



# THE WINNER'S MESSAGING STRATEGY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE: Technically Excellent, Vulnerable to Disruption

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## The Winner's Messaging Strategy of the Islamic State: Technically Excellent, Vulnerable to Disruption

The Islamic State (ISIS) has taken strategic communications by a jihadist group to an entirely new level, with tightly choreographed and [slickly produced](#) videos, an apparently deep understanding of how to catch the Western media's attention, and [exceptionally skilled](#), coordinated distribution of content on platforms like Twitter. The group's leap forward in reaching its various target audiences is of great concern. Through the strength of its communications, ISIS has drawn [unprecedented numbers](#) of young Muslims from across the globe to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq to fight on the group's behalf. ISIS has provoked a wave of lone wolf terrorist attacks, [raising legitimate questions](#) about whether extremists' savvy use of social media might produce a permanent rise in such attacks. ISIS has eclipsed the communications skills of its predecessors in the jihadist movement, and is [widely perceived](#) (rightly so) as winning its propaganda war against the United States and other Western powers.

But underneath this hard shell exists a soft underbelly: **ISIS has become heavily dependent on the success of its messaging, yet the group's propaganda is vulnerable to disruption.** Despite its [recent gains](#), ISIS's flawed military strategy has left it surrounded by foes and fighting wars on several fronts. As ISIS has made more and more enemies, ranging from the nation states bombing its convoys to the [shadowy vigilantes](#) killing ISIS officials in the territory it controls, ISIS's propaganda operations have become increasingly important to shoring up its overstretched caliphate.

These propaganda efforts initially compensated for ISIS's flawed strategy by drawing thousands of foreign fighters to the theater to join ISIS. But as ISIS lost territory in Syria and Iraq and its supply of foreign fighters declined – only [around 120](#) foreign fighters joined its ranks in the first three months of this year – ISIS focused its messaging efforts on adding new affiliates internationally.<sup>1</sup> Drawing in additional affiliates gives ISIS a lifeline in many ways. New affiliates feed into the perception that ISIS is an indomitably growing force. The group also hopes to gain operationally by drawing new groups into its orbit, and compensating for its loss of foreign fighters by drawing manpower from these affiliates, as well as securing additional funding sources. International expansion also ensures the organization's survivability even if it loses its hold over broad swathes of Iraq or even Syria. ISIS's propaganda has been [critical to this international growth](#) and its spread to new territories, such the brutal Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram's decision to pledge *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to ISIS in March 2015.

How can ISIS's messaging be countered? The [comments](#) of former and current American officials suggest that ISIS has fashioned such a powerful propaganda apparatus that it could take the United States (U.S.) years to formulate a "counter-narrative" capable of undermining the group's appeal. This view, however, conflates ISIS's appeal with that of the jihadist movement as a whole: Though ISIS obviously strikes many of the same themes as do other jihadist groups, they are not the same, and the former is easier to counter than the latter. Conflating the two causes practitioners and observers to overlook a central vulnerability in ISIS's propaganda efforts: **ISIS's communications can be described as a "winner's message."** That is, ISIS's messaging depends on the group projecting the image of strength and momentum – and if ISIS's narrative is undermined or disrupted in this regard, then the group risks becoming unattractive to its target audience.

That is precisely what happened to ISIS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Like ISIS, AQI also had a winner's message involving the use of extraordinary brutality, including releasing videos in which its hostages were humiliated and beheaded. From 2005 to 2007, the combination of this brutality and AQI's battlefield successes made AQI perhaps the

<sup>1</sup> ISIS's supply of foreign fighters may see another bounce following its capture of Ramadi, Palmyra and the Baiji oil refinery.

most prominent jihadist organization in the world, with many observers arguing that its emir Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi had eclipsed Osama bin Laden, the emir of the overall al-Qaeda organization. However, AQI's various excesses pushed many Iraqi Sunni tribes to support the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement that stood up against AQI's power. Sunni tribal engagement played an important role in AQI's defeat in 2007-08, and AQI's brutality shifted from a potent symbol of the group's power to a demonstration of how it had overplayed its hand.<sup>2</sup>

Though the projection of strength is central to ISIS's communications strategy, much of the anti-ISIS messaging efforts by the U.S. and its allies have focused on aspects of the group's narrative that are less critical to the organization, and also more difficult to counter. At times the counter-ISIS narrative and ISIS's own narrative have been **exactly the same: emphasizing the jihadist group's brutality**. ISIS is content to flaunt the atrocities it commits because, while many people will find its messaging distasteful, that bloody imagery also projects the group's power.

Fortunately, ISIS has experienced some [significant setbacks](#), though it was able to mount a major renewed offensive on several fronts in May 2015. However, even when ISIS was experiencing losses and failing to make gains on the battlefield, the group never lost control of its narrative of victory. This report argues that **a counter-messaging strategy focused on undermining ISIS's image of strength and momentum is the best approach for the group's foes**. Though a variety of actors can contribute to such a campaign – indeed, this campaign will have the highest chance of success if multiple state and non-state actors are involved – this report focuses on what the U.S. government can do. It is important to understand how the U.S. must adapt to compete with an organization like ISIS that moves at the speed of social media. In contrast, the U.S. is often impeded by inefficient and bureaucratic internal processes that make it hard-pressed to compete with such a high-speed messaging campaign.

It should be noted that there are [indications](#) the U.S. government is now streamlining its strategic messaging operations and eliminating bureaucratic obstacles. Because U.S. efforts remain a work in progress, it is too early to declare them a failure; on the other hand, it is far too early to declare promising aspirational rhetoric from officials to mean a corner has been turned in the U.S.'s anti-ISIS communications campaign. The argument laid out in this study should be considered a model against which evolving U.S. efforts can be judged.

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<sup>2</sup> Though AQI's brutality is not the only factor that led to the tribal uprising, it was cited repeatedly by those who participated in the *Sahwa* as an important driver of their opposition to the jihadist group. See Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Awakening vol. 2: Iraqi Perspectives* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009). The linkage between AQI's brutality and the subsequent uprising was also understood by al-Qaeda's senior leadership, prompting Ayman Al-Zawahiri to issue new guidelines for jihad when he became the organization's emir emphasizing minimal harm to civilian populations.

One may object that the success against AQI was merely ephemeral, as it gave birth to the even more potent ISIS. However, such an argument ignores the fact that ISIS's birth was never inevitable, and was enabled by such extreme factors as a bloody civil war breaking out in neighboring Syria and the Iraqi government ruling in an openly sectarian manner that completely alienated the country's Sunnis, even those who had fought AQI as part of the *Sahwa* movement. A tattered jihadist organization cannot bank on so many uncontrolled variables to facilitate its reemergence, which is why al-Qaeda's senior leadership correctly views the 2007-08 period as a defeat.



## ISIS'S FLAWED BUSINESS MODEL

ISIS's faulty strategy has left the group with a long list of powerful enemies, which in turn transformed the group's powerful communications capabilities from a luxury into a necessity. ISIS is now embroiled in a multi-front war in Syria and Iraq, straining the group's resources and forcing it to lean more heavily on propaganda operations to galvanize its support base.

From the outset, ISIS generally rejected collaboration and compromise with like-minded militant organizations, instead challenging these groups directly. When ISIS (then known as ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) expanded from Iraq into Syria in the spring of 2013, it immediately began feuding with other Syrian rebel groups, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra. The two groups had very different approaches to relations with other rebels who opposed Bashar Al-Assad's regime. As Charles Lister of the Brookings Institution has [noted](#), "Jabhat Al-Nusra shared power and governance," whereas ISIS "demanded complete control over society." ISIS's inability to work cooperatively with other Syrian rebel groups quickly earned it a host of enemies who were ostensibly on ISIS's side of the conflict. Indeed, the majority (though not all) of ISIS's geographic gains in Syria have come at the expense of other rebels rather than Assad's regime.

Despite its difficulties in working with other groups, ISIS managed to assemble a relatively broad-based Sunni coalition for its dramatic military push into Iraq in June 2014. This offensive immediately made ISIS the top foe of a wide variety of actors, including the Iraqi state, its ally Iran and Iraq's Iranian-backed Shia militias. Mere days after ISIS seized Mosul, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, [called on](#) Iraq's citizens to join the fight against ISIS. Thousands of Iraqi Shias responded to Sistani's appeal.

Although ISIS already possessed a wide array of enemies, the jihadist group almost immediately betrayed its partners in early July 2014 by [rounding up](#) ex-Baathist leaders in Mosul who had aided the ISIS advance. Rather than consolidating its forces and reinforcing its territorial holdings, ISIS's next move was to attack another group, this time Iraq's Kurds, opening a new front to ISIS's north. But ISIS was not done making enemies. Its genocidal campaign against the Yazidi minority religious sect, coupled with the beheading of two American journalists, prompted the U.S. and a coalition of allied states to join the fight, mounting a campaign of air strikes against the group.

The flaws of ISIS's military strategy can thus be clearly seen on the battlefield, though the organization still remains capable of launching major offensives. ISIS's military defeat in Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish city in northern Syria, was particularly damaging. The loss resulted in the [death of more than 2,000 ISIS fighters](#), the destruction of hard-to-replace military vehicles and weaponry, and a blow to its cultivated image as an indomitable military force. ISIS also lost control of Tikrit, though many analysts believe that its new offensive into Anbar province has for the moment lifted the pressure from its northern holdings.

At this point, ISIS relies on three primary sources of external support: foreign fighters from outside Syria and Iraq (though these have recently been in decline), like-minded jihadist organizations outside of Iraq and Syria who may pledge allegiance to ISIS or otherwise provide material assistance, and other rebel factions in Syria and Iraq who may bolster ISIS's local capabilities. These three groups are the primary target audience for ISIS's strategic messaging campaign.

**ISIS's propaganda machine is critical to the group's efforts to attract support from these sources.** Propaganda is especially important in recruiting individuals and organizations who might never come into physical contact with ISIS fighters, and who instead judge the group largely based on the image it has cultivated through social media and online strategic messaging, as well as the mainstream media's reporting on ISIS's gains and overall health. Those individuals and organizations considering a relationship with ISIS may also judge it based on what the group's emissaries tell them, although the veracity of the emissaries' messages will themselves largely be judged by how well they track with on-the-ground realities projected through these various media sources.

**In other words, ISIS's strong propaganda apparatus has helped keep the organization afloat despite its flawed business model.** This report now explores ISIS's messaging, as understanding it is critical to defanging the jihadist group's powerful narrative.

## ISIS'S NARRATIVE

ISIS has a multifaceted narrative that appeals to its various target audiences in several different ways (see Figure 1). The three messages at the bottom of the pyramid (religious obligation, political grievance and sense of adventure) are some of the most difficult for ISIS's foes to counter – and the areas upon which a significant amount of counter-ISIS messaging has focused.

There are many components to the religious aspect of ISIS's narrative, bottom line is that Muslims worldwide have a religious duty to support the caliphate. One such alleged duty is to migrate to ISIS-held territory. As the caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, said in an audio address released weeks after the caliphate's establishment: "Whoso is able to immigrate to the Islamic State, let him immigrate. For emigration to the Abode of Islam is obligatory." Another alleged obligation is fighting jihad on ISIS's behalf. Foreign fighters in the theater have exhorted their countrymen – both through distributed statements and peer-to-peer communications – to fulfill this obligation. In one release from March 2015, titled "[Message from Those Who Are Excused to Those Who Are Not Excused](#)," two deaf ISIS foreign fighters used sign language to call on Western Muslims to join the caliphate. The video's title refers to the fact that individuals with disabilities are generally exempt from waging jihad under Islamic law, and the use of these deaf men was designed to shame able-bodied men who are not aiding ISIS militarily. Another set of religious arguments calls on Muslims to carry out attacks in their home countries if they cannot migrate to Syria or Iraq.



**Figure 1.** The ISIS narrative

A second component of ISIS's communications strategy emphasizes political grievances with the West. ISIS, for example, has turned the U.S.-led aerial campaign against it into a propaganda opportunity, comparing the military operation to the Crusades of the Middle Ages. The fourth issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS's English-language magazine, was titled "The Failed Crusade," and discussed the new Judeo-Christian Crusade against the Muslims.

Another component of ISIS's narrative appeals to jihadists' sense of adventure and excitement. Foreign fighter recruitment videos depict jihad as an action-packed adventure, replete with [symbols of masculinity](#) intended to attract young men. ISIS's cutting-edge special effects also help make life on the battlefield seem both exciting and "cool."

**If any of these narratives were to be definitively refuted, it would have a significant impact on the organization.** However, these narratives are particularly difficult to prove false because they are to a large extent subjective, and thus it is not clear what would constitute definitive refutation. For example, ISIS has offered a myriad of theological justifications for the atrocities it commits, and has extensively explained why it is uniquely fulfilling Islamic obligations. Most of ISIS's supporters are aware that the majority of Muslims and Islamic scholars disagree, but the fact that such a large body opposes their religious justifications is immaterial to them. This is not to say that arguments challenging ISIS's religious legitimacy are unimportant – but they likely serve merely as a bulwark against too much expansion and a means of persuading the occasional supporter to step back from the ledge, rather than a dagger through ISIS's heart. Similarly, the battlefield may not be as glamorous as ISIS claims, but many of the group's supporters won't know one way or the other until they arrive.

However, ISIS's claim that the group is defeating its opponents on the battlefield is not a simple matter of opinion. Facts on the ground dictate whether the group can credibly claim success in one city or another. Thus, this is the narrative that can be most easily countered so long as ISIS is experiencing setbacks: Coalition forces won't convince ISIS's target audience that the militant group is losing when it is in the process of capturing and holding territory, but when the group loses ground, a successful anti-ISIS messaging campaign can magnify the perceptions of its losses. This narrative is also the most tightly wedded to ISIS as an organization. ISIS, as previously noted, should not be confused with the jihadist movement as a whole: it is a single organization within the broader movement, one that is uniquely problematic due to

its over-the-top brutality and other excesses, such as its institution of sexual slavery. While ISIS will indeed be hurt if fewer people turn to jihadism, it will be more directly harmed if jihadists choose not to support it as an organization. Its narrative of victory is critical to persuading jihadists to support ISIS specifically, as opposed to regional jihadist groups. ISIS's growth is uniquely problematic amongst jihadist organizations because it is so brutal that it distorts the market for extremism. ISIS's rise has made state support for Jabhat Al-Nusra appear less problematic, and has made countries like Jordan consider whether providing more maneuvering room to al-Qaeda domestically could serve as a bulwark against ISIS's expansion. ISIS's strength threatens to provide new opportunities even to its jihadist competitors.

A recent Arabic-language article by ISIS supporter Sheikh Abu Sulayman Al-Jahbadhi sheds light on ISIS's messaging strategy. Warning against the "showing of weakness," Jahbadhi implored residents of cities controlled by ISIS not to show the hardships that sieges against their cities impose on the population, such as lack of food, water and gas. He warned that "such announcements are considered to be major shortcomings in maintaining the psychological war with the enemy."<sup>3</sup> Jahbadhi went on to say that even displaying atrocities committed by ISIS's enemies against civilian populations, such as casualties inflicted by "Crusaders" bombing ISIS-held areas, should be avoided. He explained:

"The caliphate showed the crimes of the coalition and the *rawafid* [rejectionists]; however, it has always featured the retaliatory attacks, that is, the slaughter of a spy or punishment of soldiers. This is intended to reflect the absence of weakness. The caliphate would never publicize the crimes of the enemy alone! This would never happen, for the world no longer sympathizes or empathizes with us. You show their crimes only when they are accompanied with the punishment. When the caliphate published the video of the burning of Moaz [Al-Kassasbeh], it had previously released pictures of children burned in the shelling of the coalition warplanes. The caliphate shows their crimes and also shows how it is capable of retaliating for them."

In other words, the projection of strength is ISIS's central message. It is acceptable to show the atrocities that the caliphate's enemies are committing, but only if such imagery is accompanied by a display of how ISIS retaliated, thus underscoring ISIS's fundamental power.

In addition to obscuring its losses, ISIS has systematically exaggerated its strength. The best example of ISIS's tendency to exaggerate and embellish occurred in Africa. In October 2014, a group of militants in the eastern Libyan city of Derna openly pledged *bayat* to ISIS, and declared that they had established an emirate in the city. Soon after the *bayat* pledge, ISIS flooded social media with videos and pictures of ISIS militants in Derna, including a video [showing](#) a parade of militants waving ISIS flags as they drove down a thoroughfare in the city.



**Figure 2.** A convoy of ISIS militants near Derna

This show of force led many observers to conclude that ISIS held full control of Derna, and numerous [media outlets](#) then reported ISIS's control of Derna as an objective fact. In reality, control of Derna was and remains divided between a number of militant groups, including some al-Qaeda-linked groups that oppose ISIS's expansion into Libya.

After bluffing observers that it controlled Derna, ISIS issued a deceptive claim of responsibility for the devastating March 18 attack on the Bardo museum in Tunis. Though ISIS quickly [claimed credit](#) for that attack, Tunisia instead [attributed](#) it to the al-Qaeda-aligned Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, and [identified](#) the group's emir Luqman Abu Saqr as the mastermind. Even though ISIS's claim of responsibility was an exaggeration, it nonetheless furthered the perception that the group had significant international momentum, as it came amidst a series of ISIS advances in various other

<sup>3</sup> Abu Sulayman Al-Jahbadhi, "War Policy against the Enemy Does Not Allow Showing of Weaknesses," posted April 2, 2015.



countries, including Boko Haram's March 7 pledge of *bayat*.

ISIS's rationale for exaggerating its role in the Bardo attack was clear. In the battle for market share of global jihadism, ISIS has al-Qaeda's media operations outgunned. The Bardo attack, because it was carried out by a rival, threatened ISIS's narrative of success at a time when ISIS was experiencing losses in Iraq but compensating by gaining ground in Africa. In addition, ISIS knew from past experience that al-Qaeda generally doesn't claim credit for attacks while the operatives who carried them out are still at large, so ISIS could issue a claim of responsibility before al-Qaeda was prepared to do so. Given the way media cycles work – and ISIS is *very* attuned to the media cycle – a false or exaggerated claim of responsibility would dominate the news while Bardo remained a top headline, before anybody could disprove it. Al-Qaeda's greater role wouldn't become known until the attack was no longer a hot news item.

The media has often unwittingly aided ISIS's propaganda strategy by maintaining a narrative about ISIS that mirrors the group's own, emphasizing ISIS's growth and brutality. Indeed, in critical instances, the media has reinforced ISIS's portrayal of strength by repeating its false or exaggerated claims, such as ISIS's supposed capture of Derna, as fact (see Figure 3).

One reason the media and Western analysts often repeat ISIS's claims uncritically is that ISIS [dominates the media](#) in territories under its control, making it difficult for independent outlets to obtain a clear picture of developments therein. Further, social media in Derna has low penetration relative to the Syria conflict, and it is also [too dangerous](#) for the vast majority of reporters to visit the city. Moreover, neither the U.S. government nor any other interested party bothered to refute the false claims. Thus, ISIS has leveraged its manipulation of the media to present a narrative of military momentum and strength.

## HOW TO COMBAT ISIS'S PROPAGANDA STRATEGY

The U.S. has thus far been unable to wrest control of the narrative from ISIS, confronting two major challenges in its attempts. First, the U.S. government's messaging campaign will have trouble keeping up with the operational tempo of ISIS's high-octane, rapid-fire social media apparatus. Second, even if the U.S. could keep up with ISIS's messaging campaign, it lacks credibility in the eyes of key people who are vulnerable to ISIS's recruitment tactics.

So what can the U.S. do? ISIS's messaging strategy is based around the idea that it has massive momentum, which presents a significant vulnerability for the organization during times when its momentum slows or it experiences reversals. The U.S. should work to shift the narrative surrounding ISIS from one of strength and victory to one of weakness and loss. This can be achieved by focusing attention on the group's military defeats, fact-checking the group's claims of victory and expansion, and revealing the group's many exaggerations. Further, this counter-narrative should expose ISIS's governance failures and its struggles to function as a state. Just as puncturing ISIS's narrative of success can make it less attractive, exposing its failings as a state can undermine the image of the caliphate as an Islamic utopia, dissuading foreigners from making the arduous trip to Syria and discouraging like-minded jihadist groups from pledging their allegiance to ISIS.



**Figure 3.** The cycle of messaging

*ISIS pushes its message, including exaggerated claims, to the media and its target audience. The media often repeats these exaggerations back to the target audience as fact.*

Several steps can be taken to improve the U.S.'s counter-ISIS messaging campaign:

- There should be a small and nimble unit within the U.S. government specifically charged with refuting ISIS's propaganda, particularly its claims of momentum and victory. This unit should include strategic communications professionals with expertise in both social media and traditional broadcast and print media, as well as intelligence analysts capable of monitoring a) what messages ISIS is releasing to advance its narrative of strength and victory, and b) in what ways ISIS's claims diverge from the ground truth.
- The U.S. government should not always be the face of the response to ISIS's claims. As Nicholas Rasmussen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, [acknowledged](#), "the government is probably not the best platform to try to communicate with the set of actors who are potentially vulnerable to this kind of propaganda and this kind of recruitment." In addition to responding directly to ISIS's propaganda, this counter-ISIS unit can release its information – fact sheets, for example – to members of the mainstream media who can investigate the U.S.'s claims and report them if they are persuaded following their own due diligence. This can break the cycle of ISIS's target audience receiving the same, often exaggerated, factual claims from both ISIS and the media. Further, while many jihadists are disdainful of the Western media, it is nonetheless perceived as a more neutral arbiter of fact in a way that the U.S. government is not. Sharing information with the media in this manner can have a snowball effect: ISIS critics and members of civil society may capitalize on press reports of ISIS's exaggerations or decline, thus amplifying the message.
- To further the objective of undercutting ISIS's narrative of victory, the counter-ISIS unit should have the ability to selectively declassify information that supports its claim of ISIS losing momentum, and make it available to journalists.
- Credibility is vital in any messaging campaign. ISIS's message is vulnerable because parts of it are not true, and the group thus risks more serious damage to perceptions of its trustworthiness. The counter-ISIS unit should strive to maintain its credibility in all instances, and should not release false or questionable information even if its dissemination could harm ISIS.

As previously mentioned, the U.S. government now appears to be making efforts to improve its anti-ISIS strategic communications. While it is too early to assess the success or failure of these efforts, this study is designed to assist the U.S.'s attempts to upgrade its campaign by offering contours of what is necessary to attack ISIS's narrative of success. Further, the study should allow outside analysts to more effectively assess whether U.S. efforts have all the components they require in place to succeed in this regard.

Countering ISIS's narrative of invulnerability is not a silver bullet. In addition to being able to mount powerful offensives, ISIS possesses the resources to continue threatening Iraq and Syria for the foreseeable future, but by uncovering areas where ISIS is enfeebled and declining rather than strong and vibrant, the U.S. government can diminish the group's ability to recruit new fighters and affiliates.



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