the good believer who complies with all the precepts of Islam and subjects him to the constant risk of sinning. In the wake of this threat of contagion, compromise and association, the good Muslim who lives peacefully among the *kuffar* is allegedly exposed to the most dangerous of risks, namely abandoning or forsaking the *jihad*, a capital offense in the eyes of IS. It is clear that this cosmic-ethical construction of the relationship between the believer and the non-believer indicates the need – according to IS – for Muslims to unequivocally resolve the threat of contagion, first by acknowledging it and then by deliberately choosing to take their distance from it by migrating (*hijra* – migration/separation) to the territories under IS control, committing to its onslaught in the Middle East.

As regards the relation between IS and the enemy as *kuffar* in the areas where the battle is fought, there is little doubt that the various guarantees that have allowed Muslim societies to be ruled as multi-religious empires over the centuries are recognized only in theory and granted solely to the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-*

¹⁵ *Dabiq*, no. 3, 1435 Shawwal, p. 32.

kitab)¹⁶. As shown by numerous videos and online publications released by IS, the question of protection (*dhimma*) in exchange for the payment of a defense tax (*jiziyah*) for the Peoples of the Book is mentioned only rhetorically and prosaically, while in actual fact IS has shown no mercy in Syria and Iraq towards the Christians residing in those areas. Both in Raqqa in February 2014 and in Mosul in the summer of 2014 the militants of the self-styled caliphate provided clear evidence of the fact that they intend to pursue a policy of extermination and purge against the Christians¹⁷. Conversion was in fact the only option available to those communities¹⁸. The introduction of the *dhimma* in the two ‘constitutions’ issued in Raqqa (February 2014) and Mosul (July 2014) brought only a temporary halt to the actions of the IS armed wing¹⁹. In Mosul, in particular, the *dhimma* was introduced in the “nothing but the sword” form, anticipating a sort of truce rather than the possibility of benefitting from the protection, no matter how humiliating and degrading, of this institution. Thus IS allowed only 48 hours to make the choice whether to embrace Islam or leave the city. A kind of ‘freedom’ that is merely rhetorical and that in fact presupposed quite different intentions, in a crescendo of skillfully directed and cruelly orchestrated pathos. In fact the ‘truth’ conveyed through videos and online materials showed IS’s intention to use the suffering and humiliation of these victims as a clear and unequivocal manifesto of its military might and its unwavering devotion to the annihilation of the other²⁰. The decision to mark the property of Christians with the Arabic letter “nun” (*nasara*) and that of Shia, Shabak and Turkmen communities with the Arabic letter “ra” (*rafida*) perfectly summarized the intention of localizing and turning the suffering of the enemy into a spectacle, generating terror and bewilderment internationally as

¹⁶ The followers of the recognized monotheistic religions (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians).

¹⁷ <http://elaph.com/Web/News/2014/12/964325.html>.

¹⁸ http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/inthepress/2014/03/140303_press_wednesday.

¹⁹ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*, 14 November 2014, pp. 2-5.

²⁰ <http://www.doualia.com/2014/08/18/ش-باذا-خ-تن-داعش>

well as in the newly conquered territory²¹. Thus IS brought its psychological warfare to its extreme consequences. Naturally, this destructive and nihilistic attitude also lashed out against places of worship, cemeteries and artistic sites that were desecrated and destroyed.

The same fate also awaited the Yazidi community of Sinjar between July and August 2014. In this case, however, IS showed special fury both in terms of physical force and in communication efforts. The Yazidis are a minority group of Kurdish origin that, from a religious standpoint, follows a mixture of mystical principles and religious and theological traditions dating back to the ancient religions of the Middle East. In fact, the story of this community has been marked by outbursts of persecution since the days of the Ottoman Empire and various attempts at assimilation under the various regimes of Iraq.

In their case the IS bias against *mushrik* (pagans) was brought to the next level. Their martyrdom was staged openly, with deliberate pride, almost flaunted, using any communication tool available. In this way the persecution of the Yazidis was construed as a perfect example to show the (Muslim and non-Muslim) world the meaning of the IS project and its application towards its enemies and any potential 'threat'. In the distorted ideology of this group, the Yazidis are not simply pagans or *mushrikun* (polytheists), but become the ultimate expression of the worst possible category of enemies: an ethical enemy whose unrelenting rejection of the Islamic message is reiterated in their ancient religious tradition. For this reason any means are allowed to fight them according to the IS propaganda. The only choice given them was conversion or death. As noted in the articles that appeared in *Dabiq* about their agony, IS systematically stressed that this community, unlike Christians and Jews, could not be accepted in the *dhimma*. In the context of *Dawla al-Islamiyya*, no protection was possible in exchange for submission and humiliation.

²¹ <http://www.releaseinternational.org/iraq-ultimatum-to-mosul-christians-leave-by-noon-or-be-killed/>.

Thus the Yazidis became the ideal ‘loot’ for IS, both in terms of propaganda (the subjects on which to test and exercise the heaviest bulk of violence, to be showcased on all available media) and in the more material sense, with the enslavement of women and children. The mainly symbolic reason for this massacre is further confirmed by IS’s decision to extend the battlefield to the area of Jebel Sinjar (where the Yazidis reside) which holds no particular strategic or operational value. This behavior can be explained only by referring to the dynamics outlined above: the jihadist leaders were not interested in the territories occupied by the Yazidis or their possessions, but aimed to turn them into the ideal sacrificial lamb to cement the unity of the composite front put together by al-Baghdadi. It is distressing to read in the pages of *Dabiq*²² that IS is actually feigning a ‘positivist’ approach, inviting the reader to become acquainted with this de-humanized being, the Yazidi as *mushrik*. A plethora of selected sources and opinions points in this direction without any specific purpose except for an all-out effort to justify and rationalize the justness of their murder, enslavement and humiliation. Dehumanized and humiliated, the victims of IS become the ultimate symbols, examples of its unwavering and steadfast determination to establish a new order that is pure and uniform, against all differences and resistances. The enemy, stripped bare and helpless, serves a clear purpose for *Dawla al-Islamiyya*, presenting a simplified interpretation of religious tradition, shifting attention from the theoretical plan to the suffering of the living flesh. At the same time this operation also contributed to the psychological warfare that IS engages in with no holds barred across all media platforms, showing its strength, ‘reifying’ – as noted earlier – the violence that it delivers, and ritualizing the death and suffering of individuals and groups alike.

²² *Dabiq*, no. 4, 1435 Dhul-Hijjah, pp. 14-17.

IS and the necessity of violence

After ascertaining who IS identifies as its enemy, it is important to understand why the creation of the enemy is so essential to IS doctrine and propaganda. There is no doubt that the motivations pertain to both the doctrinal plane and its *grand strategy* and, perhaps more significantly, to tactical considerations. Since the establishment of *Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* in Iraq (the precursor of the movements that led to the creation of IS), the ability to hit the enemy heavily and relentlessly has been the only means available to the group to show their resilience in the face of mounting pressure. Against the background that was outlined earlier, a ‘combat beast’ like IS could, and still can, survive only if it proves over and over again that it can keep up the offensive, so as to convey a message of aggressiveness targeting both its opponents and its constituency and related actors. Unlike what one might expect, IS’s hold on the territories it controls is far from absolute and was repeatedly tested by social actors and local centers of power pursuing long-term agendas and objectives that differ significantly from those of the group. Maintaining a consistently aggressive stance – and constantly high pressure from the outside – has served the need to strengthen its inward solidarity: keeping the group’s sense of mission alive, contributing to cement its spirit as a single entity, and stressing its otherness vis-à-vis third-party subjects. The latter is further achieved by dehumanizing (and ‘de-Islamizing’ in the case of enemies who claim to be Muslim) the adversary. In this context, it is particularly interesting to analyze how IS has managed and justified the conflict within the *umma*. While IS has referred to a number of authors who have justified extension of the fight to within the Islamic community, it has raised the stake of intra-Islamic conflict to an unprecedented level. The distinctive trait of the IS doctrine lies precisely in the fight against those who claim to be Muslim but are regarded as the ones responsible for the decay of the Islamic world and its return to a state of *jahilliya* (ignorance) similar to the one that predates the Prophet’s teachings. Rather than fighting the far enemy, it was the declaration of war against the Islamic communities – be them

heterodox or otherwise ‘impure’ – that made the group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi stand out from the rest of the jihadist galaxy. It is against this background that one should interpret the battle launched by al-Qaeda in Iraq and its epigones against the Shia community, as well as the all-out fight against those Sunnis who are unwilling to support the movement’s cause. In the former case, the use of violence is justified by the decision of the victims not to recognize the authority of the caliphs that followed Ali (significantly, the term used to identify them is *rafida*) and therefore to perpetuate the division that indelibly marked Islam in its early days. In the latter, the conflict was triggered not by the formal rejection of Sunni orthodoxy but by the decision not to adhere to the movement’s ultra radical message and therefore to choose to err in spite of having been exposed to the truth (hence the resort to the concept of *taghut*²³ and to the practice of *takfir*).

However, the decision to concentrate the conflict within the Islamic community is not based exclusively on theological and doctrinal considerations. In fact it often stems from more materialistic, more exigent priorities, as well as strategic and tactical reasons. As correctly argued by Brian Fishman, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s decision to hit the Iraqi Shia community (and trigger a civil war) was rooted in a vision of the evils of the Islamic world whereby the near enemy is more dangerous than the far one²⁴. But it also stemmed from the need to prevent the start of a national reconciliation process that would have led to the integration of the Iraqi Sunni Arab community into the new post-Saddam order – an event that would have translated into the defeat of the movement led by the Jordanian leader, for whom the support of the Iraqi Sunnis was the *condicio sine qua non* to engage in an armed campaign.

²³ The word *taghut* (literally “rebel” or “cross the boundaries”) denotes who exceed their limits, imposing their rebellion against the will of God upon others. Accordingly, jihadist movements employ this word to address contemporary Arab leaders considered morally corrupted tyrants.

²⁴ B. Fishman, “After Zarqawi: the dilemmas and future of Al Qaeda in Iraq”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, pp. 20-21.

Targeting [Shi'a] in religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies [...] and bare the teeth of the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of the Sabeans²⁵.

It should also be noted that the particular fury against the Shias can be explained by IS's ambition to found a new state, regardless of the divisions and the borders of the Middle East. IS views its relation with the Shia community not only in 'religious' terms, but also according to eminently geopolitical considerations. Thus in Iraq, where the Shias exercised control over the political life of the country until the demise of Saddam Hussein, IS defined their defeat and humiliation as the 'liberation' of the Sunni from the yoke of oppression²⁶. These cross-references may appear at times more contextual than the result of rigorous logic and shed light on the ways in which IS mixes together 'religious' and 'political' elements to serve the purpose of an agenda that clearly fills the crannies of the Middle-Eastern region for the purpose of creating a new state.

Moreover, material and spiritual interests cannot lose sight of the rules of *realpolitik* not only as regards the fight against the enemies that lie outside of the caliphate, but also against those "fifth columns" within the IS territory. For this reason the violation of orders or norms imposed by IS is punished with exemplary violence: lashing out at a full-fledged member of the 'caliphate' conveys a message of coherence and faith in an uncompromising purity that adds polish to the movement's aura of sacredness while, at the same time, consolidating al-Baghdadi's hold on the territory according to the principle that calls for "the elimination of one enemy to educate one hundred". It is in this context that one should look at the punishments inflicted in the public square at regular intervals in the group's strongholds, but also the extreme savagery adopted by IS against anyone daring to oppose its su-

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

²⁶ Islamic State Report, Issue 3, Shaban 1435, p. 1.

premacry, as shown by the elimination of hundreds of members of the al-Bu Nimr and al-Jubur tribes (in Iraq) and the Sheitat tribe (in Syria)²⁷. This obsession with public order and morality recently led IS to punish 13 youngsters solely for having watched a match played by the Iraqi national football team. An act that testifies to IS's desire to rigidly control the behavior of those who represent, in its view, the future citizens of the 'caliphate'. The intransigence that IS has shown towards them should therefore come as no surprise: the very fact that those kids were supporting the national team of a state the group considers artificial and alien to the Islamic message was considered one of the worse crimes they could commit. After all, among IS's fiercest enemies are all the states of the Middle East, their borders and identities, regardless of whether they are real, imagined, artificial or a mere pretense²⁸.

The conflict engaged in with the Kurds deserves a special mention. The Kurds are among the bitterest enemies of the self-styled Islamic State both in Iraq and in Syria. They are presented on the doctrinal plan as *hostis* not by virtue of their specific ethnic identity but because of their disbelief (or outright atheism in some passages, in light of their proximity to far-left movements). In this sense it is particularly interesting to read a passage in issue 5 of *Dabiq* attributed to IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani: "Our war with the Kurds is a religious war. It is not a nationalistic war – we seek the refuge of Allah. We do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the crusaders and Jews in their war against the Muslims"²⁹.

²⁷ O. Holmes, S. al-Khalidi, "Islamic State executed 700 people from Syrian tribe: monitoring group", *Reuters*, 16 August 2014.

²⁸ Islamic State Report, Issue 4, Shaban 1435, p. 2.

²⁹ *Dabiq*, no. 5, 1436 Muharram, p. 12.

Conclusion

The relationship between communication, the enemy and its elimination has primary strategic value in the war waged by IS. It is precisely this connection that allows the group to support its propaganda machine both for the fight against the external enemy (at the operational and psychological levels) and the jihadist world. In this way IS seeks to achieve primacy in recruitment and in the jihadist struggle. At the same time, by pursuing the objective of establishing itself as a state, IS views the enemy as the most natural vehicle to impose its monopoly of violence within a given territory, through punishment and repression showing its ability to impose public order. The exhibition of the enemy, his punishment and elimination are therefore essential on the ruthless path to the creation of a state or proto-state. At the same time, from a strategic point of view the relationship between the enemy and communication provides the possibility to express the meaning of a political project inspired by standardization and uniformity among the subjects that it sets out to govern, according to the most radical and deviant vision of the principle of the nation-state. Consequently, the extirpation of those who are different and the call to immigrate (*hijra*) become one and the same. Moreover, IS's subtle communication skills – that are aesthetically effective as well as articulated in the use of a variety of media – support its desire to present itself as an organized, structured and distinct entity, not unlike – perhaps even better than – any modern nation-state. Lastly, in view of perpetual war, the possibility of combining the battle in the field with the one in the media, may play in IS's favor, wearing down the near enemy or facilitating escape, so as to enlarge the communities of refugees in nearby countries, which are likely to become the enemies of tomorrow. The latter is an aspect that is strategically important in that it may lead to the destabilization of these areas and that could boost the expansionist ambitions of IS according to the strategy of the 5 stages³⁰.

³⁰ While IS has not introduced any concrete innovation in the strategy for the reestablishment of the caliphate (*al-kehilafa*), it clearly illustrated this path in the first

From a tactical point of view, it is clear that IS concentrates, or rather, deliberately organizes its propaganda and communication strategy in stages, focusing on the representation of individual groups as dictated by exigent needs and convenience, reflecting to some extent the stage reached at a certain point by the organization and connected to tactical-strategic considerations. The decision to focus – almost exclusively at first, as can be gathered from *ISN news*, another publication produced by IS along with *Dabiq* – on the Shias probably aimed at providing an image and adding momentum to the fight against the central state, in view of the so-called ‘liberation’. Later, particularly around the time of the capture of Mosul and the attack against Jabal Sinjar, Christians and Yazidis were tactically turned into symbolic targets, for various reasons, to generate significant media coverage, to showcase IS’s success internationally, and to terrorize nearby populations for the purpose of continuing expansion.

From a practical and institutional point of view, while IS stands out for the gruesomeness of its attitude and behavior, it remains a political-social entity that needs to construct an identity making it different and recognizable in the jihadist scenario and by the enemies against which it is fighting. This element is essential to provide legitimization in the eyes of its own militants and new acolytes. Thus this operation becomes all the more important both to ensure cohesion inside its constituency and in view of possible expansion. Defining the enemy and communicating are useful tools to underscore the unique nature of its mission and its cause. At the same time, the construction of the image of the enemy as an ethical and ontological threat is necessary to IS to ensure that its fighters are focused on the battle’s objective and to provide motivation. This becomes all the more important in view of the construction of a state that requires the defense of a territory and the

issue of *Dabiq*. The 5 stages or required phases would be: *hijra* (migration – strategic detachment from a hostile territory towards an area where the central authority is weak); *jama’a* (congregation and training of new recruits); destabilizing the *taghut* (creating chaos and bringing down the tyrannical regime); *tamkin* (replacing disorder by creating a new state); *kbilafa* (caliphate). *Dabiq*, no. 1, 1435 Ramadan, p. 40.

constant control of its inhabitants. As such it must be able to count on a cohesive and motivated system. Moreover, the nihilistic exhibition of death and humiliation is instrumental to IS to increase external pressure. As indicated by the so-called Simmel rule³¹, the level of external pressure is directly related to the degree of internal cohesion of a group. In order to devote itself to the conquest and creation of a state that is solely designed for those who declare themselves to be Islamic, according to its particular interpretation, IS needs conflict. The purging of those who follow a different faith and anyone 'other' in general is essential to trigger an external reaction feeding its own narrative. Generating a certain level of indignation is not only part of a tactic of terror, but is also a manipulative move to strengthen its constituency depending on what measure appears most convenient. Lastly, from an existential point of view, the enemy serves to provide a secular and modern-day context for the cause that is defined according to a millennial tradition. The exhibition of the humiliation and the elimination of the enemy, therefore, allows IS to bring this cause into the present, with no hesitation. In this sense no time scale is broad enough to bring the conflict to a close³². No defeat can entail the abdication of the battle, whose triumph is entrusted to the hands of God who has already determined the fate of the enemy in the afterlife – which is solely and inevitably hell.

Indeed, it is clear that the relationship between communication and the enemy is articulated by IS to hit both external adversaries (as seen in the decision to convey all its messages in Western languages as well as Arabic and the predilection for the use of instruments like Twitter and the social networks in general) and to persuade and entice new acolytes. From the recruitment viewpoint the violence shown in a cinematic fashion and building on the

³¹ T.H. Eriksen, *Ethnic identity, national identity and intergroup conflict: The significance of personal experiences*, in R.D. Ashmore, L.J. Jussim, D. Wilder (eds.), *Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 63.

³² "There is no life without jihad and there is no jihad without hijrah", *Dabiq*, no. 3, 1435 Shawwal, p. 31.

powerfully engaging appeal of a videogame seems to point to IS's determination to target the younger groups of the population, who are possibly easier to influence. These are the recruits that IS is aiming to persuade. At the same time this approach becomes an effective weapon against the adversarial 'other', because violence presented according to Hollywood standards and style is perfectly suited to a variety of media and to being conveyed and shared online (both individually and through official broadcasters). In this way IS communication easily goes viral, turning the nihilistic exhibition of violence into a language that is readily understood by the average Western viewer, thus maximizing the psychological effect on the group's target.

Part II
Communication Strategies

3. The Islamic State: Not That Surprising, If You Know Where To Look

Monica Maggioni

There is a before and after in public opinion's perception of the establishment of the self-styled Islamic State and its appearance on the world's stage. The watershed date is 29 June 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the creation of the caliphate.

At that moment the attention of the media focused again on Iraq and the whole region, after years in which every piece of news coming from there was accepted with a sense of numbness.

What we used to call the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) chose to proclaim the establishment of the Islamic caliphate in the territories it conquered in Syria and Iraq. It did so through a speech delivered by al-Baghdadi at the mosque in Mosul¹, while in a press release on the Internet it encouraged all fellow Muslims to ally in this new battle. At the same time, ISIL announced that its name had changed to Islamic State and that its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had risen to the rank of caliph, the prophet's successor.

ISIL's spokesman said the caliphate "is every Muslim's dream and every jihadist's desire". It was a way to get every Islamic believer involved, but also a subtle threat meaning that for every Muslim, "with the establishment of the caliphate, their duty is to pledge allegiance to the caliph". And to other jihadist groups, he added: "There is no religious excuse not to support this State. Be aware that with the declaration of the caliphate, your groups have

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOORW63ioY0>.

lost their legitimacy. No one is authorized not to pledge allegiance to the caliphate”.

The message of the caliphate’s foundation was disseminated using three communication media at the same time: direct preaching by al-Baghdadi at the mosque in Mosul (the video was introduced by “Al-Furqan media foundation presents”); a press release which the spokesman entrusted to the Internet and, consequently, to the media of the whole world; and then another video (intended for global distribution) which immediately clarified the newly established caliphate’s political perspective and position with regard to the states and territories it is active in. Significantly, the video’s title reads: “The end of Sykes-Picot”². It refers to the agreement reached by France and the UK in 1916 (officially known as the Asia Minor Agreement), signed by François George-Picot and sir Mark Sykes, with which London and Paris defined their areas of influence in the Middle East after World War I.

Yet, on that June day, none of the caliph’s messages was as strong as that last video, which irrevocably marked a change in pace and strategy for the organization. The video stated the new objectives and choices of the leader and his followers.

The caliph’s men were basically outlining the moves and operating strategies that would then be carried out in the following months by the Islamic State supporters.

“The end of Sykes-Picot” lasts fifteen minutes and four seconds, it is in full HD with skillful framing and a good choice of light. Sound mixing is professional, too. The symbol of the producing company al-Hayat is shown in the top-right corner, together with that of the media center Al-I’tisam Establishment for Media Production, which has been acting as a producer of media contents for various Sunni jihadist groups over the years in Iraq.

A young bearded man appears on screen with a name caption that reads “Abu Safiyya from Chile”, in line with the narrative tradition of official audiovisual media around the world. The young man is in an unspecified location in the desert (he immediately clarifies that it is the border between Syria and Iraq); an iron

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i357G1HuFcI>.

rod behind him. The ritual formula – *basmala* – is of course in Arabic, but the man rapidly switches to English when he starts his talk. The images are from al-Qaim, the border between Syria and Iraq conquered by ISIS’s men, and the bearded youth confirms, “This is not the first border we have destroyed, and we will destroy others”, he says, mentioning Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

But who is Abu Safiyya³?

The name caption provides a piece of information that is important both in itself and because it is found there in the first place. The video’s director has a precise message to convey before any other: the name caption in the first sequence is not just a way to communicate the operating name of the jihadist protagonist of this video. It is a way to immediately characterize him as a “foreigner”: he is from Chile – says the caption – and a few instants after the ritual formula, we hear him speak English.

Bastián Vásquez, known as Abu Safiyya, is a Norwegian citizen of Chilean origins. He is 25 years old and in his recent history (since 2008) has followed the typical path of young converts who rapidly sets out on the path of radical Islam. His family moved to Norway during the dictatorship in Chile; hanging out in the suburbs where immigrants from all over the world lived, he joined a hip-hop band; around 2009 he converted to Islam after becoming acquainted with Mohyeldeen Mohammad, an Iraqi known to the police for his violent reaction to the cartoons against the prophet Muhammad in 2010⁴. Mohammad is one of the first Norwegian jihadists to go fight in Syria. In the meantime, Vasquez was among the instigators of the protest in front of the American Embassy in Oslo in 2012, together with the members of the Norwegian extremist group “The Prophet’s Ummah”. In the weeks after the protest, he left Norway to join his friend Mohammed in Syria. In 2013, under his new name Abu Safiyya, he himself posted on Facebook that he was in Aleppo with ISIS.

³ A. McNeice, “Abu Safiyya Police launch investigation into Chilean-Norwegian jihadist in Syria”, *Thu*, 3 July 2014.

⁴ Images of the protest: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkQQXkzBuXU.

It was not by chance that Bastian Vásquez became the protagonist of the first video shown to the world by the Caliphate a few hours after its establishment. Abu Safiyya was chosen because he represents what the new ISIS wants to be: he is the symbolic representation of its message and, at the same time, of its main target audience.

When the establishment of the caliphate was announced, ISIS proclaimed its intention to become a state and to identify itself with a precise territorial entity. In June 2014, al-Baghdadi's message and that of his followers to the world was not to build a guerrilla movement or a terrorist organization (which they have been for years, and there for all to see, even though very little has been done to stop them), but a real state. A state with an organization, with its own governing institutions and well-defined powers. But there is more: it is a state with strong ambitions of expansion – both in terms of territories and population. It is a state based on an ideology, a religion, a frame of thoughts and 'values' which potentially all good Muslims should identify with. At least, this is what the caliph and his followers think and preach.

So, according to them, the IS is a state whose first objective is to explain the ideal foundations and political objectives that justify its establishment and existence (it's not a coincidence that the first video released in the caliphate era is the one declaring the end of the borders set at the beginning of the last century by the 'crusaders'). The Islamic State is not content with today's successes. Mosul is not enough, the hundreds of foreign fighters arrived in Syria and Iraq to fight the jihad are not enough. The caliph needs new followers, needs to call in believers from all over the world. This is the target of its propaganda machine: convincing new subjects, and making the jihadist proposal attractive.

Political strategy and media tactics go hand in hand, following the same logic.

For all these reasons, analyzing ISIS's communication styles becomes fundamental, especially with regard to its most recent phase (after the caliphate was proclaimed), in order to understand its future moves. At the same time, analyzing everything that

happened before that 29 June is important to understand the connections and the preparation that went on in the years when Iraq was left to its own devices. It is important to fully appreciate the continuity of that “before and after” that has been presented by many as a ‘surprise move’, but which is hardly surprising at all.

Analyzing the ‘before’ will perhaps allow us to try and understand why nothing significant has been done to intercept al-Baghdadi’s action when things would have been – maybe – easier to handle.

This is why spending a few moments on the analysis of the symbolic value of Chilean-Norwegian Abu Safiyya’s appearance in the first frames of the “End of Sykes-Picot” video is worthwhile. The name caption, which brings us thousands of miles from the Iraqi desert, is the trademark of the new caliphate going beyond borders, being attractive and presenting itself as a global political project, appealing to young Muslims all over the world to enlarge its borders and strengthen the new Islamic State.

With the IS, the recruitment process, as well as the building of the jihad’s fascination, have entered a new phase.

For years, the path from radicalization to recruitment, fighting and martyrdom took place in secret and in silence, in the shadows. We would see the faces of mujaheddin only after their sacrifice, when they had already turned into *shahid*, martyrs.

Today this is no longer the case.

Fighters hold discussions on the Internet, post videos of themselves leaving for the new state, talk about their everyday life made of indoctrination (doctrine, to their eyes) and life models different from those they come from⁵.

The new fighters are finding a stage where they can be protagonists already in this life, before martyrdom: they already have a global audience to play for and they enjoy an unexpected popularity. Their journey, often with no return, is colored by magnificent prospects of lives alternating heroic acts and everyday delights. This is the IS they talk about in their videos on the web. And some

⁵ European jihadists, “It ain’t half hot here, mum. Why and how Westerners go to fight in Syria and Iraq”, *The Economist*, 30 August 2014.

have the opportunity to become protagonists, like Abu Safiyya from Chile.

As many of the converts, Abu Safiyya probably doesn't even speak good Arabic. He obsessively repeats "*inshallah*" and "*alhamdulillah*" in a double effort to justify himself from a linguistic, as well as ideological point of view.

The whole lexical choice, though, implies an ideological structure that has to be evident to the watcher: "So-called border", "so-called check point", says Abu Safiyya, to underline that nothing that was codified by Western history should be taken for granted; to state that history can be re-written from the beginning.

The video is divided into narrative portions marked by the classic "fade to black", used in the narrative sequence of contemporary trailers and videos. Every scene's detail is accurately described in the speech. The caliphate's first reportage leaves nothing to chance. The map drawn on the wall of the al-Qaim border post is intended to explain that that border no longer exists. Iraqi and Syrian soldiers' badges are picked up from the floor and described: for each of them there is an explanation that aims to underline the cowardice of the armies of 'unfaithful' states. "They took these [badges] off their uniforms, they threw their uniforms in the streets and they ran away", the narrator tells us.

The following scene appears again and again in the video: Abu Safiyya hoists the black caliphate flag on the post where the flags of the states whose armies fled used to wave. Abu Safiyya then embarks on religious explanations, saying that Yazidis worship the devil, and before letting us into the prison he says, "Exclusive for you!".

This sounds very familiar, too familiar in fact. It is the language of journalism, the language of marketing of things and news that we hear every day. Only this time what's exclusive for us is a meeting with terrified prisoners awaiting the end. The 25-year-old Chilean-Norwegian plays the perfect caliphate 'reporter'. The "western-style report" codes are systematically applied to the caliph's message, creating a narrative contrast the strength of which is hard to miss.

It is about words and narrating techniques, as well as technology: it is the result of the use of low-cost, easy-to-carry digital cameras with extraordinary performance, allowing the global ‘holy war’ fighters to copy the western narrative model, bending it to the message of their concept of jihad. Step by step, computers, the Internet and the social media become ideal tools to disseminate the contemporary jihadist epic. Abu Safiyya is the first of a series of more or less volunteer story-tellers of this new version of history we have been learning from June 2014 onward.

From al-Zarqawi beheading Nick Berg to James Fowley. Stories of doctrine, propaganda and beheadings

Mosul, the city in Northern Iraq where the caliphate was declared, did not appear in western newspapers – and Italian ones in particular – for years.

The second largest city in Iraq showed up in a few sporadic lines in the news about the persecutions against Christians in the Nineveh province or in the case of spectacular actions such as when prisons were attacked to set the prisoners free.

Iraq has become a sort of black hole in the narration of the world and its stories. Even in 2011, when the Syrian question broke out, most media treated it as a different problem, separated from the Iraqi one. Apparently it did not matter that the two States share a 605 km (375 miles) border; that jihadists have been crossing it continuously, first toward Iraq (since the very beginning of the U.S. war in 2003) and in recent years in the opposite direction, toward Syria; that the corridors of oil’s black market are indisputably important; that hints have been made repeatedly at sinister training camps for hard-to-identify rebels. None of this apparently mattered, and the information was disregarded.

The media, who forget yesterday and focus on today, have become an ideal terrain where jihadist story-telling can grow, consolidate and find its own codes undisturbed: some codes are original, others use the same signs of western codes, but completely opposite meanings.

As we are about to see.

Let us go back in time. On 7 May 2004, al-Zarqawi beheaded Nick Berg. For the first time a video showed an al-Qaeda hostage wearing the same orange uniform as the prisoners at Guantanamo. It is a symbol that remains to be explained.

The man who put his knife to the throat of the communication technician – who had left the al-Fanar hotel, right in the center of Baghdad, for the last time on 10 April – has a complicated background. He had fought with the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, struggling to legitimize himself in the eyes of the qaedist establishment for years, but at that time he was in deep conflict with al-Qaeda's leaders, who did not want to recognize his affiliation and role as manager of the organization's "Iraqi franchise".

Though the video of the American's slaughtering was criticized by al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy, it helped Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to finally consolidate his position as al-Qaeda's chief in Iraq.

In May 2004, this bloody message was addressed to both the jihadist community and the American people, who were expected to interpret the horrors shown in that video as retaliation for the atrocities they perpetrated during the war.

So, despite some initial resistance, al-Zarqawi's aggressive strategy, also on a communication level, paid off even within al-Qaeda. On 27 December 2004 of the same year, it was Osama bin Laden himself who acknowledged al-Zarqawi as al-Qaeda's emir in Iraq, stating: "We call for the unification of jihadist groups under one rule, recognizing al-Zarqawi as al-Qaeda's emir in Iraq"⁶.

⁶ "Bin Ladin acknowledges al-Zarqawi and calls for a boycott of elections in Iraq", *aljazeera.net* [in Arabic], 27 December 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=101846>; "Bin Ladin praises al-Zarqawi and acknowledges his leadership of al-Qaida in Iraq", *aljazeera.net* [in Arabic], 27 December 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=101852>; an audio file with this recording is available on al-Jazeera, http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2004/12/27/1_517667_1_13.wma.

This event sanctioned al-Qaeda's presence in post-war Iraq as the catalyst of Sunni rage. This presence, in spite of some ups and downs, has remained constant since 2004, legitimizing itself through guerrilla actions, supporting Sunnis and often protecting them from Shia's aggressions. Over the years, its groups have changed names and split up, but they have expertly exploited the Sunni community's resentment against the new Shia governments, whose ungrounded arrogance derived from their majority in the elections and the support of both Teheran and the West.

In the diverse jihadist galaxy, al-Qaeda has always shown its strength – and that of its propaganda – even (or, should we say, especially) in the years when the west showed little interest for Iraq.

The Qaedist/jihadist's voice has always left its mark: it has maintained a dialogue with the Iraqi people and its own followers at global level, and it has sent messages on the Internet and elsewhere. Let us analyze a few examples: the exercise can be useful to realize that the Islamic State's declaration should come as no surprise, and to wonder why nothing was done in the meantime.

Since 2004 Sunni insurgents – who have largely converged into the jihadist universe despite their very diverse origin, culture and motives – have used the Internet to spread their message and advertise their guerrilla actions against the occupying army. Videos made by the guerrilla's propaganda machine have earned global resonance through satellite TV networks (al-Jazeera, al-Arabia) which have regularly turned amateur videos and hand-made messages into communication tools that can reach any latitude.

The video of Nick Berg's beheading marked a change in pace and inaugurated a sinister tradition: between 2004 and 2005, the kidnapped narrative series followed a precise script including Westerners kneeling down with a Kalashnikov-armed mujaheddin standing behind them. Parallel to this series, the rhetoric of video-narrations also developed, describing actions against the coalition's men and means.

Improvised film-makers systematically followed every action against coalition forces, with very limited technical and narrative

ability. They were evidently embedded in the fighting groups. Within a few hours of the action, the corresponding video was released on jihadist websites.

Together with these videos, an endless stream of promotional material and propaganda was published every day on the Internet and on the social media.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi did not stop at being filmed while beheading Nick Berg: convinced as he was that his message should get across to his enemies with violence, thus strengthening the mujaheddin's action, he created a media unit proper whose first traces can be found in Fallujah⁷.

Jihadist leaders were focusing on representing their moves through the media and that was a fact. The structure through which their message was delivered on the media was strengthened and continued even after al-Qaeda's emir in Iraq died⁸.

The narration of what was happening on the Iraqi battlefield had an effect that reached far beyond the Land of Two Rivers. The jihadist message of the guerrilla men fighting against the coalition fuelled the global anti-West war narrative, which has been gaining momentum on the Internet since 9-11. Although there is no production center for 'holy war' propaganda, messages and symbols are completely coherent.

The live description of what happens in the field, as well as claims of responsibility and propaganda have multiplied during the years and became particularly efficient in 2007, in the days of violence in Baghdad at the beginning of the upsurge.

On 26-27 March, the Al-Fajr Media Center persistently posted detailed descriptions of the attacks against the "American crusaders".

Insurgents also produced a number of propaganda documents to explain their ideology and to make sure they were not regarded as a band of throat-cutting fighters, but as a vast group with an action plan and a structured political project.

⁷ "The Devoted Son", *al-Furqan*, Issue no. 30.

⁸ "The Islamic State Of Iraq Announces al-Furqan Institute For Media Publication time", Kavkaz Center, 4 November 2006, 12:08.

In February 2006, a report by International Crisis Group analyzed the situation and concluded that insurgent groups belonged to a “mixture of Salafism and patriotism which dilutes all distinction between foreign jihadists and Iraqi fighters”⁹. The ambiguity in the interpretation of the events that followed was largely based on this unclear distinction. In those years, insurgents and jihadists produced an impressive quantity of propaganda material which was gathered on the Internet and used to build the ‘foundations’ of the ideology and narrative of the ‘holy war’ against the West.

The production of videos was often linked to the presence of foreign fighters. Their arrival from Europe and the United States marked a significant improvement in the quality level and formal accuracy of video material.

However, it is worthwhile to stop and consider what happened in 2007 with regard to self-representation, despite a lack of means and narrative ability on the part of both the insurgents and jihadists. Amateur cameras were systematically used to record scenes of U.S. *Humvees* being blown up, insurgents killing soldiers and, as if in a game of mirrors, Western professional cameras recording jihadists being killed by the coalition forces.

Fighting groups’ logos appeared regularly on videos that provided their own ‘version’ of the attacks against the coalition forces, which often was completely different from that of official military reports.

At this point, the video recordings of the attacks followed a set ritual: in the first seconds, the ‘credits’ of the group in charge of the operation would appear on screen, and the video was introduced by a quote from the Koran.

In some cases the packaging became more professional, when videos were produced by official media centers such as al-Furqan: in these instances the logo of the ‘production company’ would appear next to that of the operating group.

⁹ “The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict”, International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, no. 52, 27 February 2006.

In 2006 al-Boraq produced the film series called “Juba”¹⁰. A number of episodes told the story of the legendary sniper of Baghdad, who allegedly “killed 668 crusaders” in 2005, according to a version accredited also by many newspapers. The film consisted of four parts with amateur images showing U.S. soldiers killed by snipers and an almost non-existent narrative structure.

Rough and lacking resources as it was, it marked the beginning of a systematic double narration, a true counter-information service.

Jihadists understood that systematically producing information was the way to achieve legitimization with their local audience as well as with global jihadism. The various groups created press agencies of some sort to write press releases for journalists, copying the format and style of the coalition forces.

A clear example is the report of the events of 12 April 2007. Albasrah.net published an “Iraqi Resistance Report” describing what happened on that Thursday in a very precise manner, but very different from the official press agencies’ report.

So, at a time when the distinction between insurgents and ISI/al-Qaeda’s jihadists was fading, the technical abilities of what was left of the information apparatus of Saddam’s regime were pooled with the new skills (mainly pertaining to the Internet and video making) of foreign fighters.

In the same years, magazines started to be systematically produced. Some were rougher, some were more structured.

The bimonthly magazine *al-Fursan* was set up around 2005 and was published until the end of 2007. It is quite a substantial magazine: just consider that issue no. 10 of 2006 consisted of 64 pages, the first 6 of which were dedicated to a graphic illustration of the group’s military results.

In the meantime, the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) published 33 issues of *Sada al-Rafidayn* (“The echo of the two rivers”), the self-defined weekly magazine of jihad and mujaheddin.

These are just examples of the many publications that have thrived in recent years: tracking them gives us a more precise idea

¹⁰ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xaah7_the-sniper-of-baghdad_lifestyle.

of continuity with the production of these past months (in particular with *Inspire* and *Dabiq*), which will be examined later.

Also with regard to magazines, what can be noticed is a natural evolution taking place over the years, rather than any of the ‘surprises’ described in the mainstream media.

In those same years, on the Internet there was an increase in the production of videos for PODs and films on al-Qaeda’s action at global level. Al-Sahab, which is considered the central organization’s media center, increased the quantity and quality of its filmed material. In order to ensure that the message would spread also to those who are not familiar with Arabic, English subtitles were added to the most significant videos.

Its narrative was now global, and even more so thanks to an *ad-hoc* structure, the GIMF.

The need for systematic counter-information and for a jihadist brand linked to some sort of coordination was highlighted in a document dated 21 September 2006 and published by al-Boraq with the title “Media Exuberance”. It explained that jihadist media had to follow rules regarding plagiarism and sources. The idea was to create reliable documents to compete against traditional media documents in terms of credibility. All these indications justify the idea of a media coordinating unit with trans-regional supervision.

The need to build authoritative information in order to counter-balance the ‘crusaders’ mainstream information was stressed again and again. It also became an explicit political statement: on 2 May 2007 the Mujahideen Army and Ansar al-Sunna’s Legal Committee declared that “media operators, speakers and writers have to tell the truth and aim their arrows against what is false because communication is half the battle”.

Thus communication becomes half the battle and it is becoming all the more crucial to understand what happens in the jihadist universe: from Pakistan to Iraq at war, from Maghreb to Somalia, messages are spread, year after year, according to patterns that are strikingly coherent.

The Somali case is significant in this sense.

Between 2007 and 2010 the jihadist group Harakat al-Shabaab dedicated resources and men as never before to the communication effort. Its aim was precise: presenting itself as a Somali state structure, claiming the role of legitimate successor of the Islamic courts. During those years, many young fighters of European and North American origin joined the movement. They played a key role in the group's media strategy. The main character is Omar "Abu Mansur al-Amriki" Hammami.

In those years, as we have seen, jihadist groups in Iraq were already developing their communication system, while in Somalia the 'holy war' tale was still quite primitive. The best production consisted in speeches given in front of a fixed camera: the quality was reminiscent of the very early productions by al-Qaeda's leaders. Only rarely did amateur videos feature images of spectacular actions on the battlefield.

Then something happened. On 20 September 2009, Harakat al-Shabaab released a 48-minute film titled "Labbayk Ya Usama"¹¹, in which Harakat's leader, Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, pledged allegiance to central al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden. This was a first-class multimedia production, with excellent narrative structure and audio quality. But the key point is that the size of this video was 1 Gigabyte. Now, in war-wrecked Somalia Internet lines were barely working and certainly could not allow for the download of such a heavy file. This means that its main target were not – or not chiefly – Somali followers: the message was intended for global distribution.

This indication was confirmed a few months later by another essential episode of Harakat al-Shabaab's media actions.

It was 27 July 2010, when the jihadist group announced the establishment of a new information channel: the al-Kata'ib News Channel.

The trailer was remarkably similar to that of any official TV channel: al-Kata'ib had a jingle, a logo and even a tagline. It used the colors of an international news program, and even its design included the same spherical element that is shown at the beginning

¹¹ <http://www.archive.org/download/Labayk-ya-osamah/mediuim-quality.ram>.

of newscasts all over the world. But it is the broadcasting of moving images that gives evidence of first-rate editing.

And then there was the tagline, shown in the final seconds, explaining the mission that the Somali jihadist fighters chose for themselves: “to inform, to inspire, to incite”.

Those three verbs tell us everything: producing counter-information, inspiring and thus spreading the ideology, proselytizing, and inciting to fight. Global and local: this was the new dimension of the jihadist message that incited fighters, attracted foreigners and told the world about the ‘reasons’ of the battle. This was true in Somalia in 2010 and it is even more true today, in the days of the ISIS caliphate.

As noted, the latest evolution in the media ability of Somali jihadists (but the same happened with the IS) was directly linked to the arrival of foreign fighters. A case in point is that of Omar Hammami, a.k.a. Abu Mansur al-Amriki, who joined the ranks from Alabama. He was a computer expert with editing skills and professional technological knowledge: he was the key to the creation and organization of the News Channel. He and other recruits were allegedly requested to bring cameras, laptops and other technological tools as a contribution to the group’s media campaign.

The news channel was presented on 27 July 2010, and Harakat announced that it would be the “phalanx of truth”. It is the same intention shown by the Iraqi jihadists to fight “half of the war” (i.e., the propaganda half). Significantly the channel’s first independent production was a long report with the title: “Mogadishu: the Crusaders’ Graveyard”¹².

If one were to watch it without any prior information about it, it would look like an episode of “Panorama”, the BBC’s famous documentary series. The tone, the narration in English, the pauses, the description of the story: every aspect of this production is impeccable. In the first minutes, we hear a voice-over description of the situation in the streets of Mogadishu after the battle: attacks to African Union soldiers are shown in the streets. It is only when

¹² https://archive.org/details/moga_graveyard_au.

the self-appointed reporter appears next to a destroyed tank that the mystery is solved: his face is covered by a black scarf. Yet, if not for his hidden face, all the communication codes are respected and sound familiar enough to remind us of Western communication systems – a familiarity that was deliberately pursued by those who set up this production. The closing is actually a replica of the ‘ritual’ formula of international reports, with the trademark sign-off phrase: “al-Kata’ib News Channel, live from the frontline in Mogadishu”.

Everything appears normal, if not for the fact that the reporter is wearing a scarf. The same feeling – everything normal except for one detail – that would characterize the reporting of John Cantlie – the latest addition to ISIS’s ‘correspondents pool’ – four years later: everything just like the BBC, except for the fact that the reporter is held hostage and his life is at stake.

Harakat’s media operation was a success. Al-Kata’ib was consulted by jihadists of various nationalities and attracted the attention of both central al-Qaeda and Maghreb’s al-Qaeda on Harakat. And Harakat leader Abu al-Zubeyr was often mentioned in Aqim’s series “Shade of swords”.

This clearly shows that, thanks to new technologies and media strategies, the jihadist message was being globalized at great speed, leveling out messages and strategies, and multiplying opportunities – including the opportunity to show horror on global TV, as was the case with the series of beheadings signed by the Islamic State. On 19 August 2014, exactly ten years and three months after Nick Berg, with the same reasons and the same brutality flavored with the same rhetoric, but with much grander ambitions. The caliphate that Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi described in their letters, had become reality.

The caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was not the one holding the knife: his order to behead journalist James Foley and show the video¹³ all over the world was carried out by a twenty-year-old rapper from London who joined the fight on the jihad’s latest frontline, the war against Assad to control Syria. The executions

¹³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyMViLsIQxM.

came in close succession, all in the same location, or so it appears. They all followed the same ritual, in which John the executioner speaks in a cockney accent, adding horror to horror and bringing it straight into Western homes, and making it sound so familiar. John used “our” sounds, not “theirs”. The barrier of what is “other-than-self” is no longer standing. This horror concerns us indeed.

This media aggression was so violent that TV and information networks had to consider how to use those images. Editors all over the world met to discuss: what should be shown? What should be hidden? Why are terrorists showing everything in so much detail?

Showing means playing into their hands, the majority agreed. Not showing means allowing some to keep thinking that ISIS’s war is somehow acceptable as a fight to seek revenge for the oppressed. The global media system itself is the victim of a strategy it cannot control or fully understand.

Dread and horror seem to be the only keys to interpret the videos deliberately spread by ISIS through the Internet, Facebook and dozens of Twitter accounts supporting the jihad, some of which belong to the jihadists themselves.

And yet this is only the beginning. There is more to come. The caliphate’s media production did not end with the series of horror videos. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The strange case of John Cantlie

There is another man wearing orange in the recent history of the caliphate. He is a hostage like others, and his fate should be the same as that of the other hostages: beheading. His name is John Cantlie, he is a British reporter kidnapped in Syria in November 2012 and he was James Foley’s prison mate (and Foley’s execution was broadcasted globally). And yet at some point his story took a different turn and confronted us with yet another level of the challenge that concerns not only military strategists but each and every one of us, actually turning us into unwitting characters of an evolving narrative.

Cantlie made his first appearance on 18 September 2014. That day we watched a video titled “Lend me your ears” and captioned “Messages from a British detainee”¹⁴.

John Cantlie is the hostage in front of two cameras, skillfully lit, leaning on a table, ready to deliver a message to the world. The message is so complex that nobody is yet able to fully appreciate it.

Cantlie tells the story of his kidnapping and, one minute into the video, he says, “It’s true, I am a prisoner, that I cannot deny, but seeing as I have been abandoned by my government (...)” and then he adds, “I want to take this opportunity to convey some facts (...)”.

The game is clear now. Prisoner Cantlie will become the instrument of the caliphate’s counter-information strategy. We understand that when, 1’03” into the video, the word “facts” breaks into the reasoning, uttered by a British journalist who does not deny his condition but implies that he is about to say things different from what we expect.

That was the moment when plans were overturned and communication rules were subverted. A new reality appeared that was different from the idea everyone had up until that point. There was a different side of the story that would be told by the host/hostage from now on, starting with the declaration that counter-information is necessary: “I am going to show you the truth, as the western media try to drag the public back to the abyss of another war with the Islamic state”, he says, announcing the series.

What we see is so skillfully studied that it makes us wonder if – even more than the ferocious beheadings – the jihad’s most violent tool against its enemies will be no other than *us*. This tool is all the more efficient because it hides its cruelty behind the narration, because it can make us forget that John Cantlie is a prisoner and confer him the fake role of narrator that so logically fits his British accent.

Certainly, in the third episode of the “Inside” series, dedicated to field reports¹⁵, the unknown and brilliant director of the

¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vcew3qmidRI.

“Cantlie operation” had his character utter words that sound even more sinister at a time when the White House is again considering the possibility of bringing the Marines back to Iraq “boots on the ground” to free Mosul, despite all previous announcements. The Briton reminds us that IS’s fighters are ready for battle and explains that Americans would better not flatter themselves, because no ‘surgical operation’ will earn them success on the ground, and they will need to get their hands dirty. And he adds: this is a “win-win situation” for the IS.

In his long speech Cantlie mentions newspapers, articles, editorials from the previous weeks. Only his orange suit gives away his condition.

Then, when John Cantlie appeared in besieged Kobane¹⁶ on 28 October, to show us the other side of the truth, it became really difficult to remember that he was a hostage, not a reporter on the IS’s side. This time, the video begins with the new jingle dedicated to “Inside” reports. The IS’s representation of the truth must be based on verifiable and convincing information. That is why the video starts with an aerial view, which the caption explains was recorded by a drone of the IS army. Thirty-four seconds into the video, Cantlie the reporter appears on screen against the background of moving images, an effect that is not that simple to create. He is no longer wearing orange: in fact, he is all dressed in black as the majority of the IS fighters are, when they are not wearing their battledress. Cantlie’s speech is a challenge to the U.S. strategy, it is a smirk against Kerry’s statements. He looks much calmer, his beard looks longer and, more importantly, his tale shows even more accurate directing. Though filming images outdoors in a city at war, the film director relies again on two cameras. The shooting is slow and accurate. There is no sign of haste. Cantlie refutes information coming from the Kurdish front reporting fierce battles. He says, “the situation is calm, there are few gunshots, as you can hear” and in closing he reminds us that

¹⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS8p8_IAnc48.

¹⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQSwGBkGb6o.

victory belongs to the mujaheddin who specialize in urban guerrilla.

Cantlie gives voice to everyone's worst fears. Exactly like in the video about Mogadishu, everything appears "to be true", only this truth is nothing but verisimilitude. A verisimilitude skillfully recreated through well-known codes, stemming from the use of words, video graphics, and light; from narrative sequences in which we relax – despite ourselves – and follow the speech forgetting that the propaganda comes from a man who could be killed at the end of any report, or – why not? – even during one.

In the second episode of the "Inside" series, shot in the streets of Mosul¹⁷ and released on 3 January, the sense of normality is strengthened by a motorcycle tour of the city governed by the IS along with the host-hostage (who appears now much more host than hostage, at least judging from his performance). There is an enormous distance between this narration of a tranquil city and western descriptions of life in the place fallen into the hands of the Islamic State. The sense of relax and apparent calm perfectly matches what young foreign fighters say on their websites when they encourage their friends in Europe or in America to leave for the exciting 'holy war' adventure.

On 9 February, John Cantlie reappears wearing a brown jacket, apparently in perfect health, in Aleppo's outskirts¹⁸. He is ready to present the latest report of the "Inside" series from the city tortured by years of civil war. Cantlie says this is going to be the last episode.

What does this mean? It is impossible to tell. Maybe the brilliant directors of the Islamic State are getting him ready for another, more effective series, where he will be an anchor. Maybe – after all, this cannot be ruled out – it means that Cantlie is going to be killed, just like his prison mates. If so, it is also possible that the execution ritual was already carried out on the day the video was released. But then, why getting rid of such an effective storyteller? This is, after all, what John Cantlie's life or death comes

¹⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN3ktXbLzIY.

¹⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSp8_IAnc48.

down to. In this last 12-minute report the host/hostage takes us in the streets of this broken city and from there he once more describes what he calls “western lies”. We visit a silo of wheat “which is distributed to the people at prices lower than the market price” and a school where students are reciting the Koran and future guerrilla fighters are trained. “It’s not true that under the Islamic State education will suffer”, says Cantlie as he shows the waiting room of a sharia tribunal, the Islamic law defined by Cantlie as “right and simple”. From Aleppo’s market the Allies’ drones are shown as they fly over a ‘civilian only’ area and drop bombs risking to kill innocents. Next is an interview with two mujaheddin. The first says he is convinced that killing ISIS’s leaders would do no good, because “We will go on even stronger”. The second one speaks perfect French. Clearly, he is a foreign fighter and in French he praises the attacks in Paris. And he goes further: “I encourage all my brothers who are still in France and in the West to defend religion (...) you are sitting on your sofas while other Muslims are being massacred, what will be your excuse before Allah? (...)”. It is an exhortation to choose jihad and join the fight. Once again, the recruiting process occurs through a high-quality video.

But a small detail leads us back to what has been argued so far. There is some sort of aside reminding us of those 2007 counter-information sheets. Cantlie crosses a street and shows a small prefabricated building he calls the “media center”. Various computers appear on the small desk inside. A boy is printing out sheets and giving them out to passers-by. This is a way to show what the Islamic state is actually doing for its citizens, at least in their view.

Ten years down the line – from 2005 and Musab Abu al-Zarqawi’s media center in Fallujah, all the way to here – the need is exactly the same: building a counter-information system so that citizens can “find information” outside official networks managed by the usual protagonists – the Americans and the Gulf States – each with their own specific agenda.

In the meantime, while the vaguely sadistic game continues, Cantlie has become the IS’s multimedia reporter. His articles

appear also on *Dabiq*, the extra-glossy Islamic State's magazine in its seventh issue. The magazine is conceived specifically for global communication, to spread the message through codes that even those Muslims who grew up in the West or the converts can recognize as their own.

Dabiq, a glossy magazine for global jihad

The will to provide themselves with an articulated and multimedia communication system has been there at various levels in all jihadist groups and even in the peculiar mix of jihad and territorial insurgency that has characterized Iraq since 2004.

The idea of producing a glossy magazine is part of the project, so as to spread their message, as well as recompose it in a more complex analytical framework beyond individual releases. *Al-Fursan*, *Sada al-Rafidayn* were the magazines of the Iraqi's jihad in 2006 and 2007. They were serious and substantial magazines, with an often significant number of pictures, still linked to a traditional representation in terms of both graphic and general structure. Qaedism leaps into the contemporary print media industry with *Inspire*. It is a truly modern magazine, designed for a global, young, radicalized, and English-speaking audience. Its latest issue was published in December 2014. In between political news there is practical advice (even on how to build a home-made bomb, which is an old theme connected to all forms of subversions, certainly not just Middle East extremism) and interviews with mujaheddin. *Inspire*'s March 2013 issue mentioned the name of Stephane Charbonnier, the director of the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, in the list of the 10 most wanted by Qaedism.

Inspire was considered the reference product in the qaedist galaxy. That is why, when the caliphate was established, it could only come up with its own competing (though completely coherent as far as the message is concerned) magazine: that is how *Dabiq* came about.

Dabiq is slick, sophisticated, printed in various languages including English. It defines itself as a "magazine focusing of the

issues of *tawhid* (unity), *manhaj* (truth-seeking), *hijra* (migration), *jihad* ('holy war') and *jama'a* (community)".

What is impressive is the tremendously modern approach to these issues. While imbued with doctrinal analyses and philosophical and religious considerations, its articles follow the usual current affairs magazine structure: editorials, reports, analyses.

In order to understand *Dabiq*'s genesis and the objectives of its message, we have to start from its name. According to Islamic literature references, Dabiq is a small city in Northern Syria near the border with Turkey and it will be the location of the final battle against the 'crusaders' before the 'Messiah' returns, according to *hadith* 6924 (the collection of Muhammad's sayings). This is a very strong symbol, yet according to the most advanced Koran studies experts, it is a dismissive interpretation of a very complex *hadith*, which requires a completely different one. But that is not one of the main aims of the caliphate. The key point is war symbolism in a very simplified version. And it is no coincidence that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi himself used this same symbolism before being killed by U.S. missiles in 2006, which again proves the deep connection between the present of the caliphate and the past of Iraqi guerrilla. "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq". This sentence appears above the index in each issue of *Dabiq*. As we have already seen, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is once more indicated as the true intellectual and political reference, forerunner of the caliphate and its value and symbolic system. He is the one, not Osama bin Laden; the caliphate is the winning model, not al-Qaeda.

References to *Dabiq* recur often. The latest was on 16 November 2014¹⁹, when a video was released in which the executioner with the cockney accent announces the death of hostage Peter Kassig (former U.S. ranger converted to Islam). He utters precisely this sentence: "We are burying the first 'American crusader' here in Dabiq, and eagerly waiting for the rest of your armies", while the severed head of the young man is shown. The black-clad

¹⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=8w_WkSq2Mcs.

men are waiting for the armies of Rome, the ‘crusaders’: the same armies mentioned in *hadith* 6924²⁰, those coming to Dabiq, which is the name of the trendiest magazine of the IS.

This is the very symbolic code the Islamic State has gotten us used to. Nothing is left to chance. A century-old name used for a glossy magazine; a message linked to the Prophet’s actions and mediated by history and tradition is used as a tool to package an extraordinarily contemporary media content. The result must give us pause.

As we are about to see in the analysis of each issue, another fundamental element is that very often the magazine refers to events that took place only a few days earlier. This means that *Dabiq* is neither amateurish nor improvised: there is a group of editors choosing the contents of each issue, writing them in a ‘journalist-like’ way, impeccably arranging the lay-out and releasing them in several languages. All this over just a few days.

Analyzed individually, the titles of the issues released since last June are evocative and aim at spreading a very precise message, which can both engage the reader and stimulate curiosity, thus enlarging the potential readership. Clearly, *Dabiq* targets readers who are interested in political Islam, for sure, but without necessarily already being convinced jihadists. Step by step, these readers are very skillfully explained about the caliphate’s reasons, sense and projects. This is an explosive mixture for those already pursuing the path of jihad, and an ‘inspiring’ message for the non-jihadists who might be in doubt.

Dabiq’s first issue appeared on 5 July 2014, a month after Mosul was conquered. The title on the cover reads: “The return of the caliphate”. It is a political issue, which very carefully illustrates the Islamic state’s program. In order to attract others, it explains that caliph al-Baghdadi’s project is a successful one, that his

²⁰ Hadith 6924: “Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-A’maq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them). When they will arrange themselves in ranks, the Romans would say: Do not stand between us and those (Muslims) who took prisoners from amongst us. Let us fight with them?”.

control over the territory is already strong and many tribes have already joined in. The writers of the articles know that the issues at stake are high: the IS is launching an attack against all other jihadist groups at global level (first and foremost, al-Qaeda). With this issue of *Dabiq* the Islamic State wants to spread the message that the caliphate's establishment is correct both from a political and a doctrinal point of view, and that al-Baghdadi and his followers are better suited than others to fight their jihad, which they discuss in triumphant tones.

Each issue of *Dabiq* deserves a thorough analysis. The second was released on 27 July 2014 and it was titled "The Flood". The third appeared in October and dealt with the call to migration, *hijra*, comparing the journey of those choosing to move to the Islamic State to the journey of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. But it is the front cover of the fourth issue, published on 22 October, that drained the color from the faces of many Western security agencies. A photoshopped picture portrayed a caliphate black flag flying atop the obelisk in St. Peter's Square. The cover story was entitled "The failed crusade" and described the failing of all military operations of the coalition forces against the IS.

Dabiq's fifth issue was released on 22 November 2014 with a programmatic title: "Remaining and Expanding". Its political reasoning is an ideal continuation of the first issue: the goal is to become the main reference for those who are leading the 'holy war', but it is not limited to them. The goal is to be recognized as 'the caliphate' by all qaedist groups all over the world. The idea is to become the political and religious entity of reference associated with a corresponding territory. This same vision was confirmed by several messages on the web, the social networks and 'official' information websites but, significantly, the Central Organization felt the need to elaborate on it in its very fancy, very global magazine.

In *Dabiq's* sixth issue, the cover story is about a report on al-Qaeda in Waziristan. In this very long and interesting article a Jordanian mujaheddin tells the story of his trip through Afghanistan and the tribal area between Pakistan and Afghanistan and his

search for the ideal place where to fight the jihad. What is particularly interesting, however, is the clearly diverging view of some qaedist groups compared to the caliphate's vision as the day-to-day narration of events unfolds. Besides any philosophical and religious consideration, the report confirms the caliphate's criticism against traditional al-Qaeda positions – especially at doctrinal and operating level – and it provides valuable peeks into the life of a contemporary jihadist. It is also an engaging tale of a great adventure, an irresistible element for youth looking for heroic role models.

In light of all this it is worth taking a moment to consider the style used by the author and the translator. The long text includes tens of terms connected to the jihad that are not simply translated into English, but systematically quoted in Arabic and then translated. This is a precise educational method, revealing the intention to help the readers to become acquainted with jihadist terms – even if their familiarity with Arabic is limited. It is a perfect product to recruit foreign fighters, where world-scale proselytism is clearly at work.

Issue 6 is built around two other key elements: the umpteenth report by John Cantlie, who has turned into the Islamic State's media story-teller (until when?, one could wonder), and the opening article dedicated to the attacks in a café in Sydney. The most interesting aspect lies the fact that the whole article aims at showing how western media smeared the character of Islamic State mujaheddin Haron Monis, portraying him negatively for the sole purpose of discrediting him. This goes back to the media war, the information battle which the IS's men have decided to fight systematically. The analysis of the action in Sidney and the criticism against western media goes hand in hand with Cantlie's counter-tale in Kobane, Mosul and Aleppo.

And it does not end here. The juiciest elements of the narration are highlighted in the Islamic State's multimedia communication platform: just like in western media, scoops need to reach as many readers and viewers as possible. That is why *Dabiq's* issue 6

features an exclusive confession by Muadh al-Kasasbeh, the Jordanian pilot captured after his jet crashed.

Issue 7 beats all the others in terms of ‘contemporary-ness’. The whole issue is a response to what is happening in Europe. It was released on 11 February 2015, exactly a month after the peace rally in Paris, and it is entirely dedicated to claiming responsibility for the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, featuring: an interview with Coulibaly’s wife – some doubt that this testimony is authentic –; the story of the two Belgian jihadists who eluded all the European secret services; and the religious justification of the decision to burn Jordanian pilot Muadh to death. That is, the media reaction to everything that has gone on in the last month.

This shows that information and counter-information are now playing on the same field, at the same time, and with increasingly similar tools.

From “Flames of war” to Muadh’s stake: Hollywood-style horror

The interview – or, rather, the confession-turned-interview – with the Jordanian pilot published on *Dabiq* no. 6 deserves some consideration.

Once again strictly adhering to western media layout standards, the magazine’s editor highlights questions and answers using bold fonts; questions from the ‘magazine’ are introduced by the word *Dabiq*, whereas the pilot’s ‘answers’ are introduced by the word *murtadd* (apostate). This style gives readers the impression that the person asking questions for the magazine is a third element, a subject describing the situation objectively, an interviewer, not a tormentor torturing the pilot.

In fact, the article opens with a description of how Muadh’s jet crashed and the events that followed, then the rest is introduced by the sentence “The following is an interview with the murtadd”. This is what skillful propaganda is all about: turning the interrogation of a prisoner, who will soon be burnt alive, into an captivating interview for the world’s readers.

The pictures shown in the ‘interview’ were taken at the same time as the filming of the dreadful video; perhaps they were actually single frames of the video itself. The interview is the word-by-word transcription of the interrogation-confession recorded in the video.

The message prepared to be spread through the video is used on all available platforms: the caliph’s propaganda already knows the rules of content production optimization. And this consideration on how several media are used and contents are shared on various platforms brings us to the issue of how the video – or should we say the *movie* – is designed to show Muadh al-Kasasbeh²¹ burning at the stake.

Let us go through those 22 minutes together.

The beginning is that of classic American action movies (the “Bourne” series comes to mind). The backstory is provided to the viewer: sequences showing king Abdallah of Jordan addressing U.S. allies in English, sending armed Muslims to fight against other Muslims, their brothers. In response, battle songs alternate in the sequence – an alternation that continues as battlefield images appear: Muslims against Muslims.

Once more, the graphic and sound effects are those of a war videogame. The quality of editing and image selection is truly remarkable. A 3D reconstruction of the jet flying towards Syria is shown, then flames in a village appear, then pieces of the plane and the title “Healing the believers’ chests (...)”.

A syncopated sequence of all the Arab world’s newscasts announcing that the jet has been brought down brings us back to the story. Information captions appear one after the other, then we hear the pilot’s voice describing his mission in detail (that is, the text published as an ‘interview’ in *Dabiq*).

The background documentation work carried out by the movie ‘directors’ is clear: they include images of all the airstrips from which coalition planes take off, as well as the geographic coordinates of air raids. Muadh’s target is Raqqa, Syria. It is 24 December.

²¹ <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=q73BYnrCMis>.

The interview/interrogation is filmed with two cameras. Style, lighting and framing are very similar to John Cantlie's first videos. The same hand is behind the style, or at least some of the technical aspects, that much is very clear. The extensive and careful use of graphic solutions causes us to be detached from reality and leads us to codes that we typically associate with cinema, to that which is "similar to the truth" and plausible, and yet it is not the truth. They take us away from our compassion and instinctive horror for what is happening to the young Jordanian pilot.

The sequences showing his flying jet alternate with those showing the tragedy of his targets: villages destroyed, children mutilated and burnt to death. The pilot is being skillfully depicted as the foe, someone who has allegedly perpetrated heinous crimes so despicable that the cruel fate awaiting him can only be regarded as an act of justice. But this judgement remains unspoken. The video is not explicit on this point. The images, however, speak louder than words: the visual narration is built to lead precisely to that conclusion. Those same images, that were shown on 5 February in the streets of the Syrian town of Raqqa²², generated approval – not horror – among adult and teenager viewers.

What follows is a sharp turn in the narration: no more synco-pated images of war, no more top-gun in action. The climax is perfectly built. From the chaos of wars we find ourselves in a suspended, rarefied place. Muadh walks past some ruins (perhaps the ones he himself caused with his jet's bombs?). Time is suspended in the extraordinary light, there is a surreal silence. He walks slowly in the silence. A rapid sequence of frames of night battles illuminate his steps. All around, the Islamic State fighters appear. Their uniforms show something new. This is no improvised brigade wearing military suits found who knows where. These masked men's uniforms are spotless. Brand new. These men are perfect. The pilot looks at them in silence, a puzzled look on his face – or perhaps he is just stunned (we do not know how badly he was beaten, perhaps he has been drugged). Surely Muadh

²² <http://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=452>.

al-Kasasbeh's look is the key element of an extraordinary filmic construction.

Then another change of pace, another sequence begins. He is now in his cage, and his orange prisoner suit is wet.

The men wearing uniforms are all around him, very still, a scene clearly arranged by a skillful director. Only one of them is moving: he holds a stick soaked in flammable liquid in his hand.

A voice-over description says he is "the commander of an Islamic State region that was bombed".

The following sequences show the nightmare of a man burnt alive. Yet his screams are kept at a low volume, almost covered. Here we get the feeling that someone has decided which level of horror is 'acceptable'.

The message has been dosed *ad hoc*.

The burning scene is cut. What follows is the burnt corpse, and the bulldozer that appeared in the first frames closes in to bury him under rubble and rocks. The corpse lies now under a pile of rocks. The final sequence returns to the initial action style and rhythm: this time it is not just a narration of an attack, but pictures, names, and IDs of fifty Jordanian pilots who flew their planes against the IS that day. The end of the movie is dedicated to them. The names of the most wanted by the caliph close the action movie.

The way in which the various parts of the narration are entwined (interrogation, walk, cage) indicates that they were filmed at different moments, according to a carefully set script. Nothing is improvised: the men in uniforms, the light in the various points of the action, the symbols.

Achieving such a high-quality final product is not easy, even by western production standards. The various videos are all coherent, filming and editing methods are consistent, everything is released on social networks in a coherent and systematic way: all this suggests a single director, or a small group, who are extremely sophisticated and familiar with editing, writing and spectacularization techniques. Such techniques are a combination of cinematography and videogame production. That's why some analysts tend

to think that the head of the organization dealing with social media and multimedia production is Ahmad Abu Samra, among others.

He grew up in Stoughton, Massachusetts, and was an excellent student and a genius at university. He became a great expert in communication and IT, and was employed by a U.S. telecommunication company. There, Abu Samra learnt the marketing rules he is thought to be applying in the promotion of the IS brand. Allegedly, he is the bright mind behind the idea of building an *ad hoc* ‘narration’ for the caliphate’s endeavors, translating them into a filmed series halfway between an action movie and a videogame, thus turning web supporters into virtual fighters. The result is a series of low-cost, adrenaline-filled, epic moments and the sense of a “mission to reestablish justice”, which becomes explosive material in the recruiting campaign aimed at youth who are sensitive to the jihad’s appeal.

According to the latest information, the 34-year-old lives in Syria, in the Aleppo area, and he is supposed to be responsible for the launch of the “Dawn of Glad Tidings” app that can be downloaded from the Google Play store to spread news and notifications in order to enlarge the media machine of the Islamic State and make it look even more sophisticated in terms of technical infrastructure.

“Various divisions within the IS deal with social media: the official account releases all videos, while provincial accounts release local news. Single mujaheddin’s accounts allow them to keep telling their everyday life and experience on the ground”, says Abu Bakr al-Janabi²³, an Islamic supporter who often translates and spreads the group’s messages.

Behind all this, there are various organizations for the centralization and spreading of messages. The main one is al-Furqan Media, which keeps posting documents on epic battles and the idyllic caliphate world, while Fursan al-Balagh Media deals with translations to spread the message globally. Together, they set up a

²³ “Who is behind Isis’s terrifying online propaganda operation?”, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2014.

real communication agency, al-Hayat Media Center, which posts ISIS's videos and spreads the organization's messages.

Yet this description is partial: there are countless "video production centers" and places where propaganda is organized and circulated, as well as countless individuals who work and contribute their abilities and creativity to the construction of a massive narrative structure.

Conclusion

The IS has very clearly shown a number of things through their communication choices.

First of all, the caliphate's communication methods are far from random, but pursue various goals with precision and lucidity. The first goal is to be perceived as a full State organization with rules, a political project, a structure and long-term planning. The second goal is to proselytize within its own territory and, in particular, at a global level. The target of its most sophisticated narration are young second- or third-generation Muslims. Their resounding message and epic tale of fighting against injustice – fascinating as very few western messages can be – become extraordinary powerful catalysts to rebel against the West, which is perceived as unjust, aggressive and corrupted.

There is also a third level of communication, aimed at all jihadist groups all over the world. The Islamic State sets itself as the successful example of a state built on sharia law, in which rules and behaviors are based on an obscurantist interpretation of the Koran. The caliphate's success story becomes a model of attraction and imitation for all other radical groups on earth; that is why so much of the propaganda is devoted to showing that the Koran's correct interpretation is that of the caliph and that the true jihadists are only those who have joined the Islamic State. The IS has launched its aggression campaign against all other groups using a very coordinated strategy. The caliphate has global aspirations and this is clear from its communication choices.

Twitter, Facebook and the Internet have become the modern-day tools with which the oldest of messages is spread. Having burnt thousands of books in Mosul, the Islamic State is assisted by young communicators who grew up with Hollywood's myths and who use social networks to disseminate a vision of the world that is modern only in its language and formal codes.

The recent proliferation of messages, videos, magazine issues coming from the Islamic State suggest an escalation. We have no way of knowing whether this media escalation reflects actual actions on the ground and possibly more terrorist attacks, or if it is only a full-blown media assault.

Surely, in light of what was said, such extensive media activism simply cannot be disregarded.

The obsessive proliferation of testimonies is already producing a result: it is giving the presence of the IS in the world a sense of inevitability. The IS is forcing itself into our discussions, the programming of our newscasts, the first pages of our newspapers. This is already a result in itself. By increasingly communicating their undertakings, a single group of men are creating an augmented representation of reality, as if in a sophisticated game of mirrors.

4. IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate's Communication Project

Marco Lombardi

IS has always stood out for its specific ways of communicating, particularly since the declaration of the caliphate on 19 June 2014.

The Western reaction to the communication of Islamists has been one of surprise. However, such amazement is not justified at all. For historical reasons: for instance, the jihad – and Qaedism in particular – has always used communication as an instrument of war. And for specific reasons, suffice it to note the skillful and flexible use of the name of the Islamic State, as explained in other parts of this publication.

In the following pages, we will try and explore the communication of IS by looking at its main products, so as to understand the categories that can explain them in the context of a complex communication project strategically aimed at establishing the caliphate, of which communication is a key pillar. What is new in the case of IS is that, for the first time, the use of different media is directed in a competent manner. It is not just a matter of being familiar with the right techniques: communication and the use of media are part of a more complex political and military strategy, aimed at consolidating radical and jihadist Islam in a specific geographical area.

IS is simply pursuing its goals through a clever and linear strategy, where fighting, mass murders, communication, economic and political actions converge into the project for the creation of the Islamic State. In short, it is the DNA of IS that guides the project. This is a terrorist group that calls itself a State and that is organized like a state: it governs an area where it collects taxes

and offers services; it intends to issue money and it publishes its budget; it uses the ‘legitimate’ power of violence; it communicates through a variety of media and using diversified messages. It is a group that is taking on the form of a rising state according to the shared political theory and it is already showing the first features of an actual state.

For the purpose of the IS project, achieving the ideological hegemony of the IS caliphate over other forms of Islamic state or governance is essential. In this context, the campaign for formal support promoted among AQ organizations is fundamental and aims at obtaining a pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi’s authority.

The following sections present a selection of the huge amount of messages issued by IS. They also provide a short description of the different types of media used and the ‘series’ produced, focusing on the most significant messages sent out. The conclusion will highlight the perilous media strategy followed by the new terrorism of the caliphate¹.

Social media and more: Promotion and recruiting

In recent years, especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent attacks in Europe, researchers have tried to pin down the new features of international terrorism.

Studies on *radicalization* processes, on the other hand, are more recent. These focus on the mechanisms through which individuals change their attitudes and embrace a potentially deviant behavior based on a radical or extremist ideology. The end result of these mechanisms is the individuals’ *recruitment* to join organizations or extremist groups that use violence to achieve their social and political goals or to destabilize the context where they operate. Although radicalism cannot be considered a synonym for ‘terrorism’, the process that pushes people to embrace radical

¹ A summary table, with the titles and publication dates of the analyzed contents, can be found at the end of the chapter.

ideologies is extremely important: it is the first, crucial step towards violent extremism.

At this historical moment, the phenomena which characterize the wider Mediterranean region are strictly connected to the development of radicalization processes – with the threats that follow and, in turn, act as boosters of the very same processes.

Italy too contributes to strengthening the jihadist ranks, especially in Syria, with the support of online radical cells which, rather than being fighters themselves, help future fighters travel to their destination.

This is nothing new for Italy: in the 1990s the Country was already a reference center to recruit fighters for the Balkan wars. The phenomenon is simply picking up again after a slowdown due to the fact that organized Islamic networks in Italy are less widespread than in other European countries, and to a lower radicalization of recent migrants, who do not live in ghettos as they do in France, Belgium or The Netherlands. These characteristics still influence the recruitment process for Syria in Italy. Here, more than elsewhere, *self-recruitment* has taken root, mainly through online channels and concerning small self-styled groups rather than activism at the mosque.

The Islamic State alone has managed to make the most of social media (Facebook and Twitter in particular), both as specific tools for recruitment and as instruments that are coordinated with other media to achieve broader goals. The power of communication in the process of radicalization is clear in the facts that, on 18 June 2013, led to the discovery of Giuliano Delnevo's death in the fights in Syria against Bashar al-Assad. Delnevo had converted to Islam in 2008, he had changed his name to Ibrahim and he had been fighting in Syria for about one year. His is a dramatic case in point that illustrates the effects of the IS's communication strategy. His Facebook profile made explicit reference to the Chechen jihad and to the Kavkaz Center, the Web portal of the Caucasus Emirate, a network of militants aspiring to create the pan-Caucasus Islamic caliphate. One of his last posts, dated 12 Febru-

ary 2013, shows Abdullah Azzam² as Delnevo's role model. Radicalization through the Internet and exposure to preachers' sermons pushed the young man from Genoa to fight alongside a large number of Arabian and North African jihadists in Syria, where he eventually died.

Other stories followed, like Anas el Abboubi's (born in Morocco in 1992), who moved to Italy in 1999 and lived in Brescia. His steps can be traced to the Sharia4Belgium network: he wanted to create Sharia4Italy and then leave for Syria to join the ranks of al-Qaeda and die as a martyr, as he wrote in his Facebook profile. He was charged of terrorism and arrested before leaving, as he was suspected of planning terrorist attacks in Italy. He was later released and he dropped off the radar in January 2014 in Syria, where he had landed with the help of an Albanian network.

The case of Mohamed Jarmoune is also similar. The 20-year-old man from Brescia of Moroccan origin contacted recruiters through the Web, but he did not leave. He was a computer jihadist who collected information and organized other militants. He was arrested on charges of terrorism and jailed, as his computer contained information that raised suspicions about a possible attack against the synagogue in Milan.

The whole of Europe is not immune to the Syrian 'sirens' of the Web. In April 2014, news spread about the alleged death in a suicide attack of Denis Mamadou Cuspert, a German citizen who had joined the jihad in Syria and was fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/L). The man, who was also known in Germany as Deso Dogg (his stage name as a rapper), had joined the ranks of the jihadist group under the battle name of Abu Maleeq first, and then Abu Talha al-Almani. He was from Berlin and came from a mixed family: his father was originally from Ghana.

² Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (1941-1989) was a Palestinian Sunni theologian and master and the mentor of Osama bin Laden. He was an important inspiration, guide and even organizer of the fighting jihad and invited all Muslim to join forces against the enemy to reclaim the lands of Islam and establish the caliphate.

“The Islamic nation is bleeding after hearing of the martyr of his jihadist fighter, brother Abu Talha al-Almani. May he be received by God”, is one of the messages published on jihadist forums. That continues: “His death was caused by a kamikaze attack carried out by the traitors of Jolani (the head of Abu Mohammed’s al-Nusra Front) against the house where some Isis brothers were”.

Cuspert had been under observation for at least three years: he was a popular German rapper, known to al-Qaeda for his *nasheed* (Islamic inspired chants). He was considered one of the most influential figures in the promotion of the violent jihad and a supporter of the strategy to attack Western interests through the Web and YouTube.

The story of Wa’el Ahmed Abd al-Fattah comes from a different part of the world. He was arrested by Egyptian authorities in April 2014; he was a fighter returning from Syria, one of many hundreds of Egyptians recruited by Al-Nusra and/or ISIS. Many of them are part of the first wave of fighters who are now returning to Egypt, where they side with Ansar Bait al-Maqdis – a jihadist group of the Sinai region – and have already organized several attacks in Egypt.

These are all different stories, but they all point in the same direction: recruitment through social media is supported especially by stories and first-hand reports of *foreign fighters* that are popularized online. This makes for an extremely viral process: it becomes a sort of chain of imitation, a dangerous infection for dissatisfied young people looking for their lost identity.

The battle on social media is deliberately open.

These messages were posted in July 2014 (in Arabic and then translated in English):

#The_Concept_of_Lone_Wolf_Attacks The time has arrived to respond to Twitter’s management by directly attacking their employees and physically assassinating them!! Those who will carry this out are the sleepers cells of death.

#The_Concept_of_Lone_Wolf_Attacks Twitter management should know that if they do not stop their campaign in the virtual

world, we will bring the war to them in the real world on the ground.

And so on and so forth. These messages were posted in response to the decision by Twitter to suspend several accounts that disseminated IS-related materials from the battlefield. But this measure failed: the suspended accounts resurface under slightly different names and are always connected to users in the U.S., Canada, Switzerland, The Netherlands, etc. The so-called *foreign fighters* are well positioned also in this virtual war. However, the awareness that external observers can access social media led to the announcement, at the beginning of 2015, that a dedicated messaging platform would soon be launched to protect the privacy of users.

As we know, the use of these tools was popular long before the massive intervention of IS: these are the instruments of the digital generation, they are highly pervasive, they allow people to be constantly connected and are intimately familiar to the young people who are recruited.

While it is clear that IS has not used social media in an innovative way, it has managed to include them in a wider scheme: they are part of the overall media strategy that IS has developed giving proof of remarkable competence. In the hands of IS, social media have become 'story telling' instruments, ensuring high circulation in virtual places where fighters share their experiences from the battlefield. Recently, by avoiding posts that contain excessively crude images that may be censored by providers, these stories from the front have legitimately remained online. Their enthralling and subjective narratives have further promoted viral emulation which lies at the heart of the recruitment process.

France: Threats and recruitment

As was mentioned before, there is more to the Web than social media, but social platforms in particular are used by IS to maintain real time communication with its audience. Twitter, then Face-

book, as well as specific ‘chat’ programs, are used to launch new media products that can be accessed and used online, such as videos, magazines, games and music.

A similar product to the ‘stories’ published on social media – in terms of recruitment purposes and viral capacity – is the video posted on 9 November 2014 by one of the IS ‘film majors’: the al-Hayat Media Center. The video, titled “What are you waiting for”, is 7 minutes and 19 seconds long. It features Abu Osama al-Faransi, Abu Maryam al-Faransi and Abu Salman al-Faransi: as their names suggest, these are three French men who call young Westerners to war in French (with Arabic subtitles).

“There are weapons and vehicles, and targets ready to be hit. There is poison to use in the water and food of Allah’s enemies. Kill them, spit on their faces and crush them with your cars”, say the anchormen, speaking to their young fellow French countrymen.

The video is interesting both in terms of its intended target audience and for the symbolic mixture it shows: the men speak perfect French, the second speaker is standing between a Kalashnikov and a Muslim curved sword, the three speakers follow each other and are introduced by an individual title.

The message is clear, explicit and has a strong impact.

In this case, the ‘viral’ nature of the video starts from the three French anchormen. They are probably school friends to some, acquaintances to others or the guys next door: this is the audience of IS television. At the same time, they are accomplished ‘dramatic actors’ who enjoy the media fame that has come from telling us about their deeds. They are also men for whom there is no coming back (an added value for IS): they are now ‘dead men walking’, it would be unacceptable for them to ‘return home’ after doing something that is neither understandable nor justifiable. This video is the supreme pledge that inextricably binds them to the caliph.

As usual, the message also suggests targets and operating methods. It builds on a practice that has already been used in recent months (“crush them with your cars”) and suggests another

one that the jihad has long been considering (the use of poison to contaminate water and food). More significantly, however, it is a dangerously viral video that encourages imitation among dissatisfied youngsters living in the *banlieues*, who may act locally as ‘lone wolves’ (lone fighters who have now become ‘zombies’³), the greatest threat to daily life in the West.

Finally, the video shows impeccable direction and perfect timing. The attack against France appeared at exactly the right political moment: on the same day when “What are you waiting for” went online, France decided to step up its military effort in the war against IS.

Beheadings: The evolution of how to communicate horror

Foley is not the first reporter murdered by the jihad. Daniel Pearl, correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, was beheaded on 1 February 2012. Sadly, the list does not stop here.

The pace is impressive and the sequence of media products persistently shows the same ritual: the prisoner is kneeling, wearing the orange jumpsuit of Guantanamo inmates. After reciting the curses against the West imposed by the caliphate, he is beheaded with a knife. The throat cutting ritual is willingly used and promoted as a distinctive mark of the caliphate. It shows continuity with the project of al-Zarqawi, but such brutality is reserved to the *kuffar* alone, thus making the threat even stronger. Let us remember, for instance, that on 9 February 2015 an IS ‘citizen’ accused of sorcery was beheaded with an axe and not with a knife. Again, the diversification of the instruments of death has a significant symbolic and communication impact.

³ Zombies: skilled individuals who have been trained to fight. They gather in semi-structured and flexible networks, characterized also by ‘sentimental’ and soft ties (for instance, the survivors of the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris who come from the same battlefield). They take action for ‘internal’ or ‘external’ reasons. (Note: *Dabiq*, the IS magazine, had indicated the director of *Charlie* as a target!).

The goal is to terrorize the West with a media product that is easy to disseminate (a short video launched, for each murder, on all platforms, including mobile ones) and that is immediately understood, given its extremely graphic content. It is a threat aimed at everyone, and one that the media will feel compelled to circulate.

But on 16 November 2014, something changes with Kassig

The horrifying 15-minute video which shows, *among other things*, the beheading of Kassig imposes a change in perspective: the video shows the head of the American man but there is no orange Guantanamo uniform and no speech. This killing is preceded by a long introduction on IS, with images of the beheadings of a group of Syrian soldiers carried out by IS staff wearing camouflage uniforms and standing in a parade. The faces of several participating *foreign fighters* (French and German) are shown quite clearly. The video has been accurately shot and thought out, nothing is left to chance: the parade, the rhythmic execution, the placing of the heads on the corpses, etc.

Some analysts may assume this is due to an emergency strategy: the usual ceremony (used in the case of Foley and Henning) could not be followed because “something went wrong” during the execution. Kassig had fought in the war and may have refused to comply with the staging required by the ritual.

However, in addition to this possible interpretation, a shift in style may have occurred – as was the case with the Cantlie video series – for very specific purposes, as part of an effective jihadist communication strategy.

The video is a different product and may have multiple meanings.

The method of beheading continues to be a distinctive mark of IS. As noted, it follows the tradition of its founder Zarqawi. But, in this case, the threat is even more explicit, direct and emotionally effective as the executioners, their face no longer hidden, are clearly from the West. The representation of an unconceivable act – for the world that has exorcised death and now is faced with

coarse brutality caused, through everyday technological instruments – shows Western culture the possibility of unexpected acts, carried out by people who were born and brought up in the same world but are now a threat to Europe. The video steers clear of the risks of a terrorist attack in Europe, but effectively highlights the kind of threat that IS represents by winning “the hearts and minds” of young Europeans. Which is probably worse than a terrorist attack.

Finally, it is an opening to dialogue with that part of Islam – even Qaedaist Islam – which is critical of beheadings. In addition to Zawahiri in 2006, others have recently voiced their criticism: a group of British Salafi scholars, Fethullag Gülen in Turkey and the radical Abu Qatada al-Filastini in Jordan, who openly criticized IS and the beheading of Western journalists while he was in jail.

Putting the knife in the hands of Westerners can help reach out to those critical radical religious men, a useful strategy to foster dialogue with traditional al-Qaeda.

The evolution continues

On 24 January 2015 another message is published online: Kenji Goto, one of the two Japanese citizens held hostage by IS, announces the killing of Haruna Yukawa. The ritual beheading was anticipated in a previous video, where the two asked the Japanese government for a 200 million dollar ransom, the same amount that Japan had just approved to support the fight against the caliphate. Although there are hints that the traditional procedure has been followed (orange jumpsuit for the prisoners, and executioner wearing a hood), the fellow prisoner shows Yukawa’s cut head resting on his body in a picture that he holds in his hand. The barbarous ritual itself is not shown. As a sort of innovation in tradition, this message keeps the option of the payment open, without giving up the gruesome impact of what happened. Its skillful direction attracts the audience and creates suspense for what may soon follow: the first beheaded Japanese man is an ominous indication of the possible fate of his companion, who is

now delivering the message. The same format is replicated on 27 January with the “Second public message of ‘Kenji Goto Jogo’ to his family and the Japanese government”: fixed camera, white background, prisoner wearing an orange jumpsuit, he speaks while holding a picture of the Jordanian pilot held prisoner by IS since Christmas. In this video Kenji announces he has 24 hours left to live, and the pilot even less. The pressure is now on the Jordanian government, asked to release terrorist Sajida al Rishawi in exchange for the Japanese and, now, the pilot too. This request confirms the attention paid to international political events. The case ends on 31 January with a 67 second video, produced by al-Furqan and published on Twitter, which documents the beheading of the Japanese journalist by British jihadist John according to the usual ritual, although in a different location, possibly in the Aleppo area. No news are received on Muadh al-Kasaesbeh, the Jordanian pilot who many tweets claim is dead. However, with no official news from the caliphate, there is no certainty. The communication strategy concerning the two kidnapped Japanese journalists followed two routes: on the one hand, it showed the usual approach based on terror, with the knife of the killer and the orange jumpsuit of the victim, but at the same time it provided factual information on the payment of the ransom, using the metacommunication of the pictures in the videos. The combination of these two aspects was certainly useful for the twofold objective of the videos, but it could also be the beginning of a new phase in the dramatic communication of beheadings, which – in the merciless, continuous and indiscriminating display of horrific events by Western TV and media – the public seems to have almost grown used to.

All patterns are dramatically broken with the release of the 22-minute video where Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasaesbeh is burnt alive in a cage.

The end of Muadh al-Kasaesbeh, the Jordanian pilot captured on 24 December 2014, and the communication of his death generated heated debate. We will not discuss the immediate reactions to the event here – not because of relevance, but because it is hasty

and potentially not effective by its own nature – and consider the following points instead:

- The pilot was killed on 3 January; rumors about his death had already been circulating on Twitter and other information had been gathered. An accurate reading of the sequence (starting from the picture shown by Kenji Goto, with the pilot wearing the orange jumpsuit, and finally the video with the execution in the cage) clearly shows the evolution of his imprisonment and the frequency of the use of the cage where he ended his days;
- It can be assumed that the Jordanians were already aware of the pilot's death, which had taken place before the release of the video, considering how they handled IS's ransom request (at the same time as Kenji Goto's);
- Terrorists Sajida al-Rishawi and al-Karbouly, whose release IS had demanded, were immediately executed;
- Right from the start, it is safe to assume that this was the only epilogue IS was expecting to reach. The pretense could not last until the conclusion of the hypothetical exchange;
- The week after the pilot's capture, IS launched a Twitter hashtag about "Tips to kill a Jordanian pilot pig", and a second hashtag that read "We all want to slaughter Moaz": it was a sort of online poll to decide how to kill the pilot. Suggestions included beheading, burning him alive, and crushing him with a bulldozer. The tweets were retweeted thousands of times;
- Fragments of the full video (22 minutes) of the pilot's death have been circulating on Twitter, along with some stills, since 3 February;
- Some of these fragments can be considered as autonomous videos, for instance:
 - The sequence that shows the pilot's death, built with a 'dramatic crescendo' using mixed images of the effects of air strikes, flying pilots, interviews with the prisoner and finally al-Kasaesbeh who moves closer to the cage in an area full of debris. A handful of IS men watch on standing in a theatrical pose: their positions have been carefully thought out, and what they wear – a camouflage suit and

desert balaclavas – is very different from the clothes worn by killers in the videos of the beheadings. The video ends with the pilot burning in the cage where he is held captive;

- The part (video) called ‘security database’, posted on Twitter as a separate video at about 8 pm Italian time on the same day. It lists the names and shows 60 mugshots of pilots that IS wants to kill and proclaims: “On this occasion, the Islamic State announces a 100 gold dinar reward for anyone who kills a crusader pilot. The state security command has released a list with the names of the Jordanian pilots who participate in the campaign. This is good news for anyone who supports its religion and commits a killing that will save them from the flames of hell”;
- The full, 22-minute video is rather complex. The two partial videos described above are made of fragments taken from the full video and reassembled and edited to create two separate shorter videos with their own narratives. The full video is skillfully made, carefully shot and edited. The story of the pilot (his capture, imprisonment, declarations and death) alternate with images of air strikes, the damage that they produce, briefings and finally information on the pilots that should be hunted down and killed. The theological motivation for the killing is superimposed on the image of the burnt pilot: “Ibn Taymiyya, may Allah have mercy on him, said: So if horror of commonly desecrating the body is a call for them [the infidels] to believe [in Islam], or to stop their aggression, it is from here that we carry out the punishment and the allowance for legal Jihad”⁴. It is both significant and threatening that the last images do not show Muadh al-Kasaesbeh’s burnt body, but the pilots on whom IS has placed a bounty;
- The release of the (extremely crude) video was discussed by the media for the first time: some chose not to publish any image, others released ‘softer’ images, others linked to other web-

⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, considered one of the most important scholars of Islam, declared the legitimacy of the jihad against Muslims who do not follow the sharia, stating that they are not real Muslims, despite their declaration of faith.

sites that showed the video in full. The different attitudes have stirred up a debate on whether or not (and how) to disseminate communications from IS on Western media. This marks the emergence of the issue of media responsibility.

These are the aspects that are worth reflecting on. Once again, the IS's communication strategy prevails: it is clear that the exchange of prisoners was never an option, but the new way of handling communication allowed IS to change the usual format of beheadings (Kenji Goto's videos with the picture of his friend and the Jordanian pilot) and close the case with a disruptive, 'burning' video, that was held up for one month before being released. Everything had been planned since the beginning in order to change the perspective that the Western public was beginning to get used to, drag viewers into the empathic sharing of a horrific event and set the trap for Western media that felt compelled to report the news.

The IS director is like a cat playing with a mouse: after allowing the prey to catch its breath, it is hit with the deadliest of blows.

This type of communication also sends a direct message to Jordan, where the opposition to IS is not to be taken for granted many groups of society and 3,000-4,000 men are already fighting with the jihadists. It is also a threat to the caliphate's neighboring countries – a target for IS expansion and consolidation. Finally, it clearly shows the identity of possible targets and the fate that awaits the soldiers of the coalition.

The video also seems to add something to the complex communication strategy of the caliphate, which is trying to present itself as a state and, with these images, provokes an instinctive reaction to brutality. A second objective emerges, in addition to that of institutionalizing IS. We may call it 'double radicalization', as will be explained in the conclusion. If we look at the sequence of communications on the first five beheadings, the Kassig video in mid-November, the two Japanese prisoners' videos and the killing of the Jordanian pilot, the objective appears clearly and deliberately. The first five videos follow the same script, both in the announcements and in the execution, and have a strong impact,

although the public of 'flow television' was beginning to become used to it.

Kassig breaks the pattern, by necessity or choice, as discussed, and the video directors take the opportunity to stage a more complex representation: they show a shared ritual with men wearing military camouflage suits, some of them clearly Westerners.

Fear remains but becomes more subtle – given the direct threat of many potential 'neighbor' killers – and less impactful, although supported by an accurate choreography. The director is evolving the series with the continuity that the public expects; he introduces new twists but does not change its meaning and perspective. The two Japanese, instead, are a sort of digression, a break to let viewers catch their breath. It is an intentional pause; the Jordanian pilot video is probably in post-production, the soldier has certainly been sacrificed already. With Muadh al-Kasaesbeh, that pause comes to a sudden end that evokes shock, although it is expected and consistent with the workings of the media: it aims at making the public jump off their seat, provoking their emotions, looking for the spontaneous reaction caused by watching a man being burnt alive (especially in the way this was presented). It leads us back to the same choreography of Kassig's video, but makes it even more sophisticated – with men lined up in their camouflage suits as extras – and elaborates on the same terrifying message, after using the pause as a communication booster.

This communication sequence highlights, at the beginning of 2015, a second objective which does not replace but accompanies and strengthens that of institutionalizing IS's role. The additional goal is the promotion of a generalized and widespread conflict that the outraged and understandable reaction to these images can spur in Europe – a reaction obtained with the whole sequence of videos. So, in addition to the *strategy of communication aimed at institutionalization*, the *strategy of emotional communication* emerges; these are both traps that IS has prepared and that we are running the risk of falling into.

If this is the case, the crescendo of horrific communications of the last few months can only promote further radicalization both

among IS militiamen and those who oppose IS. A burnt mosque⁵ or worse may soon become reality even in Western countries.

In addition to these considerations, the case of the Japanese prisoners deserves a brief comment concerning the so-called ‘fakes’. The communication format, in this case, is more complex and very flexible. It causes horror and uncertainty at the same time, also because of the clear post-production opportunities that these messages allow. The issue of fakes – fake videos and communication products – that has often been part of the analysis of the caliphate’s production, gained new momentum and, possibly, some new justification. However, it is necessary to make a distinction between a post-production ‘fake’ – which does not show reality but is a representation of it – and a ‘fake’ that is not real because the identity of the source is fake. In the first case, the discussion is certainly useful and helps to understand the techniques, technologies and professional skills used, the reasons that justify the fake and the strategies behind it. But it should not become a pointless exercise: a fake – which, in technical terms, is certainly possible and likely for some of these messages – does not necessarily reflect on the effectiveness of the communication to the public if the caliphate’s signature is confirmed. It is part of the complex strategy of the media jihad.

The beheadings are also part of the IS media products that are created and communicated according to a consistent strategy. Thus a change in perspective – even if caused by events which could not be controlled – or a video edited in post-production are an opportunity to renew and refine the weapons of the current media battle.

⁵ After the drafting of these notes, the first, albeit clumsy, attempt to burn a mosque was reported: “The Islamic Cultural Center in Massa Lombarda was targeted on the night between Wednesday and Thursday (4-5 February 2015). At around 4.30 a fire started and burnt the window-sill of the building on the corner of via Marchetti and via Quadri. An improvised device made of rags soaked in flammable liquid was thrown at the mosque. Flames damaged the window, the frames and several prayer rugs inside. The smoke blackened the walls of the building”.

John Cantlie: from prisoner to ambassador

John Cantlie, an English reporter, was kidnapped the first time on 19 July 2012 while he was crossing the border between Turkey and Syria in Bab al-Hawa. Wounded, he was freed by four members of the Free Syrian Army on the 26 of the same month. In November 2012 he went back to Syria and was kidnapped again with his American colleague James Foley, who was later killed by IS. Nothing was heard of Cantlie until he launched a video series called “Lend Me Your Ears”, where he focused on the critical topics of the political and media debate on the caliphate. In these videos Cantlie wears a Guantanamo-style orange jumpsuit, he sits at a table against a black background and recites his message as a prisoner. The title says “Messages from the British Detainee John Cantlie”. Cantlie’s communication changes with the second series

Table 4.1 - John Cantlie’s messages

Title	Episode	Release date	Length (min:sec)
Lend Me Your Ears	Introduction	18 September 2014	3:21
Lend Me Your Ears	1	23 September 2014	5:56
Lend Me Your Ears	2	29 September 2014	5:35
Lend Me Your Ears	3	12 October 2014	6:54
Lend Me Your Ears	4	16 October 2014	7:49
Lend Me Your Ears	5	25 October 2014	6:31
Inside 'Ayn al Islam		28 October 2014	5:32
Lend Me Your Ears	6	21 November 2014	8:52
Inside Mosul		3 January 2015	8:15
From inside Halab		9 February 2015	11:59

of videos, starting with “Inside ‘Ayn al Islam”, from Mosul and then from Aleppo.

Monica Maggioni has analyzed in depth Cantlie’s videos (see her contribution in this book for an analysis of his role). From a more general perspective, aimed at studying the caliphate’s communication strategy, John Cantlie appears to be the common thread of all the video series: he is an actual anchorman, followed by an audience that is certainly not immune to the wicked appeal

of knowing that each new episode is proof that the presenter is still alive.

Uncertainty grows after the reportage from Aleppo which inevitably requires a change in format and questions the role of the journalist (a role that he maybe resuming for the caliphate's announced TV channel, *KhilafaLive*). The topics correspond to the critical points on the public and political agenda of the countries that fight against IS. There is no blood, no violence, every concept is clearly argued, the message is "we can talk about this".

In the second Cantlie documentary series, the topics presented are enriched by tales of ordinary daily life in the caliphate. This creates even greater dissonance with the representations found in the Western media. The target audience is more informed than the average, more interested in what happens in the lands of the caliphate and in the consequences of the possible reactions of the West. It is also potentially reactive and participates in the Western debate.

The series, that can be described only briefly, are carefully constructed by someone who is intimately familiar with both the IS communication strategies and the target audience. Once again, nothing is left to chance when it comes to the IS's use of media as instruments of war that are as effective as an AK47 rifle. The complex planning of the IS's communication strategy is also clear in the article signed by Cantlie himself that appeared in issue 4 of the IS magazine *Dabiq*, on 22 October 2014, in which he explains the meaning of his reportages.

Gamification and convergence

One of the 'foul' words used in recent studies on new media and their use is *gamification*. The concept, introduced in 2010, is very interesting: it expresses the idea that daily behaviors, often boring and mandatory, can be influenced and guided by a fun activity or *game*, which is voluntary and pleasant by nature. Somehow, *gamification* is a communication facilitator that helps accepting such routines.

Another useful concept is that of *convergence*: this concept refers to the confluence on the same technological platform of traditionally different media (listening to radio, watch TV, play videogames, etc. on computers and smartphones), and to the resulting ‘melting pot’ of cultural attitudes and perspectives, encouraged by this mix of genres and tools.

The result is the engagement of users for the purpose of retaining (and eventually recruiting) them and guiding them towards an apparent solution of problems, which has more to do with pleasure (fun) than effectiveness. As a result these days much is heard about game-related diseases whereby games superimpose their virtual reality on real everyday life until the latter is replaced by the former, which eventually becomes the only reference for an individual. This technique maximizes the extremely close relation between the virtual and the real world and exploits it to inform, to guide, and to provide the opportunity to experiment and to break boundaries.

Terrorists discovered gamification and convergence long ago, even before they became a theory: role games and games where the infidels are the enemy – aimed at training, recruiting and retaining, and, more importantly, at breaking the ethical barriers of life – have existed for decades in various forms. The first example are the early ‘jihadist’ cartoons which showed how to train a ‘child terrorist’ blowing himself up on a line of enemy lorries, replicating the actions of one of his parents.

Very early on terrorists had also discovered how to distribute these products on multi-platforms and to how to connect them with other media products, e.g. games that follow or precede videos.

Again, the IS has exploited these possibilities very effectively

On 16 September 2014 the caliphate released a short video called “Flames of War”, a sophisticated trailer in the media campaign carried out by al-Hayat Media Center for IS. The video is about 1 minute long and fairly well documented, it has a fast pace and

slow motion parts: it is a classic trailer announcing something that will come later and raising expectations and interest. It is clearly a product made by skilled hands. More importantly the video highlights the deliberate media strategy of IS: it is part of the jihadist fight, which uses video and media materials on the battlefield of a ‘widespread war’. In this case, the strategy is more relevant than the technique: the video has an open ending (what will follow? A videogame, a movie, a series...?) which embodies the idea of media convergence typical of our society. By circumventing all limitations on the transmission of contents (violent and gruesome videos fall under the censorship policies now applied by social media), this strategy also manages to create hugely viral contents.

Only a few days later “Grand Theft Auto: Salil al- Sawarim” makes its appearance.

“Grand Theft Auto” (GTA) was first released in 1997 for PlayStation and other platforms; in 2004 it boasted 30 million players worldwide. The game targets young players, it is highly enthralling, and therefore hugely successful. Precisely the kind of potential that was not lost on IS, that promptly customized the game to suit its own purposes. The brand name is the same with the addition of “Salil al-Sawarim”. Its goal is to attract young people and to introduce them to a career not as car thieves, but as jihadists. The Arabic addition to the title translates roughly as ‘rattling swords’ and is consistent with the images of the videogame trailer released on 18 September 2014, which is not too different from the commercial videos for the actual videogame.

This is a perfect example of gamification and convergence: the title “Salil al-Sawarim” (abbreviated as SaS) had already been used for a video made by al-Furqan, one of the most important production houses of IS. The fourth episode appeared on 17 March 2014. In the first 24 hours on YouTube, the video was watched by about 57,000 people, with an average permanence per visitor of 17 minutes (the video is 1 hour long). As usual, the video was made available in different formats, including a high-definition 1G version for download: in short, it was a huge success. Searches for the video came especially from Twitter in the first two days,

particularly from Android platforms, followed by iPhone, and mostly in Arabic (about 30,000 searches) followed, at a significant distance, by Indonesian. The video shows mujaheddin fighting and IS convoys being cheered by the crowd in Homs, Raqqa and Fallujah, where a drone, apparently a Parrot AR Drone controlled through an iPad, offers viewers a 360° view from above of the IS march from Syria to Iraq. The video is actually very well made and effective in captivating the audience and promoting support, like any war or adventure video produced in the U.S. or Europe would. Of course, the topics, characters and goals are different and the myth it is inspired by is obviously the jihad.

The videogame builds on the success of this video to target, through a specific product, a younger and more fun-oriented audience. Of course the game – an appreciated and common format among young people – aims at influencing the ideology of users by legitimizing terrorism and the jihad ideals while having fun.

Once again, this is proof of IS's ability to use media. In this case it perfectly grasps and applies the concept of gamification to its advantage, making the most of all its communication power.

The only missing piece to fully implement the strategy of convergence was a web TV: on 20 January a teaser trailer⁶ promoting *KhilafaLive* made its appearance in various forums.

The video refers to the *Khilafalive.info* website, advertised as the “official website for the supporters of the Islamic State caliphate” and anticipates broadcasts with the same protagonists and topics of the whole IS media system: Cantlie with its reportages, *nasheed*⁷ on the jihad, programs for recruitment and training, updates on life in the caliphate. It is a sort of State television – that will perhaps one day require an annual subscription fee – and an important step towards the institutionalization goal pursued by IS. The possibility for viewers to chat on the issues presented in the TV programs was also announced.

⁶ A teaser trailer is a short promotional video usually focusing on one single sequence.

⁷ Traditional Islamic vocal music, widely used in the jihad.

The strategy aims at achieving the convergence of messages that are reinforced on multiple platforms, thus attracting different audiences for the same purpose: strengthening the jihad.

But this should come as no surprise: it is actually a strategy that we created ourselves.

The jihad magazines

Inspire is the ‘historical’ magazine of Qaedaism. The first issue was published in January 2010, making the Western world fully aware of the communication skills and strategies of terrorists. In print the publication – disseminated online on forums and chats – looks like any modern magazine: it has about 30 color pages, it contains many pictures, and texts are mainly in English, indicating that the target is a young, modern and radical audience. Its topics deal with promotion, recruitment and training; detailed information is given on how to launch an attack and which tools to use – from homemade bombs to the correct maintenance for Kalashnikov rifles. *Inspire* – of which 13 issues have been published (most recently on 24 December 2014) – is one step forward in the media production of the jihad. It supports the new, flexible structure of ‘on demand’, self-taught terrorist groups who are encouraged to hit soft targets with operations they have to organize autonomously. Most notably, in March 2013, the 10th issue of *Inspire* listed Stéphane Charbonnier – the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* who was killed in the attack on 7 January 2014 in Paris – among the ‘most wanted’ targets.

The new magazines (including *Al-Shamikha*, “The magnificent woman”, 31 glossy pages published in March 2011 with an armed, veiled woman on the cover, clearly intended for female readers) are written in English. They are based on a traditional model but are available on platforms and distributed online. This highlights the complexity of the media galaxy of the jihad and begins to clearly show the strategies and the careful direction behind the activities of al-Qaeda before, and IS now.

Dabiq is the IS version of *Inspire* and a further evolution of the first Qaedaist magazine⁸.

Dabiq is a small town with a population of around 3,000 in Syria, on the northern border with Turkey – so IS's special interest in conquering Dabiq in the battle of August 2014 may appear puzzling. But Dabiq has an important role for Islam: according to one of the hadith in the Sunnah⁹, Mohammed's teachings, the Muslims will fight against a horde of infidels near the town of Dabiq, in the last hour of history, before the return of the Messiah.

These are the plan and the promises that the name of this town enshrines: hence the decision to use *Dabiq* as the title of the IS magazine that aims to communicate and spread strategies and targets and, more importantly, the radical view of the caliphate. *Dabiq* is a modern magazine, full of colors and pictures, an interesting layout, consisting usually of 40 to 60 pages (but the first issue was shorter, 26 pages). Here is how it defines itself:

a periodical magazine focusing on the issues of unity (*tawhid*), truth-seeking (*manhaj*), migration (*hijrah*), holy war (*jihad*) and community (*jama'ah*). It will also contain photo reports, current events, and informative articles on matters relating to the Islamic State.

Until January 2015, *Dabiq* pursued these goals with six issues published from 5 July to 29 December 2014. In all these issues, the caliphate makes its conquest plan clear by promoting the recruitment of fighters and families, trying to establish its Qaedaist leadership, explaining – to its own advantage – aspects of daily life according to the doctrine of Islam (see the paper by Monica Maggioni for further analysis). Its communication is always

⁸ For further information on *Dabiq*, see the chapter 3 by Monica Maggioni in this publication.

⁹ Hadith 6924: "The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-A'maq or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them)... They will then fight and a third (part) of the army would run away, whom Allah will never forgive. A third (part of the army) which would be constituted of excellent martyrs in Allah's eye would be killed and the third who would never be put to trial would win and they would be conquerors of Constantinople".

mindful of Western debates: for instance, the 6th issue of *Dabiq* in December 2014 mentions the attack against the chocolate shop in Sidney¹⁰ and uses this good example in a ‘counter-narrative’ to explain the aspirations of IS. In other words, it contextualizes the debate from a different perspective – that of the jihad. *Dabiq* is perfectly integrated in the multiplatform communication strategy of the caliphate, it is an important part of it and uses Internet channels to spread its messages also in a more traditional form. While the goal is the same, all communication activities are skillfully orchestrated to rely on different media to reach different audiences.

The caliphate and ‘tourist’ brochures

As regards the use of different media – including the more traditional ones – it should come as no surprise that IS is also using brochures as a promotional tool for a very targeted audience: the families of *foreign fighters*. The goal here is to attract them to IS territories and to consolidate IS’s status as a ‘rising state’.

One example of this kind of systematic communication is another magazine, called *Islamic State News*, published by al-Hayat Media Center. Since June 2014, the weekly publication has been celebrating the success of the caliphate, presenting both its military victories and the assistance provided to the population. The first issue discusses “Aid distribution. The Islamic State gives flour, fish and other materials to Sunni families in Ewessat”; the second opens with pictures of apple and gold stalls at the market under the title “Business flourishes under the guide of the Islamic State”. Finally, the third issue states: “The Islamic State offers protection to shepherds”. All the provinces are covered, thus further emphasizing the state organization of IS and the opportunities for development that it can offer.

¹⁰ On 15 and 16 December 2014 the Lindt coffee shop in Sidney was attacked by Haron Monis. The attack ended with the death of the terrorist and two of about thirty hostages.

Another brochure was launched through the Twitter account @Wilaiat_Halab (later suspended): 31 color pages in Arabic, published in September 2014, illustrated life in the province of Aleppo. It contained no references to rifles or dead people, but plenty of data on economics and demographics, pictures of quiet rivers, fields ready for harvest, views of automated ovens to make bread and schools educating children under the black IS flag. Its success is clear from the interviews gathered in those months in that province, where people say that, thanks to IS, diesel fuel is finally cheap and justice is ensured:

I recently (22 August 2014) had the opportunity to speak to a friend in Manbij, a small city in Aleppo of about 100,000 (pre-war) under exclusive Islamic State (IS) control since January 2014 (when the organization was still called ISIS). He told me about how IS cadres were administering the city and what Manbijis think about the new political order. (...) In Manbij, people see that IS is 'getting comfortable', and that the trappings of statehood appear stronger every day. IS's public administration structure includes several types of police, courts and administrative bodies. The group provides services and undertakes development projects. IS collects taxes in the form of zakat and redistributes some of the money to the poor... Recently, IS has begun shipping fuel from fields it recently captured in Dayr al-Zawr province and selling it at fixed discounted rates in Aleppo.

This is basically what Cantlie later explained in his reportages from Mosul and Aleppo.

This type of communication – in the framework of the general project – has two objectives: it shows the world the quality of life in the caliphate and, more importantly, it aims to attract the families of *foreign fighters* to build solid ties of loyalty among the population.

IS's online editorial production: the *Black Flags Books*

This analysis of the caliphate communication strategy would not be complete without considering IS's production of e-books – limited to .pdf – that are distributed via Twitter, with links to new volumes. Compared to other communication products, the editorial quality of IS e-books is lower in terms of layout and language. However, they are certainly useful in the context of IS's general strategy.

The production of e-books came to the fore on 16 January 2015, when some well-known and often banned Twitter accounts began to promote the new e-book published by the caliphate: *Islamic State 2015*, 100 pages in non-perfect English containing a lot of information on IS.

The e-book is made up of 5 sections:

- Leadership (pages 8-21): the first section describes the IS command, its goals and the strategies used to escape attacks.
- Soldiers (pages 22-50): this part describes how to access IS-controlled territories, what type of training is carried out, the command chain and the daily life of a fighter.
- Services (pages 51-64): this section explains that the State will soon issue its own currency and that free transport, education and health services are provided.
- Media (pages 65-86): this section details the caliphate communication strategy and tools, with particular emphasis on social media, based on the appreciation with which IS messages have been received in the Western world.
- The future (pages 87-100): where the State will hit, including missiles against Europe and Italy that AQIM is asked to send.

Despite some initial surprise – which would reveal a lack of awareness – it was clear that *Islamic State 2015* is actually the eighth book in the series of the “Black Flags Books”, that are widely advertised in jihadist forums.

The titles published so far – that have appeared more frequently after the establishment of the caliphate - are the following:

- E-book 1: *Black Flags from the East* (Khorasan) (November 2012)
- E-book 2: *Black Flags from Syria* (May 2013)
- E-book 3: *Black Flags from Arabia* (September 2013)
- E-book 4: *Black Flags from Persia* (Iran) (October 2014)
- E-book 5: *Black Flags from Rome* (November 2014)
- E-book 1: *Miracles in Syria* (2013)
- E-book 2: *Martyrs of Syria* (2014)
- E-book: *The Islamic State* (2015)

As is evident, the e-books target the caliphate's neighboring countries, where IS wishes to expand and where it already boasts a certain level of ideological and operating clout, thanks also to the internal fractures within the Islamic group. Rome is the exception: it is considered the capital of Europe and the homeland of all *kuffar*. This is how the *Black Flags from Rome* e-book is presented on the Internet:

Europe is returning to the Dark Ages (due to a financial recession). Armed gangs are forming into militias for racist politicians, and a young Muslim minority is their enemy. All this while a caliphate is growing across the Mediterranean sea next door. How does this mix of chaos lead to the conquest of Rome (the capital of Europe)?

The programmatic e-book that opens 2015 is part of a more complex editorial strategy which, once again, highlights IS's ability to orchestrate a versatile use of different media.

In terms of communication, *Islamic State 2015* is an interesting product: although it is not particularly refined and the magazines have a better quality – one gets the feeling that it was probably a 'rush' project – it often uses information and infographics taken from Western media and presents them from the caliphate perspective. The text adds nothing relevant about the caliphate itself, but systematically organizes all the information that is already circulating on the Internet, thus becoming a useful tool for those who "search for IS" and a propaganda tool for its State.

The chapter on communication indirectly explains the reasons behind this new media production. Page 76 reads:

The Islamic State has imprisoned and later beheaded some journalists and activists from Western non-Muslim lands, many who later turned out to be spies or 'ex-army' soldiers. However, lately (end of 2014) the Islamic State has changed its position and is being a lot more transparent with journalists. It is allowing them the right to travel in the Islamic State and see the services it is providing for the people.

Transparency has become a strategic cornerstone: although they reveal nothing new, the contents are reorganized to reflect the caliphate's view, and are aimed at a wider Western audience and particularly new recruits. Cantlie's work should be considered in this context, as well as German journalist Todenhoefer's, whose opinions – even critical ones – are recontextualized in the book as an example of transparency, which, according to the clever – and correct – interpretation of the Islamist strategy is a rewarding approach.

On this point, the book contains an interesting section that is found at page 80-81, under the title *The Islamic State Online*: It is surprising to notice that the Islamic State does not have a website of its own. Its entire network of propaganda consists of the following media types:

- Professionally edited videos. (i.e. al-Furqan, al-Hayat)
- Social media accounts (i.e. on Twitter)
- E-books and eMagazines. (i.e. *Dabiq* magazine)

The Islamic State's online world is similar to its practical real life world, in that everything is decentralized. Example: In real life, nobody knows where Khalifah Ibrahim (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) is located, similarly no-one has one centralized website they can visit to find the Islamic State and its content. This is really important because by hiding Khalifah Ibrahim's location, no-one can easily assassinate him. Similarly, by not having a website, no-one can hack it and claim an online victory. The Islamic State's content (videos, e-books, social media accounts) are scattered all around the Internet. Just like the different provinces of the Islamic State are scattered in different locations. Each province has its own responsibility in creating its own videos and social media accounts

to share its successes. By decentralizing everything from the core leadership, even if a province fails online or offline, the leadership and overall Khilafa (Caliphate) leadership project is still safe and can grow elsewhere. Hashtags: whenever Islamic State members want to promote a cause or message, they will use hashtags (such as: #AllEyesOnISIS) to promote their campaign, message or to advertise a new release. What we see is that even though Muslims have been trying to tell people about Islam for the past 20yrs, there have been more searches for 'Islamic State' on YouTube in the past 3yrs than there have been for 'Islam' since YouTube has ever existed. This shows that the world is starting to search about Islam a lot more now that it is a real practical entity (State) instead of just an idea (...).

These few lines, expressed in rather clumsy English, portray the same picture of the caliphate that has emerged from previous analyses. In this case, however, the description has the strength of a 'self-portrait': the caliphate describes itself for what it claims to be – and maybe actually is – which is in fact very close to what we – who do not belong to IS – say it is.

In communication terms, this is a powerful statement. Once again, it aims to consolidate IS's identity as a 'State' proper, it is likely to attract new recruits and to 'destabilize' Western readers. The latter, faced with the same symbolic codes they are used to, are forced to break away from the stereotypical idea of the 'Bedouin jihadist' used to label the enemy as someone "other than oneself", different and far away, someone who is unable to communicate.

The transparency and multiple media use implemented in the complex IS strategy serves precisely the purpose of rejecting the stereotypical image of the jihadist which, by facilitating the identification of the enemy, ends up being the number one enemy of the caliphate aspiring to be a State: an entity you can have relations with.

The hybrid war on the Web

The examples of the complex and articulated communication strategy of IS that we have outlined clearly indicate that this is all part of an accurate, determined and targeted effort to achieve the caliphate's ultimate goal: recognition as a State. The State the IS aspires to would control a territory, be inhabited by citizens and function according to a system of institutions and infrastructures. Within this global strategy, the media strategy plays an important role which may not have been fully understood by those who fight against IS.

For instance, it may appear odd but IS has proved more effective at producing counter-information and counter-narratives than the coalition fighting it.

While on one side there is a journalist like Cantlie, the undisputed anchorman of the IS approach, on the other there is an attempt by Barak Barfi – a representative of Steven Sotloff's family (beheaded on 2 September 2014) – who speaks directly to the Islamists in Arabic and questions the legitimacy of that beheading, using informed arguments. The request by French Minister for Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius (16 September 2014) not to use the acronym IS to call the Daish¹¹ in order to avoid acknowledging its status as a State and use a derogatory acronym instead, has not been very successful and seems to be a weak suggestion. An example of 'carelessness' comes from Italy's RAI radio news broadcast of 4 February 2015. While commenting the executions of Sajida al-Rishawi and Ziad al-Karbouly¹² the word 'retaliation' crops up, while other media, including ANSA (Italy's national

¹¹ The term Daish (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham) is the Arabic acronym for Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant); it was used in April 2013 by Iranian media and later adopted by anti-IS Syrian fighters. Also, in Arabic "Daish" sounds like "Daes", which means "he who crushes something under his feet" and also like "Dahes", which means "he who sows discord".

¹² Sajida al-Rishawi was sentenced to death for her role in the terrorist attacks in Amman in 2005, where 60 people died. Al-Karbouly, an al-Qaeda fighter, had been on death row since 2008 for planning terrorist attacks against Jordanian citizens in Iraq.

news agency), use the word 'revenge'. Considering that both had been tried by the legitimate court of a sovereign state, their reference should have been limited to the "execution of the sentence", as that is what it was. In contrast, journalists insisted on the emotional side of the event, thus playing the game of the IS communication strategy. Counter-narrative actions must necessarily involve the whole media system, which should be aware of the responsibilities that stem from a situation where each and every communication is part of a strategic game of conflict where everyone is involved, media included. The same comments apply to most of the IS communications that are indiscriminately reported in the media, with no consideration for effects and responsibilities. This situation that is passed off as freedom of expression is actually a dangerous and irresponsible game in the context of the new forms of 'hybrid war'.

In the so-called 'hybrid war', where actors and battlefields are most diverse, communication plays a central role, which goes far beyond traditional "psychological warfare operations". At the end of January 2015 the announcement was made that the British army would soon create a specialist brigade for 'online fighting'. It is the 77th Brigade, already identified as the "Twitter Troops". As of 1 April, their task will be to fight the pervasive presence of IS, especially on social media. It is an important step in military enforcement strategies: for the first time, specific *kinetic activities in the virtual world* are formally launched (in this case, non-conventional, non-lethal combat actions), with explicit objectives. It will be interesting to see if this new approach can be shared with other units which may be created in other allied countries.

Along the same lines, after the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* (Paris, 7 January 2015), Anonymous stepped in. This is a global network of *hacktivists* who have declared war on IS and are determined to fight it in *cyber space*¹³ with operation #OpCharlie-

¹³ The Anonymous statement of 10 January 2015 reads: "People of the world, the time is serious. On 7 January 2015, freedom of speech was hit. Terrorists broke into the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and killed several cartoon artists, journalists and two policemen. Disgusted and shocked, we cannot fall to our knees. It is our

Hebdo. Again, this confirms the multitude of fields and actors involved. In particular, Anonymous intensified its activities at the beginning of February, when it hit hundreds of Facebook and Twitter accounts related to IS and announced with a video: “You will be treated like a virus, and we are the cure (...) Operation Isis continues. We are Muslims, Christians, Jews... the terrorists who call themselves Islamic State are not Muslims”.

There is no doubt that the Web – the global network – is becoming an important battlefield, used deliberately by IS (as stated in the above mentioned book *Islamic State 2015*), and probably less deliberately by its opponents.

In this virtual war, Anonymous has been mentioned for the clamor of the #OpCharlieHebdo initiative, but *hacktivists* had began to launch their attacks much earlier, in the summer of 2014, with operations *opIceISIS* and *OpISIS*, which were later revived after the attack against *Charlie Hebdo* and boosted by the media with the Anonymous video of 6 February. Another campaign, NO2ISIS, aimed at attacking institutions and states accused of supporting IS by providing funds and weapons.

So far the result amounts to less than 2,000 identified Facebook and Twitter accounts and a few blacked-out jihad websites, compared to about 60,000 registered accounts of IS supporters before Foley’s killing, a figure that dropped by about one half after the implementation of social media control policies. Anonymous is actually trying to list jihad-related websites, looking for their weaknesses, creating a database of websites, defacing them

duty to react. We are all affected by the death of Cabu, Charb, Tignous and Wolinski, talented artists who were massacred for their opinions and for the freedom of the press... *Charlie Hebdo*, historical figure of satirical journalism, was targeted by coward killers. Anonymous has always fought for the freedom of expression and press. We will never stop. Anonymous must remind every citizen that the freedom of the press is one of the fundamental principles of democracy. It is everybody’s responsibility to defend it. We have always fought for the freedom of expression. We will not stop now. Any attack against the freedom of expression is an attack against Anonymous. We do not allow it. All companies and organizations connected to these terrorist attacks should expect a massive reaction by Anonymous. We will track you down. We will find you and we will never stop. We are Anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us”.

(changing the homepage), gathering information on their participants and, the very last option, launching a DDoS attack to put them offline (black them out). It is a cooperation strategy which has involved several activists and non-activists who share a large amount of data on chats. For instance, the *@OpCharlieHebdo* account reached 30,000 followers in two days. If we look beyond statistical data, it becomes clear that Anonymous does not expressly encourage its activists to put websites offline, but rather to gather information which, if interesting, can be passed on to the agencies that are working on the Web. In other words, it is a meaningful and adequate intelligence operation to tackle the problem, shaped by the awareness that if a profile or a website is blacked out, it will emerge again soon afterwards, under a slightly different identity. This would waste the time of those who look for information on the Internet, without significant outcomes. Maybe, we hope, constructive cooperation can be set up between all those who have decided to fight IS in the virtual world, in various forms.

IS itself does not use the Web for propaganda and recruitment purposes only: it also launches digital attacks. The “eye of the caliphate” is one of the IS initiatives in this field: with a Trojan virus, it installs a program in the user’s computer. The program runs in the background and registers all inputs sent through the keyboard or any other device. A few weeks ago, IS put down for a few hours the Twitter account of CentCom, the United States Central Command for the Middle East, headquartered in Tampa (Florida) and responsible for the area from Egypt to Pakistan and Kazakhstan.

In short, identifying accounts on social media, putting down Islamist websites, listing providers and identifying IP addresses scattered all over the global network is hardly useful; it is just a limited ‘victory’ which immediately leads to the emergence of new virtual battlefields. This is due to the very nature of the Internet – a delocalized and virtual network. As a consequence, the most useful approach is the constant monitoring of communications sent over the Internet, in order to acquire information and to launch any necessary operation (although with limited results) to

Table 4.2 – Summary of IS communication strategies

Type (and products)	Target	Objective	Strategy	Preferred medium
Social media (FB, Twitter, etc.)	Potential supporters, Islamist radicals, etc.	Radicalization, recruitment	Promoting viral behaviors and imitation, <i>story telling</i>	Social platforms
Communication of horror (beheadings)	Enemies of the caliphate wide Western audience	Terrorizing and threatening	Showing the brutality of death, promoting emotional reactions	Video
Counter-information (Cantlie: Lend Me Your Ears and reportages)	Informed and interested Western audience	Promoting the debate on the IS, focusing on the critical points on the Western public agenda	Creating counter-narratives: recontextualization of contents from the point of view of IS	Video
Information (Islamic State News and various brochures)	Families of (potential) supporters, Westerners who are critical of actions against IS	Normalization: spreading news that emphasize the normality of daily life in the caliphate	Creating counter-narratives: recontextualization of contents from the point of view of IS; promotion of the normality of daily life in the caliphate	Pdf
Magazines, e-books (<i>Dabiq</i> , <i>Inspire</i> , etc.)	IS members, especially <i>foreign fighters</i> , and competent Western audience	Explaining and providing political, theological and tactical guidelines	Using a 'traditional' medium and multiple strategies	Pdf
Gamification (Grand Theft Auto: Salil al- Sawarim)	Digital youth, not just Islamists	Socializing with the caliphate and IS	Using games as a tool for socialization and normalization	Online game
Convergence (KhilafaLive, gamification,...)	Dissemination of all topics already raised by IS communication activities, targeting a wide public; individuals will then find their own 'niche areas' in terms of language and time.			Web TV

hinder activities, infiltrate groups or spread counter-narratives in cooperation with the private sector, i.e. companies that offer online services. This is the rationale behind the appeal launched by the British intelligence at the beginning of 2015.

The following table (Tab. 4.2) is a summary – limited to the examples mentioned in this paper – that attempts to identify types, targets, objectives and strategies that characterize the caliphate's communication activities.

The analysis clearly shows that this complex media strategy is not accidental, but rather the result of knowledge and skills that belong to the global world of widespread and pervasive communication.

Not acknowledging as much, or being surprised at the use of communication technologies, shows the frequent cultural delay and the ethnocentrism that the West adopts far too often towards its rivals, thus generating huge vulnerabilities.

It is now clear that the IS media strategy has a solid structure and organization: it is an effective and competent system that pursues clear strategies (for instance the al-Hayat Media Center brand). It is equally clear that the jihad has been using media technologies for years and that terrorism has invested money and resources in the media war for quite some time. As discussed in the previous pages, the qualitative progress made by IS is the complex direction of its different media products, which follow different lines. Let us not forget that communication in general (not just IS communication) is always based on a process that aims to build relations. In other words: each communication – particularly competent communication – leaves a track that reflects the characteristics of the addressees, the competence of the source, the features of the dissemination infrastructures, etc. This creates a potential vulnerability for the communication creators whenever there is a competent and proactive interest to 'interfere'. And this is a good reason why the 'surprise' generated a few pages ago is not acceptable.

It is also important to remember that, in pervasive communication, the processes of such communication define the level of reality: more and more often, the public agenda (conveyed through media) and the political agenda tend to coincide. By the same token, the gap between the "representation of reality" and "reality itself" has significantly decreased, especially in the 'emotional'

communication that Western media uncritically use and the caliphate uses within a carefully designed strategy.

Conclusion

As far as the objectives of the complex and articulated communication strategies of the caliphate are concerned, it is very clear that the end goal pursued is the institutionalization of IS, its acknowledgement as a State. The production and organization of media contents is one of the components of this process; it is not the only one, but it is certainly quite relevant.

However, the growing dramatization and the increased frequency of new significant media products in the last months points towards a second objective. This time the aim is not only to promote radicalization in order to recruit so-called *foreign fighters*, but also to accentuate the conflict, intensified by reactive attitudes in the West. IS is trying to indirectly activate the potential enemies of the caliphate, that is European citizens. It no longer relies on direct terrorist attacks alone to let the violence between 'Islam' and the 'West' explode, but also on the reactive response that it is trying to trigger.

In addition to establishing itself as a State, IS seems to be also interested in unsettling Western societies with violence by promoting all kinds of conflict, and conflicts inspired by ethnic and religious radicalism are easier to generate.

The *strategy of communication aimed at institutionalization* is now accompanied by the *strategy of emotional communication*: both are traps that IS has prepared and that we are running the risk of falling into.

This second communication approach – where the central tool is the 'beheading series' – is aimed at a 'double radicalization': on the one hand, it helps IS look for supporters and new fighters. Let us not forget that the terrible killing of the pilot is 'understood' as retaliation against those who had done the same against IS villages using bombs and that the indignation it generates is not necessarily shared by everyone. As a result, it promotes the radicalization we

are used to, aimed at recruiting people. On the other hand, however, it fuels indignation by exasperating and surprising another audience (the European public) and fostering a violent reaction against a generalized enemy, a 'beast' (the most common comment that appeared in the media) that is specifically characterized by the fact of being Muslim.

The result is a *second radicalization* involving those members of the European and Western population who are led to react. The first signs of this phenomenon are the following:

- Between 4 and 5 February a clumsy attempt to burn the Islamic Cultural Center in Massa Lombarda was made: "At around 4.30 a fire started and burnt the window-sill of the building on the corner of via Marchetti and via Quadri. An improvised device made of rags soaked in flammable liquid was thrown at the mosque. Flames damaged the window, the frames and several prayer rugs inside. The smoke blackened the walls of the building";
- A growing sense of fear and uneasiness is spreading, particularly among younger people, which tends to turn into violence. Although no statistical data are available, in January the number of worried parents whose children (usually aged 14-20) are afraid when they meet someone who speaks Arabic and ask (or say) what they can do to go and fight against IS, was on the rise;
- Political debate within individual European countries is becoming inevitably radicalized. This translates into stances that contain elements of xenophobia and racism. As a result, any action against the caliphate becomes more difficult (any measure wishing to be effective requires a joint effort);
- The statements of traditionally influential imams - such as Ahmed al-Tayeb (4 February 2015) from the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, the most prestigious center for the teaching of Sunni Islam- have proved rather ineffective. After the Jordanian pilot was killed he condemned the terrorist act and stated that "the Koran-prescribed punishment should be asked for these aggressors who fight God and his Prophet: death, cruci-

fixion or the amputation of their hands and feet”... but the effect was nil, as traditional Islam no longer carries a significant influence on IS. This showed the obvious weakness that al-Tayeb and other religious leaders now suffer in the world of radical Islam, and at the same time engaged them in the potential emerging conflicts in the West, as defenders of Islam. IS is effectively impairing their power of representation¹⁴.

Both strategies aim at both establishing the caliphate as the leader of the Islamist world – which is fragmented into a multitude of discordant groups looking for a new ‘commander-in-chief’ – and at threatening Europe (identified as the ‘weak plurality’ of the West), while establishing the legitimacy and supremacy of IS in its destabilization.

If, as is likely, this also relates to the difficulties that the caliphate is experiencing in its expansion and to its ability to exploit the vulnerabilities of its opponents – who constantly fall into the traps laid by IS – we can soon expect an exacerbation of the conflict at all levels of the hybrid war.

After all, a radical clash between Islam and ‘the rest’ would only play to the advantage of IS.

Given the specificities of the media conflict, responses must be based on the development of specific counter-strategies in the context of the hybridization of the conflict, where actors and tools blend and communication is a real and virtual battlefield at the same time.

Also, we need answers to more general issues such as the impossibility to govern the Web, given the absence of legal instruments that define the freedom of action of each individual according to shared rules; the responsibility of Western media – that are used more and more by IS as channels to spread its own messages – for the effects that the information they convey;

¹⁴ Unfortunately, even data that describe the situation in more general terms do not paint a rosier picture: according to a survey carried out at the end of August 2014, 92 per cent of Saudi Arabians still consider the Islamic State compliant with the values of Islamic law.

Table 4.3 – Timeline of analyzed media products

Title	Type	Release date
'Various' on social media - FB and Twitter	Post, profiles, stories...	Constant release
Salil al-Sawarim	Video	17 March 2014
Islamic State News - 3 issues	Magazine	June 2014
Dabiq, issue 1	Magazine	15 July 2014
Dabiq, issue 2	Magazine	27 July 2014
Beheading of James Foley	Video	19 August 2014
The province of Aleppo	Brochure	September 2014
Beheading of Steven Sotloff	Video	2 September 2014
Beheading of David Haines	Video	13 September 2014
Salil al-Sawarim IV	Video	18 September 2014
Flame of Wars	Video trailer	18 September 2014
Grand Theft Auto: Salil al-Sawarim	Trailer, videogame	18 September 2014
Lend Me Your Ears Foreword - Cantlie	Video	18 September 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 1 – Cantlie	Video	23 September 2014
Beheading of Hervé Gourdel	Video	24 September 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 2 – Cantlie	Video	29 September 2014
Beheading of Alan Henning	Video	19 August 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 3 – Cantlie	Video	3 October 2014
Dabiq, issue 3	Magazine	12 October 2014
Dabiq, issue 4	Magazine	22 October 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 4 – Cantlie	Video	16 October 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 5 – Cantlie	Video	25 October 2014
Inside 'Ayn al Islam – Cantlie	Video	28 October 2014
Beheading of Peter Kassig	Video	16 November 2014
What are you waiting for- al-Hayat Media Center	Video	19 November 2014
Lend Me Your Ears 6 – Cantlie	Video	21 November 2014
Dabiq, issue 5	Magazine	22 November 2014
Dabiq, issue 6	Magazine	29 December 2014
Inside Mosul - Cantlie	Video	3 January 2015
KhilafaLive	Web TV	20 January 2015 announcement
Beheading of Haruna Yukawa	Video	24 January 2015
Second public message of 'Kenji Goto Jogo' to his family and the Japanese	Video	27 January 2015
Beheading of Kenji Goto	Video	31 January 2015
Islamic State 2015	E-book	2 February 2015 (on Twitter since 15 January)
Martyr of Muad al-Kasaesbeh	Video	3 February 2015
From inside Halab - Cantlie	Video	9 February 2015

the need to embrace an open, empathic and analytical cultural approach to reduce vulnerability and adapt our responses to the IS attack capabilities.

In addition to these specific objectives – and given the emergence of a ‘strategy of conflict’ pursued by IS – it is still important to keep on looking for active cooperation, and not simply dialogue, with that part of Islam that chooses to keep its distance from Islamism.

Part III
The Objectives of the Propaganda

5. The Caliphate, Social Media and Swarms in Europe: The Appeal of the IS Propaganda to ‘Would Be’ European Jihadists

Marco Arnaboldi and Lorenzo Vidino

Since the IS became the main protagonist of the global jihadist scene and created a *de facto* state which now controls large portions of Syria and Iraq, governments and terrorism experts have been wondering about the Islamic State’s skills on battlefields and in an equally important arena: media campaigns. The focus on the Islamic State’s propaganda strategies is particularly strong in Europe, given the presence of about 5,000 fighters from various European countries among the IS ranks, according to January 2015 estimates.

Part of the secret of the Islamic State’s success lies in its military achievements. However, the group’s skilled use of media in no less important and it is an essential component of its appeal among young European Muslims. Since the 1980s several jihadist groups have been investing significant resources in propaganda activities. Abdullah ‘Azzam was probably the first to understand the importance of propaganda, but his disciple Osama bin Laden was equally aware of the fact that “the war of the media is one of the most powerful weapons of this century; we may say it accounts for 90 per cent of the preparation for battle”¹. In his first speech as the head of al-Qaeda, his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri praised the “warriors of the media jihad”, whom he described as

¹ Harmony Database, Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. ID, AFGP-2002-600321.

“hidden soldiers unknown to most, who have left their mark in the world”². In recent years, al-Qaeda has intensified its messages to the Western audience: it has translated its materials into various European languages and it has been using a framing that is attractive to young Muslims who have grown up in the West.

Although sophisticated, al-Qaeda’s media efforts pale in comparison with the modernity, reach and effectiveness of its former branch and now rival: the Islamic State. The group led by al-Baghdadi has outshined al-Qaeda, both in terms of quality and reach of its communication activities. This chapter will look at the IS European media campaign and explore some techniques, style choices and communication frames which seem to be the most widely used by propagandists in the Old Continent, and the most suited to European tastes. In looking at how the Islamic State spreads its message in Europe and the kind of people who are particularly attracted to it, we will also try to illustrate the evolution of the European jihadist scene towards new forms of networks. This development – which, as will be explained, is limited to our continent – seems to be strongly influenced by and to follow the same communication environments which determined the propaganda strategy of the IS in Europe. Finally, the paper will present the specific case of Anas el Abboubi, a young Italian jihadist, as a good example to empirically confirm the ideas presented by the authors.

Social networks and swarm dynamics

The analysis of various episodes of radicalization – and the resulting connection of Europe to the different theaters of the global jihad – highlights, in most cases, a common thread. This is particularly true if we focus on the years between the end of 2010 and

² *The Emir’s Speech: Zawahiri Addresses Al-Qaeda*, Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, 25 August 2011.

the beginning of 2013, the time that can be defined as the first wave of European fighters leaving for Syria³.

The study of the linkage⁴ mechanisms that can be observed in this first wave of departures shows the key role played by a galaxy of small cells scattered throughout Europe in connecting aspiring European jihadists and various armed groups in Syria. In this context, the network of groups belonging to the Sharia4⁵ movement appears to be very relevant. The different branches of this network allowed their supporters to get in contact with so-called *facilitators*, people with the necessary contacts to open a privileged channel with a specific jihadist group. For countless aspiring jihadists, getting in contact with these people was the turning point in their original plan.

Studying groups like Sharia4 is particularly important if we focus our attention on the communication model that they have chosen⁶. As we will see, the most modern forms of proselytism and calls to the jihad now coming from Syria and Iraq follow a communication strategy that Europe has already seen in the last five years. In this respect, some of the groups that led to the birth of the Sharia4 universe – such as the English groups al-Muhajiroun and Islam4UK – were precursors of trends which are now easy to observe. The main characteristic of their communication style is the shift from a vertical structure to a *bottom-bottom*, horizontal approach; this creates a communication environment where each addressee and consumer is also a potential issuer and producer of materials. Back in 2009 Islam4UK already relied on a large team of multimedia content creators, who published their products on six official YouTube channels, several websites and a

³ D. Weggemans, E. Bakker, P. Grol, “Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, *Perspective on Terrorism*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2014.

⁴ L. Vidino, *Radicalization, Linkage, and Diversity: Current Trends in Terrorism in Europe*, RAND, 2011.

⁵ For further information on the Sharia4 network, see M. Arnaboldi, *Sharia4: Un ponte tra Europa e Levante*, ISPI Commentary, 8 October 2014.

⁶ L. Vidino, *ISIS Incubators: The Emergence of Salafi Jihadism in Europe*, Al-Mesbar Center, 20 November 2014.

few social network accounts. The group also organized public debates, it held *street da'wa* (street proselytism) sessions twice a week and a variety of events in schools⁷.

The qualitative (and quantitative) leap began in 2010, when the network spread into a galaxy of cells scattered throughout Europe. The new cells are now smaller, but are deeply integrated in the different local contexts. These groups immediately showed their penchant for the use of social media to spread contents and, at the same time, as platforms for dialogue and debate. Since 2008 Anjem Choudary, the current leader of Sharia4UK, has been holding Salafi-jihadist doctrine courses on Paltalk⁸, a software that allows users to create chat and webcam rooms. Its two channels (“Muslims Against Crusaders” and “The Road to Jannah”⁹) can be freely accessed and are not shy about their purpose¹⁰. Although some official Web pages (especially blogs) have been set up for some Sharia4¹¹ groups – thus preserving a certain degree of vertical communication – the members of the various groups have gradually begun to operate autonomously through personal Twitter and Facebook accounts. Shared contents have therefore begun to circulate in a decentralized manner, leading to a staggering increase in terms of potential audience and creative know-how¹².

Once the foundations of the new jihadist propaganda had been laid in Europe at the beginning of the new millennium, the Syrian-

⁷ C.Z. Raymond, *Al Muhajiroun and Islam4uk: the group behind the ban*, ICSR, 2010.

⁸ “Terrorism gang jailed for plotting to blow up London Stock Exchange”, *The Telegraph*, 9 February 2012.

⁹ The two chat rooms can be accessed on

<http://www.paltalk.com/g2/group/1365669164/DisplayGroupDetails.wmt> and <http://www.paltalk.com/people/users/The%20Road%20to%20Jannah/index.wmt> respectively (visited on January 21, 2015).

¹⁰ The Muslim Against Crusaders chat room describes itself as follows: “We believe the shariah shall be implemented into british kaffir society and islam will rule the world” [sic].

¹¹ The Italian branch of Sharia4 also runs its own blog; it is still active at <http://sharia4italy.blogspot.it/> (visited on 21 January 2015).

¹² Jihadist contents use the same arguments and standardized production methods. For instance, the various Sharia4 logos all show the map of the country where they are located, one of its most famous monuments and a flag with the *shabada*, the Islamic declaration of faith.

Iraqi jihad gave European fighters the opportunity to take what they had been doing at a local level to a global scale¹³. Easy to use and cheap, they offer unlimited opportunities to share content and, as a consequence, are difficult to control: these are the strengths that social networks offer to jihadists. Twitter is the most widely used platform, followed by Facebook, Instagram, Ask.FM, Paltalk and Tumblr. Other sites allow users to create ‘flash’ pages where audio, video and text contents can be very easily uploaded, and then saved under one URL address that does not change over time. This is the case of archive.org, manbar.me, and the Italian justpaste.it. Free of any restriction and control on published materials, these websites are the main platforms where contents are stored, while social networks are more often used to spread them.

A study carried out by a group of researchers of Brandeis University looked at the way Twitter is used by some Western jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Using a ‘snowball’ sociological research method, the investigators have shed light on the interconnections between European and local jihadist scenes, detecting – in the social networks of the analyzed accounts – the predominance of some representatives of Western Islamism, including several people linked to the Sharia4¹⁴ network. Leading figures on social media are the above mentioned Anjem Choudary, as well as Ahmad Musa Jibril, an American preacher of Palestinian origins who speaks in favor of *foreign fighters*, and Musa Cerantonio, an Australian imam of Italian origins who has become a star of the Web and openly supports the Islamic State¹⁵. In these social networks, the role of European users (and Western users in general)

¹³ It is usually Western members of these jihadist groups, where their presence is accepted, who are responsible for communication and propaganda.

¹⁴ J. Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: social media networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 38, no. 1, pages 1-22, 2015. In dissemination mechanisms, particular emphasis is placed on the role of women: many Twitter accounts belong to women and have the sole purpose of spreading content. The name of these users is often preceded by the Arabic word *Umm* (“mother”).

¹⁵ J. Carter, S. Maher, P. Neumann, *#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, King’s College, 2014.

is to disseminate contents. The study has highlighted a chain of dissemination of online materials. Islamist organizations that are actively involved in the fight are the primary producers of contents, created through the various media centers that have been established. They have the opportunity to disseminate their products through the above-mentioned platforms and, in some cases, expressly ask mujaheddin to share them. European followers, who usually do not care for primary outlets, republish the messages received from fighters and act as a tertiary source of information¹⁶.

To better understand how this dissemination process works, let us consider the example of *Dabiq*, the most relevant magazine of the Islamic State¹⁷. It is produced by the al-Hayat Media Center (*Markaz al-Hayat lil-I'lam*), one of the four official propaganda centers of the IS¹⁸, which specializes in the production of English language materials. This media center was founded by German Abu Talha al-Almani, also known as Deso Dogg¹⁹ before his conversion to Islam. He is a well-known German-Salafi militant who, after a brief experience as a foreign fighter, decided to devote his time and efforts to propaganda activities alone²⁰. The magazine is published online on file-sharing platforms. Websites

¹⁶ The recent study by E.F. Kohlmann, *Charlie Hebdo and the Jihadi Online Network: Assessing the Role of American Commercial Social Media Platforms*, House Committee of Foreign Affairs, 27 January 2015, also shows the completely opposite mechanism. In some cases, it is the jihadist websites which republishes and thus legitimizes contents primarily published on social networks (an example is the <https://www.alplatformmedia.com/vb/forum>).

¹⁷ In addition to *Dabiq*, in May 2014 two IS official journals had already been published – the first called *Islamic State News*, a more military publication, and *Islamic State Report*, a political one. In December 2014, the al-Hayat Media Center also launched a short magazine aimed specifically at French readers, called *Dar al-Islam*.

¹⁸ Al-Hayat Media Center only deals with English language contents. Other official media centers are al-I'tisam, al-Furqan and the Ajnad Foundation. See M. Al-Ubaydi, B. Price, D. Milton, N. Lahoud, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2014.

¹⁹ Before leaving for the Islamic State, Al-Almani was a rapper and he had produced three albums for the Streetlife Entertainment label under the alias Deso Dogg.

²⁰ *New ISIS Media Company Addresses English, German And French-Speaking Westerners*, MEMRI JTTM, June 2014.

and forums connected to the Islamic State then spread the news and disseminate the link to download the magazine. At this point, the IS mujaheddin add the social media dimension and advertise *Dabiq* through their official accounts. Finally, the followers of these accounts – including Europeans – share and repost, thus allowing the IS to reach a potentially unlimited audience. A self-feeding dissemination process of this kind takes away the role of primary *subject* of information from traditional media and turns them into *objects*, held hostage to uncontrolled news flows. Social media have allowed terrorist organizations to break away from mainstream journalism and to spread contents regardless of the priorities of newspapers and TV channels.

The symbiosis that has developed between the European and the Middle-Eastern jihadist scenes sheds light on the modern mechanisms of influence between individual mujaheddin. Through social media, each jihadist can put pressure on the rest of their contacts. People who have already reached the affiliation group can convince their friends to do the same, giving advice and offering support. This model of interactivity between individuals is essentially horizontal and free from hierarchies. In terms of communication, the current European jihadist landscape has evolved compared to the vertical patterns of the past years; it has few leaders, as it has given more power of influence to the bottom.

A very useful concept when describing the characteristics and dynamics of the various European jihadist cells is that of *swarm*²¹, a term that refers to the group as a whole. First of all, the activities, behavior and ideology of the various groups are shaped by a few individuals only (whom we may call the *choreographers*), whose influence guides the collective flight of the swarm. An illuminating example is given by online conversations: often, during a debate, it becomes clear that some users are going to have the last word or have more weight than others. These mechanisms

²¹ The application of swarm dynamics to the European jihadist scene has already been introduced, in relation to The Netherlands, in *The Transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm dynamics and new strength*, General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, June 2014.

of collective control are also useful to ensure cohesion and define the general policy of the group. However, the fact that the decision-making power is shared by several people does not mean that the different groups do not acknowledge leaders. The path traced by the major international jihadist networks is often taken as the first reference model followed by local groups. Secondly, the various groups have great collective action and movement capabilities. By feeding constant flows of information on social networks, the members of these groups are able to start behavioral escalation mechanisms and to coordinate their actions, thus rapidly reaching the critical mass required for the success of their operations (demonstrations, meetings, protests, and fundraising activities). Finally, swarms are very flexible, both internally and externally. When a member is arrested, has left or is absent, he/she is easily and quickly replaced. Since they do not depend on individual key figures, these groups need no authorizations or opinions to organize events, and each member has the opportunity to communicate and exchange information and ideas with another member. In the long term, choreographers themselves risk being excluded from the group. The various swarms in Europe can take on different forms, adapting to specific environmental conditions and protecting themselves from external attacks.

On a microscopic level, smaller, more cohesive circles can be identified within the jihadist swarms. Often made up of members from the same city, these particularly close-knit circles are kept together by friendship ties or similar ideological views. Their limited size allows for frequent meetings: from gatherings at the mosque, to study groups on doctrine. Individuals – as minimal units of the swarm – can belong to more than one circle and serve as bridges between them, thus creating larger units and allowing people who are socially distant to get in contact with each other. Very similar structures also exist on social networks, although the boundaries of a circle are much less clearly defined in the online world. In some cases, European fighters at the front remain in contact with their original circle through the Internet.

Despite the continuity and replication of European communication models in Syria and Iraq, these have not caused the same redefinition of the local jihadist landscape. This may be due to a number of reasons. First of all, unlike their European counterpart, the Eastern jihadist scene is highly formal: its organization is based on closed groups – which are often in contrast with each other – and a clearly defined chain of command. Also, several organizations have set up internal systems to limit the influence of European fighters, such as the ban to use social networks or the imposition of specific propaganda contents at specific times²². It is believed that only the most trustworthy militiamen are free in their use of social media. Environmental causes also play a role: mujaheddin do not always have access to a mobile network or to a source of power to recharge the batteries of their phones.

The intended messages and the target audience

The analysis of the contents spread through social networks by the mujaheddin who fight in the Syrian civil war poses some *qualitative* problems and issues when trying to make a distinction between messages that may be regarded as ‘personal’ (freely written and disseminated from the various accounts) and those that are somehow imposed to fighters by their affiliation front. As it is not always possible to distinguish between the two, but we will try to at least identify the different purposes of the various contents. As for the *quantitative* analysis of messages, we will make reference to the results of two previous studies on the use of Twitter by Western jihadists in the Middle East: an analysis by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence by King’s College in London²³ and the study by Brandeis University that was mentioned earlier²⁴.

²² J. Klausen, (2015).

²³ J. Carter, S. Maher, P. Neumann, (2014).

²⁴ J. Klausen, (2015).

The results of these studies clearly show the predominance of doctrine-related messages on social networks. Among these, there are references to Salafi principles, notes that glorify martyrdom and references to key figures of global jihadism, including Awlaki and Osama bin Laden. As far as doctrine goes, different groups often tend to delegitimize each other. *Takfir* (“charge of unbelief”) messages sent between rival factions are not unusual, and groups may call each other *kharijita*²⁵. It is interesting to note that the importance of doctrine has withstood the changes in communication and propaganda activities of jihadist groups of the last ten years and it is still the most widely discussed topic. Part of the reason lies in the attempt by jihadist groups to obtain a certain theological legitimacy. The Islamic State, for instance, in the above-mentioned Dabiq magazine, almost always quotes *hadith*²⁶ from the Muslim and Bukhari collections, which are universally recognized as the most reliable²⁷. On this basis it can be gathered that the main purpose of using the Internet is still proselytism, although it is now aimed more markedly at jihadism than in the past. The number of independent preachers and non-institutionalized platforms has dramatically increased, while many figures from non-jihadist Salafism have recently embraced a more condescending view of *foreign fighters*²⁸.

Updates from the battlefield and information on life on the frontline are also very frequent. Contents may be extremely varied and show different degrees of violence. The *continuum* is so wide that it includes extreme videos of crucifixions or children holding decapitated heads, as well as images of mujaheddin pouring milk

²⁵ The term “kharijita” originated at the time of the first Islamic civil war to indicate the faction of those Muslims who, after supporting ‘Ali and hindering Mu‘awiya in the fight for the succession to ‘Uthman, the third caliph, decided to stop their activities and accepted an arbitrate. In jihadism, the term is now used to indicate that a group is not compliant with the true spirit of Islam: the word comes from an Arabic root which means “to exit”, “to detach oneself”.

²⁶ The *Hadith* are the tales of the *Sunna*, i.e. the Muslim tradition. For the purpose of this paper, not all *hadith* have the same value; their relevance depends on the reliability of the transmission chain.

²⁷ It is not by chance that their collections are called *sahibani*, “the two true ones”.

²⁸ General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), (2014).

for their kittens²⁹. Given this vast heterogeneity, it is not unusual to come across pictures showing the daily life of *foreign fighters* who go shopping, give the *zakat*³⁰ to people in need or read the Quran o the battlefield. However, some doctrine-related messages are included even in this type of contents. Very often mujaheddin are shown with their index finger pointing upwards (the sign of the *tawhid*³¹, the unicity of God), or smiling when they are dead, to show their martyrdom. Finally, several videos show the infliction of punishments according to the *shari'ah*, while others show public *bay'a* ceremonies (loyalty oath to a leader). In these cases, these are mainly projections of power: as a group, the various fronts want to show their influence in the context where they operate; at individual level, fighters try to present their experience from different angles. On the one hand, some mujaheddin boast heroic and romantic models of presumed humanitarian efforts to free the Muslim people from oppression. Others focus on the odd fun that the jihad offers them, and others emphasize its gangsterism, action and danger.

Messages against enemy factions, often accompanied by pictures of the innocent victims that they have caused, are less frequent. The main trend is the dehumanization of the rival: while dead companions are shown in serene poses, killed enemies are often reduced to a pile of torn bodies. Finally, mujaheddin use the network to exchange information, coordinate their actions and, rarely, send general threats to the West.

Such variety of propaganda contents has made the jihadist message attractive to an unprecedented number of people³². As a

²⁹ One Twitter account is exclusively devoted to cats and mujaheddin in the Islamic State; it can be accessed on @ISILCats (Islamic State of Cat).

³⁰ The *zakat*, the third pillar of Islam, is a tax that each Muslim must pay to help the poorest sections of the population.

³¹ The *tawhid* is one of the core principles of Wahhabi ideology. It may seem like an empty concept, but it has important repercussions, since it is the opposite of the *shirk* ("polytheism") that several radical thinkers see, for instance, in the Christian Trinity or in democracy, regarded as a way to elevate the power of man at the same level as God's.

³² *Foreign fighters are joining jihadi groups in 'unprecedented' numbers*, Public Radio International, 31 October 2014.

consequence, the community of *foreign fighters* that we now find in Syria and Iraq is difficult to define as a whole. Given its internal variety, it takes a certain analytical effort to identify the possible causes that attract these people to the jihadist discourse. Their diversity creates a wide *continuum* which includes the most disparate cases. The multiple nature of the phenomenon suggests a more targeted, *ad hoc* approach to consider each case individually. For this reason psychological causes are usually accepted as an explanation, considering that different subjects react in different ways depending on the message they receive. A study by CPDSI (Center for the Prevention of Sectarian Deviations of Islam)³³ has highlighted some patterns in the influence of propaganda based on the type of content and the characteristics of the recipient. The results of this analysis show that people who suffer from anxiety and/or depression are particularly sensitive to strongly doctrinal messages, which reassure them on the uncertainty of the future by presenting a life system based on a limited set of clear values. The case of people who have grown up in excessively tolerant or atheist families is very similar: they are more prone to find comfort in messages that, contrary to their family context, impose clear doctrinal rules. As for younger subjects, many of them seem to be mainly attracted by the ‘adventurous’ side of the jihad: they believe they can live a videogame experience in real life and are particularly sensitive to messages and videos of people and friends of the same age from the frontline, especially if they depict action-packed, frenzied raids. Finally, those who suffer from social exclusion or have difficulties integrating may feel strongly attracted to the promises and perspectives of a much simpler life, which would allow them to easily access elitist inclusion dynamics, invert power relations and reduce the necessary effort to live a socially fulfilling life. An example of propaganda aimed at this kind of audience is the announcement made by al-Baghdadi in the

³³ *La métamorphose opérée chez le jeune par les nouveaux discours terroristes: recherche-action sur la mutation du processus d'endoctrinement et d'embrigadement dans l'islam radical*, Cpdsi, November 2014. See also the related article, “Dépressif et issu d'une famille athée: le profil type du jihadiste français”, *France 24*, 18 November 2014.

summer of 2014, when he promised grants to marriages between members of the Islamic State³⁴.

However, there are some objective environmental characteristics of the Syrian-Iraq jihad which cannot be overlooked when analyzing the boom of *foreign fighters* in the last four years. These include the fact that Syria is easy to reach (and to leave), and the attractive prospect of fighting in the cradle of the Arab world and in the context of what some foreigners have defined “a five-star jihad”³⁵.

The later evolution of the jihadist galaxy into more and more sophisticated forms of quasi-states, which culminated in the proclamation of the caliphate by the IS, has a number of several highly relevant implications. It is possible that people who were not entirely sure about leaving were ultimately convinced by the presumed organization and transparency of the Da‘esh. Fascinated by a more user-friendly narrative than the pompous Qaedist speeches of the past, modern jihadists do not simply aspire to be on the battlefield, they hope to settle down in a State.

An Italian case study: Anas el Abboubi

Italy seems to be touched in a relatively marginal way by these dynamics. The number of Italian *foreign fighters* is much lower than is the case for most other European countries: slightly more than 50, compared to more than 1,000 in France, about 600 in the UK and Germany, and 400 in a relatively small country like Belgium. Additionally, the local jihadist scene seems to be in a very early stage, both online and offline. However, in recent months some cases have emerged which replicate the same mech-

³⁴ “ISIS leader offers marriage grants to militants”, *Al Arabiya*, 29 August 2014.

³⁵ For instance, former English fighter – now deceased – Ifthekar Jaman spoke in favor of the Syrian jihad on several occasions. He said mujaheddin are allowed to live in fully equipped houses, enjoy a number of free goods and, in some cases, receive a wage. See for instance “British Muslim who bragged on Newsnight that he was fighting a ‘holy war’ alongside Al Qaeda group in Syria has been killed”, *Daily Mail Online*, 17 December 2013.

anisms that have been observed in central and northern Europe for some years.

The most revealing case is probably that of Anas el Abboubi, one of the few Italian jihadists who seem to have joined the militia of the Islamic State in Syria. Investigations on el Abboubi began in September 2012, when the Digos (General Investigations and Special Operations Division) in Brescia, alarmed by some statements made by the young man during a visit to the police station, decided to open a file on him³⁶. Born in Marrakech in 1992, he moved to Italy at the age of seven and settled with his family in Vobarno, a small town in the quiet Valle Sabbia, 40 km from Brescia³⁷. The family is described as well integrated and Anas seems to favor Italian, which he speaks with the strong accent like any Brescia native would, over Arabic. As a teenager he attended a technical high school in Brescia and developed a passion for rap. He became relatively well-known on the local hip-hop scene under the name McKhalif³⁸.

But something changed very rapidly at the beginning of 2012. Almost overnight he turned from a rebellious teenager who enjoyed binge drinking and light drugs into a rapper inspired by Islam and then into a Muslim militant³⁹. In the summer of that year he abandoned rap altogether and described music as a *haram* (forbidden by religion) activity. He began to wear long white tunics and broke off many of his friendships. He also began to spend a lot of time online, visiting jihadist websites and forums. He created various profiles on Facebook (Anas Shakur, Anas Abdu Shakur) and Twitter (@anas_abdu), and changed the contents of the YouTube channel (McKhalif) that he had used as a rapper, in order to make it more compliant with his new ideology⁴⁰.

³⁶ <http://questure.poliziadistato.it/Brescia/articolo-6-91-56067-1.htm> (visited on 21 January 2015).

³⁷ U. Vallini, "A colloquio con papà El Abboubi", *Valle Sabbia News*, 15 June 2013.

³⁸ R. Mora, "Dr. Domino, il fenomeno del rap", *Giornale di Brescia*, 28 January 2013.

³⁹ Interview with police officers, Brescia, October 2013; A. Troncana, "His mother: He is a great boy. His schoolmates: A taleban", *Corriere della Sera*, 13 June 2013.

⁴⁰ http://www.youtube.com/user/MCKHALIF_ (visited on 21 January 2015).

Investigators were impressed by the speed at which el Abboubi's topics, expressions and opinions had taken on increasingly radical tones. In September 2012, when he started to be monitored, his online activities only showed strong anti-American and anti-Israeli feelings. A mere couple of months later, the young man from Brescia was posting jihadist texts (including the omnipresent text by Anwar al Awlaki "The 44 ways to support the jihad"), he was looking for manuals on weapons and instructions to make explosives using materials available on the market, and he translated jihadist texts⁴¹.

El Abboubi also began to produce his own propaganda materials. He made a video called "La vera civiltà è questa?" (Is this true civilization?) that criticized Western civilization and depicted Pope Benedict XVI as a vampire with a bloody face and hands. He also posted a poem in praise of the jihad; its Italian rhymes clearly come from his hip-hop past as a younger man: "Martyrdom seduces me, I want to die with an armed hand, I keep my crosshair on the crusade, I am the bullet hitting you... I am thirsty for battle, the jihad against Italy... the enemy fears death, the *mujahid* knows this, France [sic] oppresses the weak, the *mujahid* will kill it"⁴².

Towards the end of 2012 el Abboubi openly expressed his desire to leave Italy and fight for the jihad. As he had no contacts with facilitators in the real world, he turned to the Web. Through the Internet, he made contact with several representatives of the Italian jihadist scene. However, many of el Abboubi's contacts – the most powerful ones – were not in Italy but abroad. Through Twitter and Facebook he contacted Millatu Ibrahim, an important German Salafi group, and followed many lessons on Paltalk held by Omar Bakri, one of the founders, in the Nineties, of the so-called *Londonistan* (the London jihadist scene) who is now exiled in Lebanon. El Abboubi also made contact with Anjem Choudary,

⁴¹ Interview with police officers, Brescia, October 2013. When he was arrested, el Abboubi was about to translate the book *The Missing Obligation: Expelling the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula*, written by the leader of the Egyptian jihad, Mohammed Abdus Salam Faraj.

⁴² Order to implement a precautionary measure in the el Abboubi case, Court of Brescia, 28496/12, 10 June 2013.

Bakri's right arm, who later founded the Sharia4UK movement. El Abboubi developed a particular interest for the Belgian branch of the movement, Sharia4Belgium. The group, initially small and mainly active on the Internet, organized a few demonstrations and surprised Belgian authorities by channeling dozens of Belgian Muslims towards the fights in Syria. In December 2012 el Abboubi bought a plane ticket to Brussels to meet the leaders of Sharia4Belgium in person. However, the meeting was cancelled at the last minute, because several representatives of the group had been arrested just a few days before el Abboubi's departure⁴³.

Although he never managed to meet his Sharia4 contacts in person, el Abboubi still decided to create its Italian branch. On 23 August 2012, the Web page of Sharia4Indonesia celebrated the birth of Sharia4Italy and sent its best wishes to el Abboubi⁴⁴. Sharia4Italy was actually a significantly smaller group than the English and Belgian branches of the movement and it only involved a couple of el Abboubi's friends. Trying to imitate the deeds of the most developed branches of the organization, el Abboubi and his friends practiced the *street da'wa*: they took pictures of themselves in the center of Brescia wearing tunics and showing the Italian flag with the *shahada*⁴⁵ and went to the mountains to do physical exercise⁴⁶.

⁴³ Interview with police officers, Brescia, October 2013; L. Damiani, "Manette al padre di 'Sharia4Italy', terrorista internazionale" (The international terrorist, father of 'Sharia4Italy', in handcuffs), *Corriere della Sera*, 12 June 2013; W. Petenzi, "L'aspirante bombarolo sgridato dal padre per cento euro spariti" (The aspiring bomber told off by his father for stealing 100 euros), *Corriere della Sera*, 14 June 2013; "Blitz antiterrorismo, arrestato studente marocchino. Cercava obiettivi da colpire in Italia" (Anti-terrorism raid, Moroccan student arrested. He was looking for targets in Italy), *Il Giorno*, Brescia, 13 June 2013; W. Petenzi, "Post e contatti da Vobarno con i combattenti in Siria" (Posts and contacts from Vobarno with the fighters in Syria), *Corriere della Sera*, 21 June 2013.

⁴⁴ <http://sharia4indonesia.com/2012/08/lahirnya-gerakan-sharia4italy/> (visited on 12 December 2013); interview with police officers, Brescia, October 2013; L. Damiani, (2013); W. Petenzi, (2013).

⁴⁵ See note 12.

⁴⁶ Interview with police officers, Brescia, October 2013; picture available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=307303602715564&set=pb.100003077808791.-2207520000.1385657145.&type=3&theater> (visited on December 5, 2013).

El Abboubi also created the Sharia4Italy blog, where he published strong criticism against capitalism and man-made judicial systems, and called for an Islamic system as the solution to bring about peace and social justice⁴⁷. Just like the texts of his previous blog (banca-islamica.blogspot.it), most of el Abboubi's writings criticized the Western banking system and promoted the dissemination of information on the Islamic banking system. "Say no to interests!", said a leaflet circulated by the group in capital letters, "Join us and present an Islamic banking system to your city council"⁴⁸.

In May 2013 police investigators, who had observed el Abboubi's rapid radicalization with growing concern, became extremely nervous when the young man searched for relevant sites in the city of Brescia on Google Maps⁴⁹. They feared that el Abboubi – who had not managed to get in contact with the facilitators for his trip to Syria or any other country where he could join a jihadist group – had decided to carry out his own terrorist attacks in Italy. On 12 June 2013 the Digos arrested el Abboubi, charged under article 270 *quinquies* of the Italian Criminal Code for engaging in training and using information for terrorist purposes⁵⁰.

On 18 June el Abboubi's lawyers filed a request for his release from prison to the Court of Review, stating that their client was only an occasional and passive consumer of jihadist propaganda⁵¹.

⁴⁷ See note 11.

⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=278023758976882&set=pb.100003077808791.-2207520000.1385651977.&type=3&theater> (visited on 5 December 2013).

⁴⁹ The sites are Brescia's train station, the Goito police station, the Crystal Palace building, piazza della Loggia and the Kennedy overpass. Pre-trial detention order in the el Abboubi case, Court of Brescia, 7456/11, 10 June 2013; W. Petenzi, "Nel mirino dello studente pure questore e piazza Loggia" (The Chief of Police and piazza Loggia among the student's targets), *Corriere della Sera*, 13 June 2013.

⁵⁰ Order of application of supervision measure, Court of Brescia, 28496/12, 10 June 2013.

⁵¹ Court of Review of Brescia, 348/2013, 1 July 2013; interviews with the public prosecutor of Brescia, Antonio Chiappani, and with el Abboubi's lawyer, Nicola Mannatrizio, Brescia, September and October 2013; W. Petenzi, " 'Terrorista' a Vobarno, la procura pronta a ricorrere in Cassazione" ('Terrorist' in Vobarno, the public prosecutor to appeal to the Court of Cassation), *Corriere della Sera*, 2 July 2013.

According to the defense, el Abboubi had only viewed some jihadist files but had not saved or shared them. Also, they maintained that the few files he had sent to other people did not contain specific training instructions, but were similar to documentaries that were available for anyone to watch on television (according to his lawyers, this was supported by the fact that most of those files came from YouTube and not from password-protected jihadist websites). Finally, they continued, el Abboubi had researched various sites in Brescia out of mere curiosity: these were places he regularly visited, so he had no reason to view them on the Internet since he could have surveyed them in person. The argument was accepted by the Court and el Abboubi was released. In November 2013 the Court of Cassation upheld the decision⁵².

However, by that time el Abboubi had already left Italy. In August 2013, he created a new Facebook profile page using the name Anas Al-Italy and indicated “Aleppo, Syria”, as his place of residence⁵³. In what may be interpreted as a mockery against Italian authorities, on 6 September el Abboubi wrote: “Free to run as a swallow in the sky”. Three days later he posted a praise for Syrian children: “Children here are very dignified; despite their dramatic situation and misery, every time I offer them money or food, they refuse as if they were already rich enough”.

El Abboubi’s new Facebook page, before being abruptly closed in January 2014, was very active and he regularly posted pictures, links and comments, many of which triggered heated discussions among his more than 200 contacts. The “Risposta al fondamentalismo laico” (Answer to non-religious fundamentalism) video is particularly interesting: el Abboubi, speaking in front of a camera, presents his spiritual testament. For 15 minutes and adopting a pace that is reminiscent of his past as a hip hop artist, he rails against Western society, which he condemns as “perverse and gloomy”.

⁵² “El Abboubi resta libero, ma è ‘scomparso’” (El Abboubi is free, but he has ‘disappeared’), *Brescia Oggi*, 9 November 2013.

⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/anas.alitaly.7> (visited on 24 December 2013).

In the opening minutes of the video, el Abboubi talks about his detention in Italy: he complains that the authorities tried to subjugate and to terrorize him, and labeled him an extremist without attempting to understand his positions and rejection of Western society. “I am one of the many immigrants whose childhood is rooted in this Europe, consumed by hypocrisy”, continues el Abboubi before criticizing the West in all its aspects. “Who should I integrate my principles with?”, he asks sarcastically before accusing Italian society of a series of faults, including individualism, sexual promiscuity, discrimination and lack of respect for the elderly. Apart from some limited references to the Islamic banking system and the Sykes-Picot agreement, el Abboubi’s speech makes no reference to global politics and it appears simply an accusation against the values (or lack thereof) of the Italian and Western society.

It is interesting to note that the comments to el Abboubi’s posts often generated a lively debate among his Facebook friends. Some of them praise him with admiration, others have very different stances. Many of those who criticize him are women who, judging from their Facebook profiles, are not Muslims. However, there are Muslims – even observant Salafis – who criticize el Abboubi’s position on the jihad from a theological point of view. Several members of the online Italian jihadist community reply to this criticism stating that fighting in Syria is a legitimate jihad and praise those who do it. These debates, that often unfold into hundreds of posts, provide an interesting view of the different opinions and groups found in the Italian Islamic community, including the more conservative ones.

Conclusion

In recent years, propaganda has come to play a fundamental role in the activities of jihadist groups. Helped by the huge potential offered by social networks, it is high in the agenda of terrorist organizations and has transformed the structure and operating frame of the European jihadist scene.

This chapter has tried to show how the current use of social networks is the result of a series of innovations introduced in Europe in the last five years by the farsighted approach of the Sharia4 movement. Their success, combined with the massive linkage from Europe to the Levant, has contributed to export the model at global level.

This exchange of expertise in the use of social networks has had two significant consequences. First of all, there appears to be a close relation between the European (and North American) jihadist scene and the jihadists who fight on the Middle Eastern front (the destination of most fighters issued from the Old Continent). This has led to the coordination of operations (sometimes limited to a strong influence), shared ideologies and dissemination of knowledge. Secondly, the global jihadist scene is now able to reach an incredibly wide audience and can count on an unprecedented heterogeneity among its members.

Starting from communication innovations, the European jihadist scene has structurally changed (and is still evolving). Its organization has become more and more horizontal and shows swarm dynamics. This translates into high flexibility, cohesion and the absence of hierarchy. Anas el Abboubi's case clearly shows that similar mechanisms are developing also in Italy, while they may still be at a very early stage.

The European Islamist theater should not be seen as a mere periphery of the primary jihadist groups who are active in the Arab-Muslim world. Its characteristics are actually more important than ever to foresee the possible future trends of the Islamist landscape in general, especially in terms of communication, propaganda and the use of technologies. The European scenario, however, is still highly dependent on the major reference groups; without them, it is reasonable to expect a significant decrease in the production of contents.

6. The Discourse of ISIS: Messages, Propaganda and Indoctrination

Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee

Following its successful campaign to control Mosul and other Sunni areas, ISIS sought to achieve the maximum benefit from these advancements. The shock that resulted from the quick fall of Mosul and the unorganized retreats of Iraqi forces helped media outlets of the terrorist organization disseminating messages glorifying its “victories” and promising a new Islamic State. “Remaining and expanding” became its main slogan, stressing that it represents a godly promise of a time when Islam will prevail all over the world.

The medium and the message

ISIS developed new outlets and managed to efficiently use social media and some genres of traditional media to communicate its messages. It also found allies, mostly individuals adhering to its ideology or inspired by its ‘successes’. Among these media outlets are:

- Jihadi websites and forums that connect jihadists all over the world. The rise of ISIS and its conflict with Al-Qaeda (AQ) and some of its branches in the region deepened divisions in the landscape of online jihadism. Some of the websites became mouthpieces of ISIS; others maintained some degree of neutrality or directed their loyalty to AQ.

- Publications and online magazines: ISIS published several newspapers, online magazines and pamphlets, mainly through its Al-Hayat Center for Media, Al-I'tissam Institute and Al-Furqan. The number of publications increased following the fall of Mosul. In July 2014, the first issue of its online magazine, *Dabiq*, was published in several languages. The magazine's main objectives were recruitment, indoctrination and dissemination of propaganda.
- Visual products such as films and short videos that portray military successes of the organization or the lives of citizens under its authority. One famous example was a series of films titled "The Clash of Swords", which followed ISIS's military operations against Iraqi forces prior and following its invasion of Mosul.
- Social networks, especially Twitter and Facebook, were main tools for ISIS propaganda. Whether through official accounts or those of supporters and sympathizers, ISIS managed to create an efficient 'news agency' that disseminated and amplified its version of events.
- Traditional media, such as Al-Bayan radio station that opened in Mosul on August 2014; billboards and murals carrying its slogans and teachings; and statements and documents that conveyed its instructions.

As its territory was expanding, ISIS felt the need not only to develop its outreach but also to speak to a wider and more diversified audience. Its propaganda was based on an elementary kind of market segmentation. There were some common themes repeated in its discourse and propaganda that gave a sense of consistency and represented the organization's main narrative. The notions that the Islamic State is "here to stay", that "all true Muslims should be part of its jihad" and that "it will prevail against its opponents" were very recurrent.

However, the group's messages vary, depending on who is the speaker and who are the audience. Its key leaders, such as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi or the spokesperson, Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani, sought to consistently represent those major themes

without concerning themselves with details of governance or daily fighting. Lower ranking members have been closely dealing with more specific situations, whereas the highly decentralized network of sympathizers have enjoyed the liberty of anonymous online activism to act more freely.

ISIS combines both the media structure of a terrorist organization that relies heavily on cyber activities and underground distribution of materials, and an embryonic propaganda machine of a state. According to a report by the Counter Terrorism Center (CTC)¹, each *wilaya* (Province) had its largely autonomous media bureau. However, ISIS eventually tried to impose a more central control over its media activities, especially after the beginning of U.S.-led military operations and the circulation of videos and pictures showing its militants killing Sunni tribesmen. ISIS also attempted to influence the coverage of Western journalism, as was the case with the German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer, who was granted access to its territory, or the British reporter John Cantlie, who was taken hostage by ISIS and allowed to write an article for the group's magazine.

According to a CTC groups report, ISIS appears to have temporarily abandoned official social media channels in favor of unofficial channels and social forums. All of this makes tracking ISIS on social media a challenge, as the content they post on unofficial forums becomes mixed in with the large amount of unofficial content produced by activists, supporters, etc². In general, ISIS directs its messages to different categories of audience: the local population living under its authority, the external world – including Muslims living outside its territories – and the non-Muslims, especially Western governments and citizens. The messages differ in their content, language and sophistication, depending on the category of people they are targeting.

¹ Mohammed Al-Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton and Bryan, December 2014. *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, WEST POINT: THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER.

² *ibid*

Local population

Building legitimacy and governance

ISIS's most sophisticated and diverse discourse is the one targeting local population in the territories under its control. There, the group had to handle multiple tasks, starting with the consolidation of its power over the territory and its population. It also needed to practice governance which is the most challenging task because it required major transformation from the structure and operational nature of an underground insurgent organization into one similar to a totalitarian government.

The propaganda targeting the local population focused on legitimizing the rule of ISIS and presenting it as a model of an 'Islamic State' that represents the aspirations of the population.

I don't promise you luxury and lavishness (...), but promise you what Allah has promised His believers: the establishment of their Khilafa on the land

said Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in his first public appearance in the Hadbaa Mosque of Mosul³. ISIS tried to present its rule as a salvation for the Sunni population in Iraq and Syria, portraying an eternal and missionary struggle against *Rafidha* (Shi'a) in Iraq and *Nussairiya* (Alawites) in Syria. In the City Document⁴, which was published on July 12, 2014, the group defined itself as

soldiers of the Islamic State (...) who took upon us the burden of restoring the glories of Islamic Khilafa and press against the injustice that our people and brothers had suffered.

ISIS's first message to the local population was: "We saved you and restored your dignity", which naturally leads to the next message: "You have to obey our rules". By presenting itself as the

³ "Awal Dhuhur lil Khalifa Al-Daishi Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi", *Al-Arabiya*, 2014, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2014/07/05/ظهوره%20لأول%20مرة>.html.

⁴ "Daish Yusdir Wathiqat Al-Madina fi Ninewa", *Al-Arabiya*, 2014, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/2014/06/13/بيان%20داعش>.html.

realization of an authentic Islamic rule which all ‘true’ Muslims longed for, ISIS delegitimized any other ideology or organization that could claim such status, especially in its two major strongholds: Raqqa and Mosul. It has shown very little tolerance towards other Sunni groups who tried to claim some credits for the “liberation” of those cities. When some local tribes refused to recognize its authority, ISIS did not refrain from punishing them brutally, as shown by the massacres it committed against the tribes of *Shueitat* in Dir Azzur and *Al-Bu Nimr* in Anbar⁵. The terrorist organization tried to make clear that its protection is extended only to those who prove to be ‘true Sunnis’ and accept its definition of their ‘Sunnism’.

Relying on its jurisprudential interpretation of Islam, ISIS portrays Sunni groups or communities that reject to pledge allegiance to its Khalifa as *murtadeen* (Apostates) or *Mumtanieen* (abstained). The former usually applies to groups and tribes that fought AQ and ISIS from the beginning, such as tribal forces in Anbar from *Al-Bu Nimr*, *Al-Jaghaffa* and *Ajjubour*. Tribes that inhabit ISIS-controlled territory and refuse to pledge allegiance to its Khalifa are called ‘abstained’. This is how the tribe of *Shueitat* in Dir Azzur-Syria was declared an “abstained group”, which justified the massacre committed against them by ISIS⁶.

Realizing that legitimacy is not something that can be secured only by force, ISIS sought to present an appealing model of governance. In this respect, its propaganda machine was very active, portraying a state of collective contentment among residents of controlled territories. In Vice’s documentary entitled ‘The Islamic State’⁷, we see members of *al-Hisba diwan* (Monitoring) walking

⁵ M. Georgy, “ISIS Militants Kill Over 300 Members Of Defiant Iraqi Tribe”, *The Huffington Post*, M., 2014. [Online], http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/02/isis-albu-nimr-massacre_n_6089678.html; J. Varghese, “Mass Grave of 230 from a Syrian Tribe Killed by ISIS Found”, 2014, [Online], <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/mass-grave-230-syrian-tribe-killed-by-isis-found-video-617701>.

⁶ Badr Al-Ibrahim, “Daesh Wal-Wahabbiya Wal-Takfir: Al-Ikhtilaf Wal-Tashabuh”, *Al-Akhbar*, 2 July 2014, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/214666>.

⁷ *The Islamic State*. 2014. [Film] s.l.: Vice News.



Figure 6.1 – From left (above) to right (below): Boxes of aid carrying ISIS’s slogan; distribution of gas cylinders; bags of aid with the group’s slogan; the Institute of the Islamic State for Religious Sciences in Atharib; and a converted police car with ISIS’s slogan

on the streets and asking people about their needs and complaints and monitoring the prices of the basic needs. As part of its propaganda, the group published pictures of its social services, such as providing cheap medical care, distributing aid or gas to local residents, opening classes to teach Quran, reaching out to children and patrolling the cities in police cars⁸.

ISIS’s online activities propagated this image of efficient governance and sought to put it in the context of comparison with the Iraqi and Syrian central governments. The Iraqi government has

⁸ This video, for example, shows members of the group distributing food for households in a Syrian village: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9j27z2roYto>. See also: L. Dearden, “Islamic State: Propaganda photos claim to show Isis militants delivering food aid in Rutba”, *The Independent*, 2014. [Online], <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/islamic-state-propaganda-photos-claim-to-show-isis-militants-delivering-food-aid-in-rutba-9721349.html>.

notoriously failed in handling the rampant corruption in its administration and security forces or rehabilitating its infrastructures and public services. The corruption and mistreatment of the local Sunni population by the Iraqi government were major causes of its unpopularity in the Sunni areas. ISIS sought to use this to its advantage and continues to do so via the propaganda showing a strong connection with the local population. One ISIS-affiliated account called a “Diary of a *Muhajira* (an immigrant woman)” published a list of ‘facts’ about the group, that makes the argument for efficient and fair governance in order to attract more Muslim immigrants to ISIS-controlled territories.

The list says: 1) We don’t pay rents here, houses are given for free; 2) We pay neither electric no water bills; 3) We are given monthly groceries; 4) Monthly allowances are given not only to husband and wife (wives) but also for children; 5) Medical check ups and medications are free - The Islamic State pays on your behalf; 6) You can live here even if you don’t speak Arabic. You



Figure 6.2 - Examples of ISIS’ governance activities as portrayed by its supporters

can find almost any race and nationality here; 7) Every newly married couple is given 700USD as a gift. (I'm not sure if it's still available now); 8) You don't have to pay taxes (if you're Muslim); 9) No one conducts business during prayer time and you can see people leave their shops open and pray either in the masjid or near their shops; 10) The number of mixed marriages and mixed-race children are high. It's beautiful to witness brotherhood with no racism.

Of course, there is no mention of how ISIS can provide those services and what its sources of funding are. More importantly, this "narratives" contradict a lot of information coming from the local population in those areas. One Facebook (FB) page, called "Mosul Eyes", has been communicating what's happening in Mosul through the voices of real people living there. The picture published on this FB page portrayed the population living in dire conditions, lacking services, under oppression and terror.

Salafization of society

As a Salafist organization, ISIS believes that justice has no other meaning but submission to the Sharia rule. Accordingly, a just State is, by definition, an Islamic Salafist State. Therefore, people have to follow its mandates as the group 'purifies' society from non-Islamic rules and practices. The group installed a large billboard in Mosul showing one of its militants placing one of his feet on what seems to be books of law, while carrying a machine gun in his hand; on the side of the billboard Arabic words read: *Under my foot man-made laws*. Another one had this sentence written in Arabic: "We want to have nothing but god's law to judge us". A similar message was seen in a mural with the slogan "The Islamic State: a book guides and a sword brings victory"⁹.

The local Radio, Al-Bayan, broadcasts religious sermons and lectures that teach the audience about the superiority of God's rule, instead of those 'invented' by man. The *diwans* that have become 'ministries' published their instructions to the residents on

⁹ A.J. Al-Tamimi, *The Islamic State Billboards and Murals of Tel Afar and Mosul*, s.l.: Pundicity, 7 January 2015.



Figure 6.3 - ISIS's billboard with the slogan: "under my foot man-made laws"

documents containing the name of the diwan and the slogan of ISIS, which is later distributed manually or posted on the walls of mosques or related institutions.

One of ISIS's most important documents was "The City Document", which was meant to imitate another historical document declared by prophet Mohammed to be the main law that regulates political and social relations in the first Islamic city-state, Al-Madina. The document announced the major principles of ISIS's authority in Mosul. Article 4 emphasized that

under our rule, people are secure and safe; there is no life better than one under an Islamic rule that guarantees its subjects their rights and restores justice to whoever was oppressed. Anybody who was disgruntled by our actions is today a safe subject, unless (he) contests or disregards.

The document declared that governmental property had passed under the authority of the Khalifa and the Islamic state would protect the private property of Muslims. It urged Muslims to attend the prayers and women to abide by the Islamic veil (*niqab*). Article 13 stipulated that 'polytheist shrines' – a reference to

Shi'a, Yazidi religious places and Sunni mosques built on graves – will be destroyed, according to the commandments of Prophet Muhammad. There was a warning that the terrorist groups will not tolerate any factions threatening ‘the unity of Muslims’, and any armed group carrying a flag other than the flag of the Islamic State.

The document ends by stating the group’s ideological position which will dictate its indoctrination policy. It addresses the population of Mosul with these words:

You have tried all kinds of secular regimes, the monarchy, the republican, the Ba’athist and the Rafidhiya (a degrading term for Shi’as), and you were stung by their fire and flames. Now it is the age of the Islamic state and its Khalifa, Abu Bakr Al-Qarashi, and you will see – by God’s help - how hugely different an unjust secular government... and a Qarashi Imama whose approach is the god’s revelation¹⁰...

ISIS issued a statement on 14 July 2014, announcing that the Friday prayer sermon would present an exclusive reading and explanation of the “City Document”¹¹. The group uses the mosques as platforms for indoctrination and as an important tool to legitimize its rule and re-create the “true” Muslim society. In most jihadi literature, including an influential book titled “The Management of Savagery”¹² written by an Islamist strategist under the name of “Abu Bakr Annaji”, there is an ambivalent attitude towards Muslim societies. On the one hand, jihadists portrays themselves as the ‘protectors’ of those societies and, on the other hand, they deeply distrust ordinary Muslims and consider them contaminated by the manners of regimes that have been governing them for a long time. ISIS expressed this ambivalence by inculcat-

¹⁰ “Daish Yusdir Wathiqat Al-Madina fi Ninewa”, (2014).

¹¹ “Daish Tuharik Souq Al’Tibaa wa Mussalihuha Yasta’aduun li Itlaq Mahtta Ifhaiyya”, *Zawyya*, 2014, https://www.zawyya.com/ar/story/داعش_تَحْرِكُ_سُوقَ_بَاعَةِ_سُوقِ_تَحْرِكِ_دَاعِش.
يَسْجُوحًا

¹² A.B. Annaji, n.d. *Idarat Attavabush: Akhtar Marhala Satamur Biha Al-Umma*, s.l.: Center for Islamic Studies and Research.

ing its beliefs in the social fabric and, at the same time, seeking to change that fabric by calling on ‘true Muslims’ to migrate to the land of Khilafa and by violently repressing its Sunni opponents.

The salafization of society found its most tragic expression in the way non-Sunni religious minorities were treated. Using its literalist interpretation of Quran and Sunnah, ISIS declared that Christians had to choose between converting to Islam or paying a tribute to the State. A warning was issued by the ISIS judiciary *diwan* on 17 July 2014, to give Christians a third option: rapid departure from the city without taking any of their properties¹³. The Yazidi minority was treated even more harshly because ISIS considered them a polytheist group that should be annihilated, and it explained the religious basis for this decision in its online magazine, *Dabiq*. It also published a pamphlet illustrating the rules related to the enslavement of Yazidi women according to its interpretation of Sharia¹⁴.

The terrorist group published decrees regarding the dress and behavior of Muslim women, explaining the religious basis for the niqab, quoting Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. The instructions defined the ‘legitimate’ hijab and urged women not to leave their homes late at night or without a man from their families¹⁵. ISIS also issued *Bayan Al-Hudood* – the “statement of Islamic penalties”¹⁶ – which established the penalty for common ‘crimes’. Death will be the penalty of anybody convicted of insulting the Prophet Muhammad or Islam or engaging in homosexual relations

¹³ “Daish Tukhayir Al-Massihyeen fi Al-Mosul Bayna T’inaq Al-Islam wa dafi’ Al-Jizya wa Muwajahat Assayf”, *Assakina*, 2014, [Online], Available at: <http://www.assakina.com/news/news2/49324.html>.

¹⁴ “Daish Tusdir Ta’alimat Jadida Hawla Al-Tariqa Allati Umkin Al-Tamatu’s biha Bil-Sabaya”, *Rawafid*, 2014, [Online].

¹⁵ Personal communication. For more details, see: “Daish Tusdir Bayanan Jadidan bi Mua’aqabat Mukhalifi Lil-Hijab Al-Shar’i”, *Mu’anat*, 2014, “Marsad Al-Ifta’a: ‘Khnsa’a Daish’ Tamna’i Khorouj Al-Nisa’a Bi Dun Mahram wa Tafridh Ghita’a Al-Wajh wal Kafayn”, *Akhbarak*, 2014, http://www.akhbarak.net/articles/17092194-الانساء_خروج_تَمْنَع_«داعش_ذُنساء»_الإف_تاء_مر_صد

¹⁶ “Bayan Al-Hudood: Daish Takshif Ala Ai Shai Yatum Al-Hukm Bil-I’dam”, *Al-Iraq*, *Mauso’at*, 2014, [Online], <http://www.faceiraq.com/inews.php?id=3345648>.

or “sodomy”. Thieves will have their hands chopped off and individuals making use of alcohol will be flogged 80 times.

The *Diwan* of education has published its first statement on September 4, 2014, announcing decisions to Islamize education and organizing the educational activity accordingly. The group imposed gender segregation on students and teaching staff and decided to cease teaching the current curriculum of history, art, philosophy, humanities, national identity and geography, replacing those subjects with new materials selected by the Curriculum Administration of the Islamic state. It emphasized that those materials and anthems that urge students to be loyal to their nation-state must be replaced with others inculcating in the students the idea that the real homeland is the one where Islam rules society¹⁷.

On 20 December 2014, ISIS issued a statement declaring that a special committee had reviewed the ‘secular’ Syrian school curriculum and “concluded that the whole educational system (...) is deviant”. It decided to close down the schools until a new curriculum would be produced. Teachers were given an ultimatum to visit the *Diwan*, declare their repentance and take courses in Sharia and religion, before resuming their pedagogical activities. According to a resident in Mosul, ISIS has brought in or permitted hundreds of religious books to be sold in the city, as part of the indoctrination process¹⁸.

Mobilization is another important element of ISIS propaganda in the areas it governs. The idea of jihad and that Muslims should be ready to fight for their ‘Islamic State’ is present in most of its statements. Murals and billboards in Mosul and Raqqa are rife with slogans praising the Jihad. One famous quote from the Egyptian Jihadi intellectual Sayyid Qutb was written on the walls and appeared repeatedly in ISIS texts: “Whoever does not pay the

¹⁷ S. Al-Nassir, “Al-MosulL Diwan Daish Al-Ta’alimi Yahdhuff Qasa’id Hub Al-Watan wa Yulghi Al-Adab Al-Insaniya min Al-Manahij”, *Alaan.tv*, September . [Online], <http://www.alaan.tv/news/world-news/113873/isis-educational-deletes-poems-patriotism-and-eliminates-the-humane-letters-from-the-curriculum-in-mosul>.

¹⁸ Personal communication.

price of jihad, shall pay the price of abstention”¹⁹. In January 2015 ISIS released pictures showing children receiving military training in a camp in Tel Afar (Ninawa region). The children were wearing headbands carrying the slogan of ISIS as they practiced martial arts. A video of one of those children was circulated on Jihadi social media as he explained that he immigrated along with his parents to the Islamic State in order to become a martyr. Again in January 2015 ISIS released another shocking video in which a boy of around 10 years of age executed two men the group claimed to be “Russian spies”²⁰. Those scenes that involve children aim to give the sense of continuity for ISIS’s project, to further normalize the idea of Jihad and to show its “success” in shaping societies and building a new generation of warriors.

ISIS targeting the world

Propaganda for the Islamic world

ISIS presented itself as the ultimate objective of any true Muslim and urging Muslims to immigrate to its land, to join forces under its umbrella and support the ‘Islamic State’ in every possible way. Khilafa was portrayed as an integral part of Islam that Muslims had lost for a long time and that now has been returned, thanks to its *Mujaheddin* (religious militants). The group expropriated the properties of and expelled Christians and other religious minorities, sometimes even Sunni families that fled from Mosul or Raqqa and were unable to prove they have properties in those cities. At the same time, it has been urging Sunni Muslims all over the

¹⁹ Al-Tamimi, (2015).

²⁰ S. Malm, “ISIS release new footage claiming to show a child executing two Russian 'spies' by shooting them in the back of the head”, *Daily Mail*, 2015, [Online], <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2908498/ISIS-release-new-footage-claiming-child-executing-two-Russian-spies-shooting-head-just-staged-fake.html>
Withnall, A., 2015. *Isis 'execution video' purports to show 10-year-old boy shooting dead two 'Russian spies'*. [Online] Available at:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-execution-video-purports-to-show-10yearold-boy-shooting-dead-two-russian-spies-9975648.html>.

world, especially those who believe in its cause, to be part of this project, whether by migration or by serving it in their countries. ISIS is generating a demographic change that aims to strengthen its grip in those cities and attract more people who are true adherents to its ideology.

In his first speech as Khalifa, Baghdadi addressed Muslims everywhere, hailing the establishment of the Khilafa state and calling on them to join it: “Come to your State, Syria is not for Syrians and Iraq is not for Iraqis; the land is for Allah, who decides to whom it is entrusted”²¹. He specifically called on religious scholars, preachers, judges, those who have experience in the military, administration and services, doctors and engineers to remember that it is their obligation to help Muslims. Residents in Mosul mentioned that ISIS counted among its staff qualified members with specialized experience. The head of the ‘Education Diwan’, Ridha Siyam – a German citizen of Egyptian origin, killed in an air strike – was described as “very well-informed regarding educational systems”. The same goes for the one responsible for economics and financial affairs²².

Highlighting this notion of an Islamic utopia that is being created to realize a divine promise was always an integral part of the ISIS discourse targeting other Muslims. The organization did not only focus on the abstract idea of Islamic Khilafa but also tried to show examples of its “just rule”, where “there will be no more poverty”²³. Like most totalitarian groups, ISIS envisages a model of a missionary and egalitarian collectivity, where every individual has a role to serve the *umma* and to be awarded for his service. Sometimes this award is a divine one, which is exactly what makes ISIS a particular kind of totalitarianism, one that represents the connection ring between the eternal and the temporal.

²¹ “Al-Baghdadi Bi Khitab Al-Khilafa: Alyawm Lakum Dawla Fahajitu Ilaiha”, CNN Arabic, 2014, [Online], <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/07/01/baghdadi-speech-isis>.

²² Personal communication.

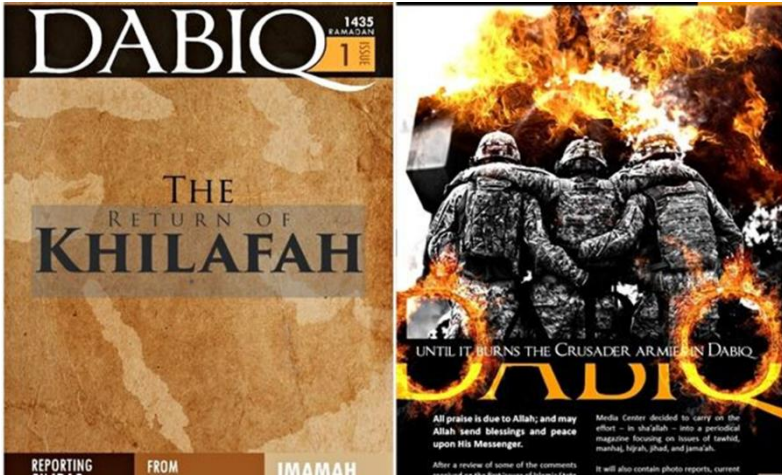
²³ *The Islamic State*. 2014. [Film] s.l.: Vice News.

However, while seeking to appeal to all Muslims, ISIS could not ignore its competition with other Jihadi organizations, especially AQ and its branch in Syria, Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN), in addition to smaller Sunni groups both in Syria and Iraq. The terrorist organization has engaged in this competition politically, ideologically and militarily. Its propaganda emphasized that it represents an expanding Islamic state to which all other jihadi groups should pledge loyalty. It insisted that no other flag but its own can be raised in the lands of khilafa and celebrated the declarations of *Baiyah* (allegiance) by other jihadi groups in the region. It used these proclamations, even the most symbolic ones, to give the impression of an incessantly growing project despite the hostilities it has been facing.

Jihadi forums have seen intense debates on ISIS's actions and decisions. Its advocates sought to justify in religious terms the declaration of Khilafa as one based on true Salafist jurisprudence. The group declared an ideological and military war against those challenging its authority, issuing several statements to justify actions against them. One such statement was issued on February 2014, accusing JN of betraying the Islamic project and allying with factions that adopt deviant approaches. The statement explained that ISIS tried to avoid more fighting among Jihadists, and still hoped that trusted members of JN will join its ranks. But it concluded with a strong threat for those continuing to fight ISIS and refusing to accept that it represents the true jihadi project²⁴.

It is noticeable that ISIS's discourse differs in areas where it exerts partial control. For example, in Halab, where ISIS shares the space with other Syrian groups, it used the opposition language and claimed a leading role in the fighting against the Syrian regime. In one statement by its branch in the east side of the city, ISIS blamed the Syrian regime and the 'hypocrites' for organizing a demonstration protesting its presence and attempting to break into its offices. The statement announced that the group will start a

²⁴ "The Islamic State in Iraq and Assham", *Wilayat Al-Khubr*, 9 February 2014.



campaign to eliminate the “allies of the regime” and named two opposition groups to be targeted as well²⁵.

In its attempt to recruit more militants and supporters, the organization’s media centers published videos of battles that had been fought. They even included scenes of massacres committed against the Syrian and Shi’a soldiers, and other violent actions that presumably symbolize the ‘Islamic revenge’ and fabricate the appearance of an undefeated organization. This ultraviolence was very instrumental in weakening the morale of its adversaries and contributing to the collapse of Iraqi units on the eve of the fall of Mosul. It was also intended to provoke the enemies and deepen the sectarian gap which has provided ISIS with a fertile land for recruitment. The scenes of ISIS’s mass execution of unarmed Iraqi soldiers who were deployed in the Spiker military base of Salahaddin, have had precisely this impact, especially in the acceleration of the mobilization of Shi’a militias²⁶. The ultraviolence of the group is itself a message that aims not only to terrorize the group’s foes, but also to attract young jihadists who are enraged and ill-adjusted to their societies.

²⁵ A Statement by “the Islamic State - Wilayat Halab”, 1 November 2013.

²⁶ A. Baker, “Massacre Claim Shakes Iraq”, *Time*, 2014. [Online], <http://time.com/2878718/isis-claims-massacre-of-1700-iraqis/>.

ISIS has also developed its tools to appeal emotionally in an attempt to win the hearts of all Muslims. Its anthems have been spread online by jihadists and supporters, using a language of determination and love of martyrdom. Although Jihadi anthems do not use music, they are usually sung by *Munshideen* (performers) with powerful voices. By the end of 2013 ISIS released the song “Oh my Ummah, Dawn Has Risen” which became very popular in the jihadi platforms and among ISIS supporters. These anthems are important because they provide the soundtrack to all the Islamic State’s videos; they are played from cars in towns they control and, they are even played on the battlefield²⁷.

This fervid expression is empowered by the mythology that ISIS has adopted in its discourse and propaganda that views today’s conflict in apocalyptic terms. The group named its magazine, *Dabiq*, after a small town in the Halab region (Syria) near the border with Turkey, which featured prominently in an Islamic prophecy predicting that Muslims would defeat “Rome” (which jihadis had long reimagined as a reference to Western powers) in the area of Dabiq, before moving to conquer Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). The prophecy was quoted at length in the opening pages of the magazine²⁸.

The mythology was used to remind us that ISIS is implementing a ‘divine plan’ and that fighting with its forces is the most essential choice Muslims have to make between being on the side of faith or against it. Some interpreted ISIS’s attack on the Kurdish town of Kobani, in Syria, as an attempt to secure the road to Dabiq. The group’s supporters on the social networks have been counting the number of States that joined the international alliance against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, to make sure they will reach 80 States, which is the number of the enemies’ flags according to the

²⁷ A. Marshall, “How Isis got its anthem”, *The Guardian*, 2014. [Online], <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem>.

²⁸ G. Fraser, “To Islamic State, Dabiq is important - but it’s not the end of the world”, 2014, [Online], <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2014/oct/10/islamic-state-dabiq-important-not-end-of-the-world>.

prophecy. This prophecy is recognized by small circles of jihadists and does not appear as an influential element in mainstream Islam. However, it has been used to generate the sense of inevitability that ISIS seeks to create about its ambition to “remain and expand”.

Propaganda for Non-Muslims

ISIS is an incarnation of the first AQ-affiliated group operating in Iraq under the leadership of Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi, *Tanzim Al-Tawheen Wal-Jihad Fi Bilad Al-Rafidayn*, known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq. It started as a jihadi project, heavily staffed and guided by foreign militants. Eventually the group became increasingly Iraqized and some of its formations today, especially the military council, is heavily staffed with Sunni officers from the former Iraqi army²⁹. With a leader of Iraqi origin, backed by efficient ex-Baathist officers, the group became more involved in local Iraqi conflicts, building in particular on the widening sectarian divide. However, after taking control of the city of Raqqa in Syria and, later on, following its declaration of Khilafa and the end of the Sykes-Picot borders, ISIS has been resumed its breadth as a global organization. This not just a matter of rhetoric, but it has its operational advantages. A Jihadi enterprise seems more appealing to young militants all over the Muslim world compared to a localized project. It actually gave ISIS an advantage over other Jihadi groups in the region whose local dimension has been frustrating their global ambitions. After all, any foreign jihadi would prefer to fight for an entity called ‘Islamic State’ than just an Iraqi or Syrian group. Moreover, as ISIS moved into territorializing its operations across the Iraqi-Syrian borders, it had to find a larger cause to secure legitimization.

As the United States and other Western Countries decided to lead a military campaign against ISIS in order to stop its march on

²⁹ For further details: A. A.-R., Al-Bakri, *Daish wa Mustaqbal Al-Alam: Bayna Al-Wad'i Al-Siyassi wal Hadith Al-Nabawi Al-Sharif*, Cologne, Dar Al-Ghurabaa Lil Nashr, 2014.

other major cities in Iraq, ISIS replaced AQ as the main jihadi organization. The group started to intensify its messages targeting the West and reiterated the theme that “we will fight you and defeat you”. News, videos and pictures were released showing that western airstrikes were killing civilians, which served as another recruitment message calling on other Muslims to defend their ‘brothers’ from U.S.-led bombardments³⁰. ISIS also strived to avoid appearing defensive: it published videos of American and Western hostages being beheaded, usually following a defiant speech. It highlighted the role of Western jihadists in an attempt to warn the West that the threat is very close and imminent³¹. English-speaking jihadists and propagandists became pivotal in this confrontation, mainly because they speak the language of foreigners which is something that ISIS used to give the impression that “we are closer to you than you to us”.

In the confrontation with the West, ISIS is trying to highlight its advantages. One repeated theme is that its jihadists like death as much as westerners like life. Jihadists attempt to demonstrate that they are ready to commit any atrocity in order to terrify their opponents and weaken their moral. Even when it shows videos or photos in which Western citizens are being beheaded, ISIS makes sure that it is the West to be blamed and to use words of the victim himself to reiterate this theme. *Dabiq* magazine, for example, published a message from the U.S. journalist Steven Sotloff, days before his filmed beheading by ISIS. They quote him saying that ISIS knows he is a journalist, but “do U.S. airstrikes differentiate between those who are armed and those who are unarmed? Like-

³⁰ A.M. Al-Masri, *Al-Harb Al-Salbiyya Al-Jadida Dhidh Al-Muslimeen*, 2014, [Online], <http://www.muslm.org/vb/printthread.php?t=537782&pp=15>.

³¹ For further information of foreign jihadists, see: T. McCoy, “How ISIS and other jihadists persuaded thousands of Westerners to fight their war of extremism”, *Washington Post*, 2014, [Online], <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/17/how-isis-persuaded-thousands-of-westerners-to-fight-its-war-of-extremism/>; P. Ross, “ISIS Recruitment Reaches ‘Unprecedented Scale’ With 15,000 Foreign Jihadists Joining Militant Fighters”, 2014, [Online], <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-recruitment-reaches-unprecedented-scale-15000-foreign-jihadists-joining-militant-1716684>.

wise they don't". John Cantlie, the British journalist taken hostage by ISIS, has written an article for the sixth issue of *Dabiq*, in which he praises ISIS's decisions and actions and criticizes the US policy.

The fourth issue of *Dabiq* was named "The Failed Crusade", addressing the attempts by the U.S.-led coalition to counter the Islamic State. Through serious and ironic language it portrays this campaign as one doomed to fail. This certainty is expressed through these words: "This (meaning Islam) is the religion to which victory was promised". The picture on the cover is of the iconic St. Peter's Square in Rome, displaying the group's ambitions of world conquest. The magazine published a speech by Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani, ISIS spokesperson, in which he vows that

we will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, with the permission of Allah, the Highest. This is his promise to us; He is glorified and he does not fail in his promise. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves in the slave market³².

Conclusion

ISIS is a new model of totalitarianism that is based on three pillars: ultraviolence, indoctrination and expansion. Its ultraviolent nature exceeds that of any other jihadi organization, showing both its nihilistic nature and a radical project of political, social and demographic change. Unlike AQ and most other terrorist organizations, ISIS claims to be a State, controls territory and seeks to monopolize "legitimate" violence within this territory. While violence is an essential element of this state formation process, indoctrination is another crucial component of its totalitarian plan. ISIS's early appeal derived from claiming to be the 'protector' of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, taking advantage of the widening sectarian gap in the two Countries and the region. After securing its

³² *Dabiq*, Issue 4.

control over large swaths of territory, the group adopted a more “aggressive” form of discourse to legitimize itself and diminish the credibility of its rivals. It conceives itself as the ‘pure’ manifestation of Islam; one that emulates and restores the prophet’s state and dictates to its subjects to follow this vision. The indoctrination has taken two forms: salafization of society and calling on Sunni Muslims to migrate to the ‘Khilafa land’.

Bust ISIS’s ideology is based on expansion. Confining itself to its controlled-territories will eventually undermine its claim of “representing the Islamic *umma*”. In the words of ISIS’s German fighter, Abu Qatada, who was speaking to the German Journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer, ISIS does not have “frontiers, but frontlines”³³. Its slogan “remaining and expanding” reflects its current objective of consolidating its power in those territories and using them as bases to attack and conquer more lands.

Propaganda has been a major tool in achieving its aims. The group developed traditional communication means that served their purpose in its direct interaction with the local population, but the most effective tool was the Internet, especially social networks and YouTube, which provided ISIS with cheap outlets and the ability to reach a wide audience scattered all over the globe. Despite attempts to restrict the group’s ability to disseminate its propaganda, its network of supporters and its experience of online jihadism helped it skip or manipulate some of these restrictions. This is a war that will continue both online and offline. It is a battle of ideas as much as it is a military conflict. While military means are helpful to contain the group or even force it out of areas it controls now, the propaganda war will decide whether ISIS or similar organizations will have a larger or smaller role in the future.

³³ Jürgen Todenhöfer published his interview with Abu Qatada on his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152723644955838&pnref=story>.

About the Authors

Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, is a researcher at the Radcliffe Institute - Harvard University. He is a political analyst and his research focuses on the status, religion, and identity of Iraq and the Middle East. He has produced several contributions for many British and Arab academic publications. He is also a political commentator and consultant.

Marco Arnaboldi, is a scholar of radical Islamist movements and an expert of radicalization processes via the web and social networks. In recent years he has collaborated with a number of newspapers and think-tanks, including *Il Corriere della Sera*, ISPI, Fondazione Internazionale Oasis, and *Caffè Geopolitico*.

Paolo Luigi Branca, is a researcher of Islamic Studies at the Department of Humanities and Philosophy at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan. He teaches History of Religions (Islamic Studies) at Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose in Milan. He has participated in numerous conferences and seminars at various institutions, including Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, Institut du Monde Arabe – Paris (France), Accademia della Guardia di Finanza – Bergamo, Centro Altri Studi per la Difesa – Rome, Université de Lausanne (Switzerland), University of Pisa, University of Florence, University of ‘Ain Shams – Cairo (Egypt).

Marco Lombardi, Scientific Advisor at ISPI. He is Associate Professor of Crisis Management and Communication-related Risks, Theory of Mass Communication and Sociology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan, and director of ITSTIME (Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emer-

gencies). He is also a member of the scientific committee for the international doctoral program in Criminology and the director of the School of Journalism of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan.

Paolo Maggiolini, Ph.D. in Institutions and Policies, is an ISPI Research Fellow and collaborates with Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan. His research is focused on the relation between religion and politics in the Middle East, with special emphasis on Arab Christians and Islamic radicalism, especially in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine.

Monica Maggioni, journalist. Since January 2013 she is the director of all-news channel “Rai News”. She has hosted several programs on Italian national TV, but has always remained a war correspondent at heart. Since the late 90s she has worked in areas of crisis around the world, from Iraq to Iran and Afghanistan. She has explained the U.S. to the Italian audience, met Chiefs of State, pacifists and terrorists. She has directed two documentaries: *Ward 54* and *Out of Tehran*. She has published two books: *Dentro la guerra* and *La fine della verità*.

Andrea Plebani, researcher at the Department of Linguistic Science and Foreign Literature of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, is a Professor of History of Civilizations and Political Cultures at the University’s branch in Brescia. He is Associate Research Fellow at ISPI and contributes to the project “Conoscere il meticciano, governare il cambiamento” promoted by Fondazione OASIS.

Lorenzo Vidino, Ph.D., is among the leading experts on Islamic studies and political violence in Europe and North America. He is Visiting Fellow at ISPI. He was Professor and Researcher at the RAND Corporation, Harvard University, and the National Defense University. He is the author of several books, including *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, translated into Arabic by Al Mesbar). He has appeared before the U.S. Congress on several occasions and collaborates with the authorities of numerous countries.

