

The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy

This Research Paper aims to analyse in depth the global propaganda strategy of the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) by looking at the methods through which this grand strategy is carried out as well as the objectives that IS wants to achieve through it. The authors first discuss IS' growth model, explaining why global expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters are pivotal to IS success. Having in mind this critical role, the authors then explore the narratives and themes used by the group to mobilise foreign fighters and jihadists groups. Third, the paper analyses how IS deploys its narratives in those territories where it has established a foothold. Fourth, it outlines IS' direct engagement strategy and how it is used to facilitate allegiance of other jihadist groups. The final section of the paper offers a menu of policy options that stakeholders can implement to counter IS' global propaganda efforts.

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About ICCT

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Executive Summary and Policy Recommendations

Since the Islamic State (IS) announced in June 2014 that it had re-established the caliphate, the group has mounted a concerted campaign aimed at expanding its presence and influence beyond Syria and Iraq. IS has declared the formation of *wilayats* (provinces) in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Algeria, the Caucasus region of Russia, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and West Africa, while carrying out attacks in several other countries in the surrounding regions. The group has also appealed to Muslims from across the globe to join its cause, with thousands of foreign fighters answering this call to arms.

Global expansion and the recruitment of foreign fighters fulfil multiple objectives for IS. For one, to affirm the religious and political legitimacy of the caliphate—which, by definition, is global in scope—IS must demonstrate to adversaries and potential allies that it can acquire and hold territory outside of its stronghold in Iraq and Syria. IS has staked its credibility on its ability to consolidate and increase its territorial holdings, even embracing a slogan—*baqiya wa tatamaddad*, or remaining and expanding—to that effect. Thus, IS has turned global expansion into an organisational necessity. The recruitment of foreign fighters, who describe their *hijra* (migration) to IS as a religious obligation, further reinforces IS' legitimacy in jihadist circles. Second, global expansion enhances IS' organisational resilience and strength, allowing the group to draw upon resources from allied factions, and providing IS with strategic depth as its territory in Syria and Iraq comes under military pressure. Foreign fighters provide IS with a steady source of new manpower when battlefield attrition rates are climbing. Third, global growth is a critical aspect of IS' competition with its parent organisation al-Qaeda. IS has tried to chip away at al-Qaeda's global network, appealing to al-Qaeda affiliates and members to defect.

IS has utilised its propaganda apparatus, one of the group's most effective tools, to facilitate its expansion into new theatres. In almost every country where IS has established a presence, the group has deployed a robust messaging campaign aimed at winning over potential allies—including regional jihadist groups, political Islamists, and local Sunnis—and intimidating adversaries. IS' propaganda apparatus has augmented the group's on-the-ground expansion efforts and amplified its capabilities, sometimes fuelling exaggerated perceptions of IS' strength in new theatres.

IS has employed several common themes and narratives in its global propaganda efforts. One theme that is omnipresent in IS' global propaganda is a “winner's message”, which portrays IS as an unstoppable military force capable of defeating all enemies. This narrative has been particularly effective in persuading jihadist organisations and prospective foreign fighters that IS has staying power in the region. But IS has also

adapted its messaging to local conditions, tapping into local political and social grievances—sometimes quite effectively, and sometimes not. IS has also routinely attacked the legitimacy of rival jihadist groups and political Islamist organisations.

To supplement its propaganda operations, IS has deployed emissaries to meet with regional jihadist organisations in person. While IS' propaganda efforts familiarise jihadist actors with IS' religious methodology and strategic approach, the group's emissaries forge personal relationships with these actors, and initiate the process of securing a pledge of allegiance to IS. In exchange for this pledge, IS has offered jihadist groups significant sums of money and weaponry. Additionally, IS has assisted groups it is wooing on their messaging and social media operations.

While IS has devoted considerable resources to its global expansion campaign, it has experienced mixed results outside of Syria and Iraq. IS has established a robust presence in the Libyan city of Sirte, which has become a hub for the group in North Africa. But IS has also experienced several significant setbacks elsewhere in North Africa and the Sahel, including in Algeria, where state security forces crushed a nascent IS affiliate in May 2015. Rival jihadist forces have also hindered IS' growth outside of Syria and Iraq.

The first section of this report discusses IS' growth model, and explains why global expansion and the recruitment of foreign fighters are critical to IS' success. It specifically examines how external support (i.e., foreign fighters and jihadist organisations outside of Syria and Iraq) addresses three core organisational objectives: religious and political legitimacy, military success, and the global competition with al-Qaeda.

The second section of the report explores IS' global propaganda playbook—namely, the narratives and themes that IS uses to mobilise foreign fighters and jihadist groups to join its ranks. The report identifies nine core narratives that IS deploys in its expansion-related propaganda:

- 1) *Winner's message*: Projecting an image of strength and concealing weaknesses.
- 2) *Discrediting the competition*: Undercutting the legitimacy of rival jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Taliban.
- 3) *The illegitimacy of political Islamists*: Accusing political Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, of possessing a deviant methodology.
- 4) *Sowing discord within enemy ranks*: Spreading misinformation in an effort to highlight, exacerbate, or create fissures within the ranks of rival groups.
- 5) *Exploiting sectarian tensions*: Fueling conflict between Sunni and Shia, often with the intent of forcing Sunnis to seek IS' protection.
- 6) *The caliphate as an Islamic utopia*: Presenting the caliphate as a pious, harmonious, and thriving Islamic state.

- 7) *Jihadist adventure and camaraderie*: Glorifying jihad as an opportunity for brotherhood and excitement.
- 8) *Driving a wedge between Muslims and the West*: Inflaming tensions between Muslims living in the West and their societies in order to galvanise Muslims to support the caliphate.
- 9) *Religious obligation to join the caliphate*: Invoking religious doctrine to pressure Muslims to align with the caliphate.

The third section of the report examines how IS deploys these narratives and adapts its messaging in four countries where IS has established a foothold: Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen. In Libya, IS has focused on exploiting civil conflict and fomenting fissures within its enemies' ranks. IS' messaging in Afghanistan has focused largely on discrediting the Taliban from a political and religious standpoint, while projecting an image of power. Confronting an intense counterinsurgency campaign, IS' Egyptian affiliate, based in the Sinai Peninsula, has focused on winning over and coercing local populations, while IS has mounted a concurrent campaign aimed at wooing members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Lastly, amid a raging civil war in Yemen, IS has sought to inflame Sunni-Shia tensions, while also undermining the legitimacy of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has impeded IS' growth in the country.

The fourth section of the report outlines IS' direct engagement strategy, exploring how the group uses emissaries and inducements to win over regional jihadist groups. It examines how groups such as Africa Media, a pro-IS outlet based in North Africa, have served as intermediaries between IS and other jihadist actors, building relationships and facilitating pledges of allegiance. The fifth section then explores how IS has fared in each of the four countries profiled in this report.

Policy Options

Though less impressive than IS claims, IS' global expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters have presented a host of challenges for the anti-IS coalition. The final section of this report proposes a menu of policy options that stakeholders can implement to address IS' global propaganda efforts.

One measure that policymakers can take to undercut IS' global messaging is to draw attention to IS' expansion setbacks in Africa. A winner's message, as the report explains, lies at the core of IS' global propaganda strategy. However, IS' expansion struggles in Africa could shift IS' narrative from one of strength to one of weakness, potentially dissuading prospective foreign fighters and other jihadist groups. Similarly, stakeholders can implement messaging campaigns aimed at exposing IS' internal vulnerabilities and divisions, which could cast further doubt on the group's image of strength and cohesion. Incorporating IS defectors into counter-messaging campaigns is another approach that policymakers can pursue; defectors can pull back the curtain on life inside the caliphate, and dispel the myths that IS propagates.

Stakeholders can also focus on undermining the online networks that IS relies on to disseminate propaganda and recruit new foreign fighters. Technology companies such as Twitter and Facebook have made considerable progress in suspending pro-IS accounts, though IS has developed some strategies to overcome these account suspensions. One additional approach that civil society actors can take is actively infiltrating IS' online social networks with fake accounts, thus reducing IS' trust in its own networks.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda had, at long last, had enough. After months of squabbling with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (henceforth referred to as IS), al-Qaeda finally decided to end its stormy relationship with its disobedient Iraqi affiliate. On February 2, 2014, al-Qaeda's general command issued a statement proclaiming that IS "is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad group [al-Qaeda's official name], we have no organisational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions".¹ This messy breakup became a major inflection point in the history of the jihadist movement. For over two decades, al-Qaeda had been the jihadist community's unrivalled hegemon, but IS' emergence shattered the movement's unipolarity and ushered in a new era of unprecedented intra-jihadist competition.

This competition was initially limited to the Syria arena, as IS vied for territory and influence against Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. IS had its eye on expanding into new theatres even before its shocking *blitzkrieg* offensive from Syria into Iraq in June 2014, but after those military successes, its outward focus escalated. Indeed, IS' declaration later that month that it had re-established the caliphate dictated that the group had an outward/international focus. After all, a caliphate is global in scope. Following the caliphate announcement, IS accelerated its global expansion efforts, urging jihadists from across the world to join the caliphate, and taking steps to establish outposts in new countries.

IS has followed a phased approach as it expands. Aaron Zelin, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, outlined this phased method in a January 2015 report.² In the early stages, IS deploys intelligence operatives to infiltrate local communities, gain support, and identify potential threats to its expansion efforts. The group subsequently begins military operations, using guerrilla warfare tactics to weaken opponents and create chaos, and to pave the way for the group to seize territory. Once IS establishes a modicum of control in pockets of a given territory, it begins a three-step governing plan, encompassing *dawa* (religious proselytisation), *hisba* (the forcible implementation of religious norms), and the provision of social services. This cycle repeats itself as the group widens its territorial control, and consolidates its hold over the local population.

IS has utilised its propaganda apparatus, one of the group's most effective tools, to complement and augment its on-the-ground expansion efforts. In almost every country where IS seeks to gain a foothold, the group has launched a multi-faceted propaganda

¹ Al-Qaeda's General Command, "On the Relationship of Qaidat al-Jihad and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", al-Fajr Media, February 2, 2014, available at https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/al-qc481_idah-22on-the-relationship-of-qc481idat-al-jihc481d-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shc481m22.pdf.

² Aaron Zelin, *The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).

strategy aimed at persuading militant organisations, jihadist foot soldiers, political Islamists, and local Sunnis to support IS. The official propaganda that the group produces through its many media wings and outlets is amplified by IS' army of social media supporters. IS' propaganda serves as a force multiplier, drawing attention to and magnifying IS' military and governance activities in new theatres.

IS' global propaganda efforts have several common themes and narratives. In countries with large Shia populations, IS has sought to incite and intensify sectarian tensions while positioning itself as the defender of the Sunni population, a strategy that the group first deployed in Iraq in the mid-2000s. IS has also gone on the attack against al-Qaeda affiliates and other jihadist organisations that hinder or oppose IS' expansion into new theatres. The group has similarly sought to discredit political Islamist organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, while appealing to the rank-and-file within those organisations to defect to IS. Most crucially, IS has embraced a "winner's messaging" strategy in new theatres it has entered, projecting an image of strength designed to convince jihadist fence-sitters that it has staying power.³

While IS' wilayats (provinces) often draw from the propaganda playbook of IS' central command, they also adapt their messaging to resonate with local audiences. In Libya, for example, IS has sought to exploit fissures within the Libya Dawn coalition, a military bloc aligned with the country's Tripoli-based government that is internally divided over the prospect of reconciling with a rival government in eastern Libya. In Egypt, IS has sought to tap into the frustrations of both Muslim Brotherhood members and residents of the North Sinai, who are deeply disillusioned with Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime. Further, the extent to which IS' affiliates have adopted the group's overarching propaganda strategy varies. IS' propaganda approach has firmly taken hold among IS' wilayats in Libya, which are in direct contact with the group's Syria/Iraq-based leadership.

IS has also deployed a variety of narratives to attract foreign fighters, the most important of which is its winner's message. After all, if IS is to convince individuals to travel thousands of miles to join the caliphate, it must demonstrate that it is an ascendant and resilient force. Another theme IS has used to attract foreign fighters is portraying the caliphate as an Islamic utopia. IS depicts the caliphate both as a functioning state and the only place where *sharia* (Islamic law) is implemented according to the principles of *al-salaf al-salih* (the "righteous predecessors", or the first three generations of Muslims). IS has also emphasised camaraderie and belonging in its depictions of the caliphate, appealing to individuals searching for a meaningful religious, political or personal identity.

³ For an extended look at the group's winner's messaging strategy, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, *The Winner's Messaging Strategy of the Islamic State: Technically Excellent, Vulnerable to Disruption* (Wikistrat, 2015), available at <http://wikistrat.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/The-Winner's-Messaging-Strategy-of-the-Islamic-State-Wikistrat-report.pdf>.

This study explores the public messaging strategy that IS has adopted to facilitate and accelerate its global expansion efforts and recruitment of foreign fighters. The study first examines why acquiring external support—namely, foreign fighters and jihadist organisations operating outside of Syria and Iraq—is so important to IS' organisational strategy. The study then breaks down IS' global propaganda strategy into the specific themes and narratives that the group uses to woo, coerce, and intimidate individuals and groups outside of Syria and Iraq. After delineating IS' global propaganda playbook, the study looks at how IS and its supporters have put its strategy into practice in specific countries where IS has, or is seeking, a foothold. In essence, this is an examination of IS' "glocal" approach, showing how the group harnesses global themes and capabilities (such as its robust propaganda network) to make an impact on the local level, and how local political contexts shape IS' propaganda approach.

The next section details how IS' public messaging in new theatres operates in synthesis with covert initiatives, including direct engagement with jihadist groups. IS' efforts to communicate directly with potential jihadist allies have received far less attention than the group's public propaganda, but the fact that they are less visible does not necessarily make these efforts less important. Indeed, while IS' propaganda campaign introduces the group's brand, worldview, and organisational strategy, IS' direct engagement initiatives help secure relationships with other jihadist actors.

This report relies heavily on primary source material, including videos, audio messages, and statements and publications produced by IS' official media outlets. Content produced by IS' supporters on social media is also incorporated into the report. However, the report carefully distinguishes between content produced by IS' official outlets and that produced by IS' supporters, which may not reflect the group's top-level strategy. Some secondary source materials, including Arabic-language news reports and research papers produced by think tanks, are referenced to provide historical and social context for IS' efforts in various theatres.

IS' expansion into new theatres and its continued recruitment of foreign fighters counterbalances some of the recent successes that the anti-IS coalition has experienced. Thus, it is critical to understand IS' global expansion strategy, and to develop appropriate responses. This report thus concludes with a menu of policy options that key stakeholders can implement to curb IS' global growth by targeting specific aspects of IS' expansion strategy, from the group's propaganda to its direct engagement initiatives. The policy menu envisions roles for numerous actors, including governments, non-governmental organisations and civil society actors, and tech companies.

IS' Growth Model and the Importance of External Support

Global expansion is not a luxury for IS, but rather an organisational imperative. IS has staked its political and religious legitimacy on its ability to consolidate and expand its territorial control, and to lay claim to a functioning caliphate. A self-proclaimed caliphate that is contained to western Iraq and eastern Syria would eventually lose credibility within the jihadist movement. The group's continued territorial expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters is essential to IS' argument that the caliphate is authentic. The importance IS places on global expansion is evident from its slogan, *baqiya wa tatamaddad*, or remaining and expanding.

Territorial expansion and religio-political legitimacy are mutually reinforcing for IS. As IS gains territory through military conquest, the group's claims appear more credible to jihadist actors. And as IS demonstrates the caliphate's legitimacy, more jihadist organisations and foreign fighters will be inclined to join the group, further bolstering IS' brand. IS' propaganda hails the mutually reinforcing nature of this relationship. In the fifth issue of IS' English-language magazine *Dabiq*, John Cantlie, a British hostage and forcibly conscripted IS propagandist, writes: "The Islamic State is now truly moving with great momentum. As an entity enjoys success, it attracts more to its fold, thereby causing expansion and breeding more success until it achieves some sort of critical mass, the point at which it becomes self-perpetuating, self-sustaining".⁴ Cantlie's statement is quite revelatory about what can be described as IS' momentum-based strategy.

Global expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters are also critical for more immediate reasons related to the group's short- and medium-term objectives. As the anti-IS military coalition applies pressure in Syria and Iraq, new foreign fighters help offset IS' battlefield losses. Similarly, acquiring new territories abroad gives IS the option of shifting resources and manpower to areas where it faces less resistance. Global expansion also fuels IS' competition with al-Qaeda for dominance over the global jihadist movement.

This section explains how external support is critical to IS' legitimacy, and its military and political objectives.

Political and Religious Legitimacy

Put simply, *IS' declaration of a caliphate makes the group's legitimacy hinge on the caliphate's continued viability. The caliphate refers to an Islamic government that rules*

⁴ John Cantlie, "If I Were the U.S. President Today...", *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 36.

a united Muslim world. Islam's first caliph (Arabic for *successor*) was Abu Bakr, who led the *umma* (worldwide community of believers) beginning in 632 AD, after the Prophet Muhammad's death. According to widely-held Sunni Muslim beliefs, a caliphate existed (albeit often with competing centres of power vying for authority) until 1924, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the caliphate when he was in the process of secularising Turkey.

There are three widely recognised Islamic legal requirements for a caliphate to be understood as legitimate: military viability, popular consent from the *umma*, and a caliph who fulfils relevant Islamic requirements. Because IS' main strength in arguing for its legitimacy as a caliphate has been its military success, military losses could have a disproportionate impact: They may cause wider questioning of the caliphate's legitimacy by extremists who might otherwise be attracted to IS' cause. The group depends on a constant stream of recruits to keep its war machine running. While IS can conscript new fighters from areas it controls, conscripts generally won't fight as effectively as zealous recruits (depending on how effective the indoctrination process is at winning the conscripts' loyalty). Further, gains in IS' "near abroad" can maintain the enthusiasm of the group's followers, making up for losses it experiences in Syria and Iraq.

The concept of *hijra* (migration) to the caliphate is central to IS' religious narrative. For example, in the third edition of *Dabiq*, IS claimed that "abandoning hijrah—the path to jihad—is a dangerous matter. In effect, one is thereby deserting jihad and willingly accepting his tragic condition of being a hypocritical spectator ... there is a Khilafah prepared to accept every Muslim and Muslimah into its lands and do all it can within its power to protect them while relying on Allah alone".⁵ *Hijra*, like the recruitment of jihadist actors abroad, also helps bolster the caliphate's legitimacy, as it indicates that Muslims are flocking to the caliphate in large numbers. This provides a necessary counterpoint to the refugee crisis emanating from Syria, which was a black mark for IS. The recruitment of foreign fighters and migrants helps IS rebut one common criticism that other jihadists have levelled against it: that IS lacks the capability to provide for populations living in its so-called caliphate.⁶ The caliphate's legitimacy is linked to IS' ability to provide governance and social services to local populations, and IS envisions foreigners as playing a critical role in state-building, in addition to their well-publicised involvement on the frontlines. Following its June 2014 push into Iraq, IS issued calls for the emigration of doctors, engineers, judges, and specialists in Islamic law.⁷ Such pleas for assistance from skilled outsiders have become a regular element of IS' messaging. The recruitment of jihadist organisations in its near abroad similarly bolsters IS' credentials. In his statement announcing the establishment of the caliphate, spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani declared that all other "emirates, groups, states,

⁵ "The Fear of Hypocrisy", *Dabiq* issue 3, July/August 2014, p. 27.

⁶ For one example of this criticism, see Abu Muhammad al-Maqqdisi, "Laysa ka-man tard. ā bi-shaqq ibnihā", *Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad*, November 5, 2013, at <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=17111301>.

⁷ "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* issue 1, June/July 2014, p. 11.

and organisations” had been rendered “null”⁸ This is because, from IS’ perspective, a valid caliphate is the only entity possessing legitimate legal authority. Thus it is obligatory for all jihadist organisations to pledge their allegiance to IS.

Military Goals

Drawing in foreign fighters and attracting other jihadist organisations to its fold are essential components of IS’ military strategy. At a time when IS is fighting on multiple fronts and experiencing significant battlefield losses—the group has reportedly lost 20,000 fighters to coalition airstrikes alone, according to U.S. defence officials⁹—foreign fighters provide a much-needed infusion of manpower. Moreover, recent reports indicate that IS is experiencing defections and struggling to recruit, and maintain the allegiance of, local fighters in Syria.¹⁰ These challenges make foreign fighters all the more important to IS’ war machine.

Foreigners are also more valuable to IS from a military perspective than local recruits. Foreigners come infused with zeal for their mission, whereas local fighters appear increasingly disillusioned.¹¹ Scholar Thomas Hegghammer, who has done significant research into the foreign fighter phenomenon, concludes that foreign fighters help to “radicalize the conflict”, as they are generally “more ideological than the typical Syrian rebel.” Hegghammer has found that “foreign fighters are overrepresented ... among the perpetrators of the Islamic State’s worst acts”.¹²

Foreigners also present an opportunity for IS to expand its reach globally, if and when they return home. They may be deployed back to their countries of origin to establish an IS branch there. Such was the case in Libya, where members of the al-Battar brigade, a Libyan-led unit which fought competently for IS in the Syria-Iraq theatre, was deployed back to the city of Derna in eastern Libya to set up an IS outpost.

Foreign fighters also bolster IS’ external operations capabilities. Several foreign fighters, including Neil Prakash, Junaid Hussain and Fabien Clain, have played pivotal roles in directing plots in the West and Australia. For instance, the late Junaid Hussain, a leading IS social media operative, was involved in orchestrating the May 2015 shooting at the “Draw Muhammad” event in Garland, Texas.¹³ At other times, IS has infiltrated foreign

⁸ Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah”, Al-Hayat Media Center, June 29, 2014.

⁹ Tom Vanden Brook, “ISIL Death Toll at 20,000, but ‘Stalemate’ Continues”, *USA Today*, October 12, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/10/12/islamic-state-pentagon/73840116/>.

¹⁰ See Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, “ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment”, *New York Times*, September 20, 2015 (discussing defections); Liz Sly, “Islamic State Appears to be Fraying from Within”, *Washington Post*, March 8, 2015 (noting that “the bloodshed is deterring the recruitment of local citizens who were clamoring a few months ago for the opportunity to earn salaries by joining the only new source of employment available”).

¹¹ For a discussion of tensions between local populations and IS, see Yaroslav Trofimov, “In Islamic State Stronghold of Raqqa, Foreign Fighters Dominate”, *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2015.

¹² Joshua Holland, “Why Have a Record Number of Westerners Joined the Islamic State?” interview with Thomas Hegghammer, *BillMoyers.com*, October 10, 2015.

¹³ See, for example, Rukmini Callimachi, “Clues on Twitter Show Ties Between Texas Gunman and ISIS Network”, *New York Times*, May 11, 2015.

fighters back into their home countries to carry out attacks. The most spectacular example is the devastating November 2015 “urban warfare” attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people. All of the perpetrators who have been identified thus far were foreign fighters who resided in Europe before joining IS.

IS' acquisition of pre-existing jihadist groups such as Nigeria's Boko Haram and Egypt's Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is also highly helpful from a military standpoint. IS' expansion into new theatres enables the group to shift resources from one theatre to another, making it more difficult for counterinsurgent forces to effectively contain and degrade the group. This is happening now to some extent: As military pressure on IS intensifies in Syria and Iraq, the group has redirected several hundred foreign fighters to Libya, the most promising of IS' international outposts.¹⁴ International expansion thus allows IS to continue functioning even if its holdings deteriorate in Syria and Iraq, ensuring the group's long-term sustainability. IS, al-Qaeda's “prodigal son”, likely learned this lesson from its parent organisation, whose affiliate strategy has made the group more resilient to counterinsurgent challenges.¹⁵

The Global Competition with al-Qaeda

External support is also a crucial component of IS' competition with al-Qaeda for dominance over the global jihadist movement.¹⁶ Ever since al-Qaeda severed its ties with IS in February 2014, the two have been locked in a fierce battle. Though al-Qaeda had long monopolised the jihadist movement, its network has been increasingly threatened by IS, which has spent significant resources attempting to sow organisational and individual defections from al-Qaeda's orbit. These defections can undercut al-Qaeda's strength and legitimacy, fuelling IS' narrative that al-Qaeda is a splintering, declining organisation.

The recruitment of foreign fighters is similarly important to IS' competition with al-Qaeda. Since IS declared its caliphate, most foreign fighters have joined IS, eschewing al-Qaeda. This trend reinforces IS' claims that it is the new champion of the jihadist movement, and that al-Qaeda is archaic and overly cautious, and thus unable to attract the support of the younger generation.

¹⁴ Suliman Ali Zway, Kareem Fahim and Eric Schmitt, “In Libya, U.S. Courts Unreliable Allies to Counter ISIS”, *New York Times*, January 18, 2016.

¹⁵ On this point, see especially Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ On this competition, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jason Fritz, Bridget Moreng and Nathaniel Barr, *Islamic State vs. al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict* (Washington, DC: New America Foundation, 2015).

Narratives of IS Messaging

IS has implemented a complex, multi-pronged propaganda strategy to attract the support of foreign fighters and jihadist organisations outside of Iraq and Syria. This strategy involves sticks and carrots, patient appeals and urgent demands. It aims to galvanise foreign fighters to join the caliphate, and persuade jihadist groups to align with IS. This messaging strategy employs a variety of themes, including religion, domestic and international politics, and intra-jihadist dynamics. IS' externally-oriented propaganda also appeals to a wide range of target audiences, including prospective foreign fighters and "migrants" in the West and the Middle East, political Islamists in the Middle East, and al-Qaeda members and supporters. The breadth and diversity of IS' messaging is impressive, and defies the common conception of the group as exclusively focused on violence and brutality.¹⁷

Through its propaganda, IS seeks to advance three core arguments:

- 1) IS has successfully restored the caliphate, which functions effectively as a state and adheres to *sharia* as it was practiced during the time of *al-salaf al-salih*, making it the only authentic Islamic state in the world.
- 2) To that extent, from a theological, legal, and political standpoint, IS is the only legitimate Islamic organisation in the world. It annuls existing governments, political Islamist groups, and rival jihadist organisations.
- 3) IS is constantly growing in strength, and is more capable and unified than al-Qaeda, which, IS claims, is on the verge of fragmentation and disintegration.

This section breaks down IS' externally-oriented global propaganda into nine core narratives. This overview is not exhaustive, but encompasses the narratives that are most critical to IS' global messaging. Some of the narratives appeal primarily to foreign fighter and migrants to the caliphate, while others target jihadist and Islamist groups operating outside of Iraq/Syria. However, these narratives are often mutually reinforcing, and IS constantly weaves divergent narratives together.

The Islamic State's Winner's Message

The projection of strength lies at the core of IS' externally-oriented strategic messaging. To persuade foreign fighters and migrants to leave the comfort of their homes to join the caliphate, IS must demonstrate that it is ascendant, in possession of military momentum, and constantly expanding its territorial reach. Similarly, IS wants to show al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist organisations that its prospects for growth are better than al-Qaeda's. Few jihadist organisations are likely to abandon al-Qaeda, a group that has

¹⁷ In a valuable study on IS' messaging, Charlie Winter similarly observed that brutality comprises only a small component of IS' overall propaganda output. See Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015).

shown its resilience over the course of nearly two decades of conflict with the West, if they believe IS' model is unsustainable.

There are several components to IS' winner's message. IS has publicised its battlefield gains and organisational successes, creating the perception that the group is constantly acquiring new fighters and territories. IS trumpets its victories through both official and unofficial media channels, producing slick videos depicting IS fighters on the front lines. IS' legion of social media supporters amplify this message, flooding Twitter and other social media platforms with news of the group's conquests. Other videos and pictures produced by IS affiliates outside of Syria and Iraq showcase IS' military strength in new theatres, depicting heavily armed militants participating in training exercises or parading down streets while displaying IS flags.

IS leverages its global military successes to create the impression that it is powerful locally. For instance, in appealing to militants in places like Yemen and Somalia, IS has highlighted its gains in nearby countries. By fostering the impression that IS is expanding in surrounding regions, IS hopes to convince local jihadists that they too should join the bandwagon.

IS has used violence instrumentally to fuel its winner's message. It has carried out high-profile terrorist attacks in countries outside Syria and Iraq to announce its presence, and to foster the impression that the group is growing in strength in new theatres.¹⁸ IS' choreographed acts of shocking brutality also bolster perceptions of organisational strength. Videos of beheadings and other atrocities show the audience that IS is capable of punishing its enemies and imposing its will on local populations.

Misinformation is another tool IS uses to cultivate the perception of organisational strength. The group frequently exaggerates its strength and military successes, and in at least one instance, claimed responsibility for an attack that it may not have carried out. While IS' tendency towards embellishment is not unique among jihadist organisations—both al-Shabaab and the Taliban routinely inflate the number of casualties inflicted by their attacks—IS has been more successful than other violent non-state actors in presenting its misinformation as fact. Social media penetration is low and journalists may be killed in many territories where IS is strong, thus leaving IS as one of the few sources of information. This allows IS to dictate the media narrative to a certain extent. Moreover, IS' army of online supporters gives the group outsize influence on social media platforms. IS also apparently has an astute understanding of the media cycle, seemingly timing its propaganda releases to maximise the attention the group receives. In turn, mainstream media outlets sometimes repeat IS'

¹⁸ For instance, IS carried out a double suicide bombing at two Houthi mosques in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa in March 2015. The attack, which killed over a hundred civilians and wounded several hundred more, was the first that IS claimed in Yemen after officially establishing a presence there in November 2014. See "Islamic State Claims Sanaa Mosque Attacks", BBC, March 21, 2015.

exaggerated propaganda claims as fact, and unintentionally amplify IS' winner's message.¹⁹

Just as IS overstates its gains, it downplays losses and masks vulnerabilities. IS has utilised shocking violence and brutality to redirect attention away from struggles on the battlefield. For instance, in February 2015, just a week after IS' withdrawal from the Syrian city of Kobani—which was the largest defeat IS had suffered in Syria at the time—the group released a video depicting the immolation of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, who had been captured after his plane crashed over eastern Syria in December 2014. IS is believed to have executed al-Kasasbeh in early January.²⁰ But the jihadist group waited to release the execution video. By distributing the video after the loss of Kobani, IS was able to shift the media's focus from its military struggles to its savagery—which, as previously noted, can be seen as a sign of its strength.

IS has sought to suppress negative reports about the caliphate from being leaked to the international media. The group has utilised both coercion and persuasion to ensure that those living in IS territory do not circulate information contradicting IS' winner's message. In an article released in April 2015, IS supporter Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadhi urged individuals living in IS-controlled cities not to show weakness or draw attention to shortages of essential goods, noting that leaking this information would be a "major shortcoming in maintaining the psychological war with the enemy".²¹ When persuasion fails, IS employs violence to silence those who highlight the group's failings. It has brutally killed a number of Syrians affiliated with Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, an activist group that exposes IS' atrocities and governance struggles, including assassinating two members of the group in neighbouring Turkey in October 2015.²²

In sum, IS' winner's message is central to the group's propaganda strategy, and the group has expended considerable resources to sustain this narrative. It is a testament to the strength of IS' propaganda apparatus (and perhaps the weakness of existing counter-messaging) that even as the group has lost territory and manpower, it has maintained its winner's message.

Discrediting the Competition

IS has sought to undercut the legitimacy of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, its primary competitors in the jihadist sphere. To successfully expand into new theatres where al-Qaeda already has a foothold, IS has to prove to local militants that it possesses superior jihadist credentials and is stronger militarily. Likewise, in Afghanistan IS must

¹⁹ For instance, IS convinced several media outlets in November 2014 that it was in full control of the eastern Libyan city of Derna. In reality, the city was divided among several different militias, some of whom actively opposed IS' presence.

²⁰ Rod Nordland and Ranya Kadri, "Jordanian Pilot's Death, Shown in ISIS Video, Spurs Jordan to Execute Prisoners", *New York Times*, February 3, 2015.

²¹ Abu Sulayman Aa-Jahbadhi, "War Policy against the Enemy Does Not Allow Showing of Weaknesses [translated from Arabic]", posted April 2, 2015.

²² Liam Stack, "ISIS Is Said to Have Killed 2 Activists in Turkey", *New York Times*, November 2, 2015.

demonstrate that it has greater legitimacy than the Taliban, and that it can withstand the Taliban's countermeasures.

With IS' expansion prospects hinging on the outcome of its competition with al-Qaeda, and to a lesser extent the Taliban, IS has gone on the attack against these groups. IS has focused on questioning their religio-political legitimacy. IS points to the creation of the caliphate as evidence that it is the only credible jihadist organisation, and that it is bold and decisive where its jihadist adversaries are timid and frozen.

IS also accuses al-Qaeda and other militant organisations of deviating from the salafi jihadist *manhaj* (religious methodology). IS points to al-Qaeda's adoption of a population-centric approach to governance, arguing that the group has abandoned the principles of *sharia* in the process. In the first issue of *Dabiq*, IS asserted that al-Qaeda had given "preference to popularity and rationalization", and had become "embarrassed of acknowledging undeniable sharia fundamentals such as takfir [excommunication of Muslims]".²³ Such accusations are intended to undermine al-Qaeda's religious credibility.

IS has also crafted rhetorical attacks against al-Qaeda affiliates. In Yemen, for instance, IS has lambasted al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) for allegedly avoiding attacks on Yemeni state forces and the Houthis, who are Shia.²⁴ In Afghanistan, IS has slammed the Taliban for refraining from striking Pakistan's government, highlighting the cosy Taliban-Pakistan relationship as evidence that the group lacks legitimacy. IS also portrays its jihadist rivals as militarily weak, while depicting itself as the only force strong enough to take on the enemies of Islam.



Figure 1: Image from "Oh al-Qaeda of Yemen, to Where Are You Going?"

²³ "From Hijrah to Khilafah", *Dabiq* issue 1, June/July 2014, p. 38.

²⁴ "Yemen", *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 27. IS complains that al-Qaeda's methodology "was one that prohibited the targeting of the Rāfidī Houthis because they were allegedly 'Muslims' excused due to ignorance!"

To that extent, IS has sought to maximise the propaganda value of its terrorist attacks against the West, contrasting its external operations with al-Qaeda’s relative inactivity. Following the November 2015 Paris attacks, IS released two videos targeting AQAP, in which IS asserted that it deserved the loyalty of the jihadist community, having proved that it was capable of “terroriz[ing] infidels everywhere”, from Paris to Beirut and Bangladesh.²⁵ The videos—one of which was titled “Oh al-Qaeda of Yemen, to Where Are You Going?”—directly challenged AQAP’s reputation as the jihadist group best positioned to strike the West.

The Illegitimacy of Political Islamists

IS has also launched a fierce rhetorical campaign against political Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. IS’ criticism of political Islamist factions is rooted in the group’s doctrinal outlook. Salafi jihadism holds that democracy is *shirk* (polytheism), as it places the rule of man above the rule of God. As such, IS has condemned political Islamists for possessing a “deviant methodology” and abandoning *sharia* “fundamentals”.²⁶ (IS’ verbal assaults on political Islamists are hardly unprecedented within the salafi jihadist movement, as al-Qaeda has also been very critical of political Islamists in the past, though it has softened that stance in recent years.)²⁷

While IS’ rhetorical attacks on political Islamists are rooted in theology, there is a clear strategic element as well: IS views the rank-and-file of political Islamist groups as a fertile recruitment pool. Recent crackdowns on Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, for example, may create significant opportunities for IS. While the Brotherhood’s senior leadership advocates for a patient response, younger members have pushed for the Brotherhood to become more combative, and have sometimes turned to violence on their own.²⁸ IS calculates that by delegitimising the Muslim Brotherhood’s methodology and providing an alternative, it can peel away hard-line political Islamists who see violence as a preferable approach in the current circumstances.

Sowing Discord in Enemy Ranks

While IS discredits its jihadist adversaries, it also seeks to facilitate their demise by creating, highlighting, and exploiting divisions in their ranks. IS has explicitly stated its

²⁵ “Ya Qa’idat al-Yaman, ila ayna tathhaboun”, *Wilayat al-Khayr*, November 16, 2015.

²⁶ “From Hijrah to Khilafah”, *Dabiq* issue 1, June/July 2014, p. 39.

²⁷ This softening is reflected in the General Guidelines for Jihad, a missive released by al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2013. The guidelines state that al-Qaeda should cooperate with Islamist groups where there is agreement with them, and “advise and correct” when there is disagreement. The Guidelines also specify that “our differences with other Islamic groups should not distract us from confronting the enemies of Islam”. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad”, September 2013, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

²⁸ For an extensive discussion of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s internal dynamics in the post-Morsi period, see Nathan Brown and Michelle Dunne, *Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

interest in bringing about the fragmentation of its enemies. In an October 2015 audio statement, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani vowed that IS would “divide the groups and break the ranks” of organisations that opposed it.²⁹ This statement contradicts the strategic preferences of al-Qaeda in particular, which has striven for unity and warned against *fitna* (discord) within the jihadist community.

But IS sees the fracturing of its jihadist foes as an opportunity for growth. If rival jihadist organisations are splintering, or if IS can create the perception that this is occurring, IS may be able to persuade rank-and-file militants and mid-level commanders to abandon their sinking ship and join IS. Further, if it appears that al-Qaeda is crumbling from within and militants are flocking to IS, then even more al-Qaeda militants will begin joining IS, believing that it is the winning horse in the global jihadist competition. The logic of this approach is similar to the group’s overall expansion strategy: Playing off John Cantlie’s earlier statement about IS’ momentum-based approach, if defections reach a “critical mass”, then the group will become “self-perpetuating [and] self-sustaining”.³⁰

With this strategic logic in mind, IS’ propaganda strategy aims to divide its opponents. Deception and misinformation are a part of IS’ divide-and-conquer strategy. In several theatres, IS has manufactured rumours that its adversaries are splintering, and that IS is rapidly growing as a result. Sometimes IS claims that large numbers of al-Qaeda jihadists have defected. Other times, the group spreads stories that influential rival commanders have broken ranks and joined IS. Even when these claims are obviously misleading, IS’ army of social media supporters enthusiastically circulates erroneous defection claims, sometimes pushing them into mainstream press reporting. In this manner, IS turns fiction into something resembling reality, saturating social media to the point where members of rival jihadist organisations begin to believe that their groups are crumbling from within.

Exploiting Sectarian Tensions

Ever since the days when it was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), IS has focused on fomenting and accentuating tensions between Sunnis and Shias. AQI worked to spark a civil war between Iraqi Sunnis and Shias, launching devastating attacks against Shia neighbourhoods and religious monuments with the intention of triggering a backlash from the Shia population. AQI reasoned that it would benefit from an ensuing civil war: Iraqi Sunnis would seek AQI’s protection, and Shia-led brutalities would make AQI’s sectarian arguments appear more persuasive. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI’s first emir, explained this strategy in a 2004 letter to al-Qaeda emir Osama bin Laden: “If we

²⁹ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “Qul lilatheena Kafarou Satughlaboun”, audio statement released on October 13, 2015, available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2015/11/01/audio-message-by-is-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-say-to-those-who-disbelieve-you-will-be-overcome/>.

³⁰ John Cantlie, “If I Were the U.S. President Today”, *Dabiq* issue 5, December 2014, p. 36.

succeed in dragging [the Shia] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger”.³¹

As IS expands outside the Syria-Iraq theatre, it has attempted to export its sectarian strategy to countries with sizable Shia populations, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Yemen. IS has adopted a two-pronged approach to inciting Sunni-Shia tensions, involving sectarian rhetoric and targeted violence. IS’ propaganda in the aforementioned countries is heavily infused with anti-Shia language. For instance, in a November 2014 audio statement, IS’ caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on Yemeni jihadists to be “harsh against the Houthi rafidah, for they are kuffar apostates”.³² At the same time, IS has launched high-profile attacks against Shia targets, with a particular focus on mosques. Indeed, IS has identified the Shia as the group’s most high-priority enemy in certain theatres: In his November 2014 statement, Baghdadi instructed IS loyalists in the Arabian Peninsula to fight the Shia before targeting the Saudi regime and Western interests in the region.³³ Though IS’ objectives differ slightly by country, the group’s overarching goal in inciting sectarian conflict is to present itself as the vanguard and protector of Sunnis across the world.

The Caliphate as an Islamic Utopia

A central narrative in IS’ propaganda is that the caliphate is an Islamic utopia. IS wants to convince observers that the caliphate is the only place where *sharia* law is practiced as it was during the time of the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Further, IS seeks to depict the caliphate as a functioning and thriving state where public services are robust, food is plentiful, and the economy is growing. In doing so, IS presents the caliphate as a preferable alternative to the Westphalian state system, a place where Muslims can live harmoniously and piously. This narrative is vital to IS’ recruitment of foreign fighters and migrants.

IS has dedicated considerable resources to propagating the Islamic utopia narrative. In a comprehensive study examining IS’ propaganda output over the course of a month, Charlie Winter found that more than half of IS’ propaganda highlighted various components of the utopia narrative.³⁴ Winter concluded that the group’s primary appeal was its claim to statehood, and that the concept of “utopia is of existential importance to” IS.³⁵

Winter divided IS’ utopia theme into several sub-genres, each of which projects an idealised image. For instance, content focused on religion and justice—which highlights, among other things, IS’ implementation of *hudud* punishments, the piety of

³¹ Letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden, February 2004.

³² Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Wa-law Kariha al-Kafirun”, November 13, 2014. The Houthis are a group in Yemen who adhere to the Zaydi school of Shia theology. The term *rafidah*, meaning rejectionists, is a pejorative often evoked by salafi jihadists against Shias. It refers to their rejection of the first three Sunni caliphs.

³³ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “Wa-law Kariha al-Kafirun”, November 13, 2014.

³⁴ Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 32.

IS citizens, and IS' efforts to eliminate religiously undesirable items such as cigarettes from the caliphate—illustrates that IS is purifying society and strictly implementing *sharia*. Propaganda that highlights governance and economic activity illustrates that IS is capable of providing services to local populations, and that the caliphate is thriving financially. IS has even produced content highlighting scenes of wildlife and nature in the caliphate.

Jihadist Adventure and Camaraderie

The concept of the caliphate as a utopia goes hand-in-hand with IS' glorification of jihad. IS' propaganda is infused with themes of adventure, excitement, and camaraderie, which is largely tailored to Muslim males in their teens and early twenties. The group has produced slick battlefield videos that closely mirror violent video games like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto. The *New Yorker* has noted:

The similarities between ISIS recruitment films and first-person-shooter games are likely intentional. Back in June, an ISIS fighter told the BBC that his new life was “better than that game Call of Duty”. Video-game-themed memes traced back to ISIS have been floating around the Internet for months, including one that reads, “THIS IS OUR CALL OF DUTY AND WE RESPAWN IN JANNAH”. (“Respawn” is the gamer word for reincarnate.) Another ISIS video, as the Intercept notes, looks like a deliberate homage to Grand Theft Auto. Audio clips that sound much like ones in Call of Duty have been spliced into other ISIS videos. Many of the ISIS recruitment videos are dedicated to showcasing rocket launchers, mines, and assault rifles, as if to say, “If you join us, you’ll get to shoot these things”.³⁶

By evoking the stylistic characteristics of violent video games in its propaganda, IS portrays its jihad as an opportunity for young militants to live out their fantasies in real life. IS also attempts to tap into foreign fighters' need for belonging and community. IS has fostered the impression



Figure 2: An IS propaganda video appealing to the narratives of camaraderie and adventure.

that there is great solidarity and camaraderie among IS fighters, presenting the caliphate's soldiers as a tight-knit community. Several IS videos

³⁶ Jay Caspian King, “ISIS’ Call of Duty”, *New Yorker*, September 18, 2014.

feature Western foreign fighters lounging in the grass and drinking tea together while calling on their countrymen to join them.³⁷ In one 2013 video, an IS member sings a *nasheed* while, in the background, other fighters swim and play together in a large swimming pool.³⁸

A study of Western female migrants to the caliphate found that many of the women were attracted by the sense of belonging and sisterhood that purportedly existed there. The female migrants reported that they experienced stronger feelings of camaraderie and unity in the caliphate than they had known in the West.³⁹ Thus, IS' depiction of the caliphate as a place of brotherhood and unity is a powerful recruitment message.

Driving a Wedge between Muslims and the West

Another narrative IS has used to mobilise Muslims living in the West is one that pits the caliphate and the “camp of Islam” against the West and the “camp of kufr”.⁴⁰ The perception that the West has placed Islam under siege helps to mobilise and rally IS supporters. IS has also expanded on this theory by seeking to drive a wedge between Muslims living in the West and their societies, believing this can compel Western Muslims to join the caliphate.

This strategic logic was outlined in an article, titled “The Extinction of the Grayzone”, published in the seventh issue of *Dabiq*. The article explains that between the rival camps of Islam (defined by IS as those who have pledged their allegiance to the caliphate) and the West, there exists a grey zone comprised of Muslims living in the West. IS' objective is to eliminate this grey zone by dividing Western society along religious lines. IS believes that jihadist attacks on Western targets can produce societal polarisation. The *Dabiq* article explains that the caliphate's presence “magnifies the political, social, economic, and emotional impact of any operation carried out by the mujāhidīn against the enraged crusaders. This magnified impact compels the crusaders to actively destroy the grayzone themselves”.⁴¹ As attacks intensify and the political climate in the West becomes more intolerant, Muslims in the West will be forced to make a critical decision: “either apostatize and adopt the kufrī religion ... so as to live amongst the kuffār without hardship, or ... perform hijrah to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens”.⁴²

³⁷ Charlie Winter discusses the foreign fighter camaraderie videos in Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, p. 19.

³⁸ This video can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43yd-vtraNE>.

³⁹ Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), p. 15.

⁴⁰ “The Extinction of the Grayzone”, *Dabiq* issue 7, February 2015.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Religious Obligation to Join the Caliphate

IS also coerces and pressures Muslims to join the caliphate. The group claims that “with the declaration of [the caliphate], it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance”, as Abu Muhammad al-Adnani noted in his statement announcing the caliphate in June 2014.⁴³

IS has invoked religious scripture and symbolism to underscore the urgency of joining the caliphate. In Adnani’s statement, he cited Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence, who stated: “It is not permissible for anyone who believes in Allah to sleep without considering as his leader whoever conquers them by the sword until he becomes khalīfah and is called Amīrul-Mu’minīn (the leader of the believers), whether this leader is righteous or sinful”.⁴⁴ IS also portrays acceptance of the caliphate as necessary to achieve salvation in the afterlife.⁴⁵

IS complements its religious arguments with emotional appeals and exhortations, challenging the masculinity and piety of those who have not joined the caliphate. In the third issue of *Dabiq*, IS explains that “abandoning hijrah—the path to jihad—is a dangerous matter. In effect, one is thereby deserting jihad and willingly accepting his tragic condition of being a hypocritical spectator”.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most notable, and creative, of IS’ efforts to evoke guilt and mobilise Muslims came in a video produced in March 2015 by the Wilayat Ninawa media outlet.⁴⁷ The video, titled “Message from Those Who Are Excused to Those Who Are Not Excused”, features two deaf IS fighters. It is intended as a direct challenge to Muslims who have not joined the group. After all, if deaf men—who are typically exempt from the obligation to wage jihad—can join IS and fight, those without disabilities have no excuse.

⁴³ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah”, June 29, 2014.

⁴⁴ Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah”, June 29, 2014.

⁴⁵ See Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015 (recounting Wood’s conversation with IS supporter Musa Cerantonio).

⁴⁶ “The Fear of Hypocrisy”, *Dabiq* issue 3, August 2014.

⁴⁷ “Message from Those Who Are Excused to Those Who Are Not Excused”, Wilayat Ninawa, March 8, 2015.

Islamic State Messaging on the Local Level

The narratives delineated above serve as IS' propaganda playbook, a framework the group can use to implement and modify its messaging. As IS has expanded into new theatres, it has drawn selectively from this playbook, adopting certain narratives and altering others. In countries where al-Qaeda or another militant group is the primary threat to expansion, IS' propaganda has focused on discrediting and dividing its adversaries. In countries like Egypt where political Islamist parties maintain influence, IS has sought to appeal to the Islamist rank-and-file while discrediting the local Islamist leadership. In countries with a sizable Shia population, IS has sought to inflame tensions and galvanise the Sunni population. The group's winner's messaging is ubiquitous, an integral part of IS' messaging in all countries where the group operates.

This section explores IS' propaganda strategy in four countries where it either has, or is planning to establish, a presence: Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen. Specifically, the section examines how the group has drawn upon and adapted narratives from its central playbook to account for local conditions in each country. It also delves into the country-specific themes and rhetoric the group has used. Each country examined in this report presents IS with unique opportunities and challenges:

- The civil war in Libya has created an environment of disorder and instability that IS has exploited. Facing a variety of military challenges, IS has sought to discredit its adversaries and exploit fissures within their ranks.
- The Taliban's dominance over the militant landscape in Afghanistan has posed a major obstacle to IS' growth in the country. But the succession crisis that erupted following the announcement of Mullah Omar's death has caused some fragmentation within the Taliban's ranks, and created propaganda opportunities for IS.
- In Egypt, IS acquired a pledge of *bayat* (allegiance) from Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the dominant jihadist organisation in the Sinai Peninsula. The group, which was rechristened Wilayat Sinai after joining IS, is under pressure from the Egyptian military, which is waging a fierce counterinsurgency campaign in the Sinai. At the same time, the Sisi regime's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has created an opening for IS to exploit discontent in the Brotherhood's young cadres.
- With the conflict raging in Yemen between the Houthis and Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government, IS has sought to inflame sectarian tensions and position itself as the defender of Yemeni Sunnis. It has also had to confront AQAP, which boasts a stronger network and deeper roots in Yemen than IS.

Though not profiled in this report, IS' propaganda strategies in Algeria and Somalia also bear mentioning, as both epitomise IS' winner's messaging approach. Despite declaring a wilayat in Algeria in November 2014, IS has struggled mightily to maintain a foothold

there. In May 2015, Algerian security forces killed over twenty IS members, including the nascent group's leader, dealing a devastating blow to IS' prospects. With its ground network seriously depleted, IS has turned to a smoke-and-mirrors propaganda strategy in Algeria. Using its social media apparatus, IS has publicised pledges of allegiance from Algerian militants, with pledges timed to maximise media attention. Though the defections are inconsequential from a strategic perspective—news reports indicate that several of the groups that have pledged allegiance consist of fewer than a dozen militants⁴⁸—the pledges, coming in quick succession, help IS maintain the image of momentum.

IS' media efforts in Algeria in September 2015 perfectly illustrate how the group has leveraged its pledges of allegiance. Early that month, militants claiming to be from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) al-Ghuraba Brigade—which had pledged allegiance to IS in July via an audio statement—released a video documenting the group's pledge of allegiance. The next day, militants purportedly from AQIM's al-Ansar Brigade, which operates in central Algeria, released an audio statement announcing their defection to IS.⁴⁹ The re-release of the al-Ghuraba militants' pledge appears strategically timed to coincide with the pledge from the al-Ansar Brigade, creating the illusion that AQIM militants were defecting to the Islamic State *en masse*. Several weeks later, another AQIM-aligned jihadist group pledged *bayat* to Baghdadi.⁵⁰ IS' social media operatives immediately sought to publicise the defections, with one prolific pro-IS Twitter user remarking that a new group was defecting from AQIM to IS every day, while another Twitter supporter claimed that AQIM was fracturing as a result of IS' pressure.⁵¹

Just as IS has relied on smoke and mirrors in Algeria, it has utilised deception and exaggeration in Somalia to persuade Shabaab fighters to join the caliphate. Shabaab's senior leadership has remained loyal to al-Qaeda despite repeated entreaties from IS. But there is considerable support for IS within Shabaab's rank-and-file, and IS has used its well-oiled social media machine to create the illusion that it is ascendant in Somalia. As part of this strategy, IS has perpetuated rumours about schisms within Shabaab's leadership circle, fuelling the perception that Shabaab is splintering in the face of IS' rise. Rumours about a split within Shabaab first emerged in March 2015, when news outlets claimed that Shabaab was divided between Ahmed Diriye, an al-Qaeda loyalist, and Mahad Karatey, the commander of its *amniyat* (intelligence and security wing), who purportedly favoured a merger with IS. Other news reports claimed that Diriye in fact supported IS, while Karatey opposed the group, attesting to observers' confusion about

⁴⁸ *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid* (Arabic), July 27, 2015.

⁴⁹ "Statement from the Mujahidin: Bay'ah to the Caliph of the Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Joining the Islamic State's Wilayat al-Jaza'ir", Katibat al-Ansar, September 4, 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/09/04/new-audio-message-from-katibat-al-an%E1%B9%A3ar-statement-from-the-mujahidin-bayah-to-the-caliph-of-the-muslims-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-joining-the-islamic-states-wilayat-al-jaz/>.

⁵⁰ "AQIM Division Pledges Allegiance to IS Leader Baghdadi in Video", SITE Intelligence, September 22, 2015.

⁵¹ Tweets from account of M. Gharib al-Ikhwan (@bhbhbhbh131), September 21, 2015; tweets from account of Uyun al-Ummah (@Oyoon_is), September 21, 2015.

Shabaab's internal dynamics.⁵² IS supporters took to Twitter to publicise Shabaab's rumoured leadership dispute.⁵³

At the same time IS was trying to accentuate friction within Shabaab, it also exaggerated its own capabilities and influence in Somalia. On March 12, an IS social media supporter posted a picture on Twitter of a group of fighters holding a banner that read: "Jeel al-Khilafa [Generation of the Caliphate]: We are coming... We are coming, The caliphate will be back on the Prophetic way". The caption accompanying the photo claimed that Mukhtar Robow (a high-ranking Shabaab member who had a falling out with the group's leadership in 2013) and 1,700 Somali fighters had pledged allegiance to IS. Though this pledge of *bayat* was fabricated, IS' decision to single out Robow, an influential commander who is still estranged from Shabaab's central command, was clearly a strategic move intended to accentuate pre-existing schisms.

In early October 2015, IS launched a coordinated propaganda campaign in Somalia that far surpassed the group's prior propaganda operations in East Africa. From October 1 to October 14, IS released at least eight propaganda videos targeting Somali jihadists. Making the campaign all the more notable, several of the videos were produced by IS wilayats outside of Syria and Iraq, the hub of IS' media operations. IS units in the Sinai Peninsula, Yemen, and West Africa all released propaganda videos in early October targeting Somalia. The decision to use affiliates in Africa and Yemen for this purpose was a strategic one on IS' part. These videos helped foster the perception that IS was gaining momentum in Africa and in Yemen, thus encouraging Somali jihadists to join an ascendant IS.

But IS' actual results in Somalia have been mixed. A small number of Shabaab militants have publicly pledged allegiance to IS, including a minor religious figure based in Puntland, an autonomous region in north-eastern Somalia far from IS' stronghold in the south.⁵⁴ But the *amniyat*, Shabaab's intelligence service, has severely cracked down on IS sympathisers, preventing IS from establishing a beachhead in Somalia. Thus, Somalia shows how, even with a robust propaganda strategy, weak local networks may hinder the group's prospects.

But IS' propaganda operations can also serve as a force multiplier, amplifying the group's strengths and accelerating its growth. This section now examines how IS has used propaganda as it tries to expand its presence in Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen.

⁵² See, for example, Mowlid Sabriye, "Sharp Division Splits al-Shabaab Into Two Factions", Radio Mogadishu, March 6, 2015 (taking the position that Diriye favored joining IS).

⁵³ See, for example, tweets from Colonel ShaamiBro, March 13, 2015.

⁵⁴ "Bay'ah From Him and a Group of Mujāhidin of Somalia to the Caliph of the Muslims Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī", October 22, 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/10/22/new-audio-message-from-shaykh-abd-al-qadir-mu-min-bayah-from-him-and-a-group-of-mujahidin-of-somalia-to-the-caliph-of-the-muslims-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi/>.

Libya

The civil conflict in Libya—which pits the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) against the House of Representatives (HoR), Libya's internationally recognised legislative body—has been a major boon for IS. The conflict has left a power vacuum that IS has deftly exploited, seizing territory and sowing instability in northern Libya. With rival factions concentrating their military resources on one another instead of combating the IS threat, IS has established a foothold in and around the city of Sirte, where it has established governance institutions, punished local opponents, and instituted an austere version of *sharia*.

The civil conflict has become a focal point of IS' messaging strategy in Libya, as has the projection of strength. As it expands into new territories, IS has used brutality instrumentally to intimidate local adversaries into submission. This section now examines the evolution of IS' messaging strategy in Libya.

Early Growth in Derna

IS' first testing ground in Libya was the eastern coastal city of Derna, long a hotbed of jihadist activity. In the spring of 2014, several hundred members of the Libyan-led al-Battar battalion, which had been fighting on IS' side in the Syria-Iraq theatre, redeployed to Derna, where they set up a group known as the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC).⁵⁵ At the time of IYSC's arrival in Derna, several other jihadist factions, including Ansar al-Sharia and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, already had firm roots in the city, and IYSC was perceived as an unwelcome newcomer by some.

Rather than conceiving of other jihadist factions as potential allies, IYSC saw all armed groups in the city as rivals. IYSC immediately sought to demonstrate that it was superior to its opponents militarily and religiously. IYSC introduced itself to Derna residents in April 2014 by holding an ostentatious military parade in which militants toting rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons drove through the streets of the city.⁵⁶ Pictures of the parade were soon uploaded to IYSC's Facebook page, illustrating how the group integrated social media into its on-the-ground messaging efforts. The parade, which amounted to a show of force, would become an integral part of IYSC's early messaging in Derna.

After announcing its presence in Derna, IYSC leveraged its messaging apparatus to draw attention to its growing influence. One tactic IYSC used was highlighting individuals who had joined the group. From July to September 2014, IYSC posted lists of repentance statements on its Twitter and Facebook pages from former members of

⁵⁵ Though IYSC did not become an official IS affiliate until November 2014, the group's messaging strategy closely resembled IS' global propaganda playbook. It is likely that IS coordinated media operations with IYSC months before the group officially pledged allegiance to IS. Thus, our analysis of IS' messaging in Libya includes IYSC's early propaganda efforts.

⁵⁶ Facebook page of Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam bi Madinat Darnah, April 4, 2014.

the Libyan security services who had “come voluntarily” to atone for their sins.⁵⁷ These repentance statements were widely circulated on social media, receiving as many as 500 retweets in some instances. These statements left the impression that city residents were flocking to the group in droves.

IYSC also showcased its implementation of *hudud* punishments in Derna, another tactic aimed at intimidating local populations and projecting strength. The most prominent example came in August 2014, when IYSC released photos and video of an execution the group carried out in a Derna stadium.⁵⁸ Other images posted to IYSC’s social media accounts showed militants lashing residents of the city for consuming alcohol.⁵⁹ By circulating these images of instrumental brutality, IYSC projected an image of power to local, national, and even global audiences. These images also underscored IYSC’s commitment to the implementation of *sharia*, bolstering the group’s religious standing with local and global jihadists.

IYSC’s messaging in the summer of 2014 set the stage for the group’s pledge of allegiance to IS. In early October, IYSC posted videos and images on social media of armed militants parading down the streets of Derna while waving IS flags and yelling IS slogans.⁶⁰ In late October, Derna residents gathered in public and pledged allegiance to IS, with IS online supporters circulating pictures and video of the event.⁶¹ IYSC’s shows of force, coupled with the propaganda the group had released previously, created the perception that IS had seized full control of Derna. Several mainstream press outlets reported that this was the case, overlooking the fact that the city was divided among a variety of militant factions.⁶² The media’s erroneous reporting illustrated how IS’ saturation of social media platforms, coming at a time when few reporters dared to venture into Derna, allowed it to shape and even dictate the media narrative.

Though IYSC was able to persuade media outlets that it was the dominant force in Derna, it still had to address its rival militias. IYSC adopted a two-pronged approach to counter the influence of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and other factions. Even before IYSC pledged allegiance to IS, the group began launching attacks against fighters from other militant factions.⁶³ At the same time, IYSC began a concerted messaging campaign aimed at undermining the religious legitimacy of its rivals. IYSC accused ASMB of violating *sharia* principles by providing security to Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the chairman of Libya’s National Transitional Council, when he visited Derna in 2012.⁶⁴ IYSC

⁵⁷ See, for example, Twitter account of Shabab al-Islam Shura Council, July 3 and 4, 2014.

⁵⁸ Twitter account of Shabab al-Islam Shura Council, August 19, 2014.

⁵⁹ Twitter account of Shabab al-Islam Shura Council, August 26, 2014.

⁶⁰ See “Libya’s Islamist Militants Parade with ISIS Flags”, *Al-Arabiya*, October 6, 2014.

⁶¹ Tweets from Prophet’s Khilafah, @PKH1974, October 31, 2014.

⁶² For instance, see Maggie Michael, “How A Libyan City Joined The Islamic State Group”, Associated Press, November 9, 2014.

⁶³ Aaron Zelin, “The Islamic State’s First Colony in Libya”, *Policywatch* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), October 10, 2014.

⁶⁴ For background on this incident, see Thomas Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Backs Jihadists Fighting Islamic State in Derna, Libya”, *Long War Journal*, July 9, 2015.

also condemned ASMB for its involvement in a security committee established by the Libyan interior ministry.

Tensions between IYSC and ASMB and its allies escalated in the early months of 2015 and came to a head in May 2015, when an IYSC-affiliated preacher in a Derna mosque claimed in a sermon that IS was the only legitimate force in the city. The statement was a direct challenge to the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), an umbrella group that included ASMB and several other militias, which issued a “final warning” in response to these comments.⁶⁵ IYSC answered by killing a key DMSC leader, triggering a bout of intense conflict. But IYSC's bark proved to be more potent than its bite: Just two weeks after the clashes erupted, IYSC militants were forced to withdraw from Derna to the suburbs.



Figure 3: A “wanted dead” poster for Hisham al-Ashmawi, produced by IS members in Libya.

The eruption of clashes between DMSC and IYSC ushered in a new stage in IYSC's messaging campaign against its jihadist opponents in Derna, one defined by vitriol and malice. As the fighting raged, IS supporters took to social media to attack DMSC, accusing the group of being a Western-backed *sahwat* force.⁶⁶ (IS pejoratively

calls Sunni groups that fight it *sahwat*, or “awakenings”, a reference to the Sunni tribes that rose up against AQI, IS' predecessor, beginning in 2006.) In August 2015, IYSC took the unprecedented step of issuing “wanted dead” posters featuring members of the DMSC and other jihadist factions.⁶⁷

IS also brought its dispute with DMSC to the group's global audience. In late June 2015, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released an audio statement warning the “*sahwat*” forces of Derna that it was futile to fight IS.⁶⁸ In an article in the eleventh issue of *Dabiq*, published in September 2015, a top IS official in Libya reiterated many of the group's criticisms of ASMB and other militant factions.⁶⁹ These propaganda pieces were

⁶⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, “Veteran Jihadists Killed by Islamic State's ‘Province’ in Derna, Libya”, *Long War Journal*, June 12, 2015.

⁶⁶ See, for example, tweets from Abu Bakr al-Barqawi, @baker_brgaa, June 20, 2015.

⁶⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, “The Islamic State's ‘Wanted Dead’ List in Libya”, *Long War Journal*, August 18, 2015.

⁶⁸ Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, “Ya Qawmena, Ajeebu Da'ei Allah”, *Al-Furqan Media*, June 23, 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/23/al-furqan-media-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-oh-our-people-respond-to-the-messenger-of-god/>.

⁶⁹ “Interview with Abul-Mughirah al-Qahtani”, *Dabiq* issue 11, September 2015, p. 61.

intended to intimidate and discredit IS' foes, but did little to change the balance of power in Derna, where IS was struggling to hold the small fragment of territory it still controlled. Indeed, in early December, IS fighters in the suburbs asked that rival militias allow them safe passage out of Derna, a request that marked the nadir of IS' campaign in the city.⁷⁰ While some Islamic State militants remain on the outskirts of Derna, they are no longer strategically relevant at this point.

But while IS' experiment in Derna was unsuccessful, the group has thrived in Sirte, a former bastion of Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime that became a jihadist stronghold after the 2011 revolution.

Early Growth in Sirte

IS began to build its communications infrastructure in Sirte even before it announced its physical presence in the city, which demonstrates the importance that IS places on messaging and propaganda in its expansion efforts. In October 2014, about four months before IS fighters moved into Sirte, Twitter supporters reported that the group had taken over the Sirte-based al-Tawhid satellite TV station.⁷¹ In subsequent months, the station disseminated pro-IS statements and religious messages, gradually exposing the population to IS' methodology. Additionally, just days after IS militants made their military advance into Sirte in February 2015, the group seized radio stations and began circulating pro-IS content, including speeches by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁷²

IS' early messaging in Sirte closely mirrored the approach that IYSC had taken in its first months of operation in Derna. In both places, maintaining a winner's message and presenting the image of strength were central to the group's efforts. Its winner's message also helped conceal the fact that, at least initially, IS had only a marginal physical presence in much of Libya. In November 2014, after AQAP official Sheikh Harith al-Nazari claimed that IS had no power in Libya, a pro-IS group in the country countered with a statement claiming that IS factions in Libya "have more weight than all the other groups, big or small". The group also claimed that all the members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte had pledged allegiance to IS.⁷³ These claims were fictitious: At that time, IS was still a small player in Libya, and controlled no physical territory aside from some Derna neighbourhoods. Moreover, contrary to IS' claims, the question of whether to align with IS was deeply divisive to Ansar al-Sharia's Sirte branch. Some members refused to align with IS, and the group reportedly broke apart because of disagreements over the issue.⁷⁴ But as Brookings Institution scholar Shadi Hamid has noted, IS frequently cares less about "objective reality" than popular perception, because it is engaged in "a propaganda war".⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Al-Naba TV (Arabic), December 5, 2015.

⁷¹ Tweets from Manatah_Sahab3, @Oussama3333333, October 8, 2014.

⁷² Tweets from Abu Usamah al-Barqawi, @gsg999h, February 12, 2015.

⁷³ "Sharia Lions in Libya Respond to Harith al-Nazari" (Arabic statement), November 22, 2014.

⁷⁴ David Kirkpatrick, "ISIS Finds New Frontier in Chaotic Libya", *New York Times*, March 10, 2015.

⁷⁵ Stephen Castle, "Britain, Concerned About Russian Crash, Halts Sinai Flights", *New York Times*, November 4, 2015.

Once IS did seize territory in and around Sirte, it employed tactics similar to what it had used in Derna to display strength and momentum. In early February 2015, IS held a military parade in Nawfaliyah, a town east of Sirte, with online supporters posting pictures of armed militants driving dozens of cars through the Libyan desert.⁷⁶ Shortly after moving into Sirte, IS supporters posted images of former Libyan security officials repenting before the group's fighters, a mirror of some of the early images from Derna.⁷⁷ IS militants then conducted another military parade shortly after taking territory in Sirte city.⁷⁸ Such processions have become a trademark of IS' global propaganda, attesting to the group's desire to project an image of strength. The parades also distinguish IS from al-Qaeda, which has generally maintained a much lower profile in areas where it has gained ground, due to concerns that shows of force will draw unwanted attention from counterinsurgent forces.

IS also used instrumental brutality to demonstrate its strength in Sirte. In mid-February 2015, al-Hayat Media Center, IS' foreign language media division, released a video titled "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross", which depicted Libyan militants beheading over twenty Egyptian Coptic Christians who had been kidnapped in Libya.⁷⁹ The video's primary target audiences appeared to be in Europe and the United States: A militant featured in the video spoke in American-accented English and vowed to "conquer Rome". The video ended with a shot of the blood-soaked Mediterranean, ominous symbolism for European viewers. But the fact that the video was filmed in Libya, seemingly on a beach, was symbolic in its own right, underscoring IS' growing presence in the country.

Confronting Libya Dawn

Soon after IS established a foothold in Sirte, it began the next phase of its messaging strategy: attacking Libya's political Islamists. IS has launched a vicious campaign against the GNC and its military ally, the Libya Dawn coalition, both of which are commonly referred to as Islamist-dominated.⁸⁰ IS has also verbally attacked the Justice and Construction Party, Libya's Muslim Brotherhood wing, and religious figures associated with the GNC, including members of the Dar al-Ifta, or Fatwa Council, Libya's supreme religious authority. IS' verbal assault against the GNC and Libya Dawn has complemented the group's actual military campaign against Dawn factions in and around the city of Misrata.

IS' rhetorical onslaught against political Islamists is indicative of the group's growth strategy in Libya. IS views the rank-and-file of political Islamist parties and Libya Dawn

⁷⁶ For images of the military parade, see Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State 'Province' in Libya Claims Capture of Town", *Long War Journal*, February 15, 2015.

⁷⁷ "IS Members in Libya Publish Online Photos of Policemen 'Repenting' in Sirte [Arabic]", *Al-Wasat*, February 14, 2015.

⁷⁸ Bel Trew, "Jihadists Use Libya Chaos To Mass on EU's Doorstep". *Sunday Times*, February 22, 2015.

⁷⁹ "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross", Al-Hayat Media Center, February 15, 2015.

⁸⁰ Both factions also include non-Islamist actors, including Berber groups and Misratan business interests.

as a fertile recruitment pool, and believes it can peel away hardliners from both blocs. This logic helps explain why IS has spent more time attacking the GNC and Dawn than the secular-leaning HoR and Khalifa Hifter—the military commander of the HoR, who has vowed to fight all political Islamist factions. Though IS has condemned the HoR and Hifter on numerous occasions, its ability to recruit from HoR’s ranks is somewhat limited, considering that there are few individuals associated with the bloc who might sympathise with IS’ salafi jihadist ideology. Thus, IS has focused the majority of its efforts on splitting the ranks of the political Islamists and exploiting any resulting fissures.

IS’ strategy aimed at Libyan political Islamists was clearly outlined in a video featuring Abu Muhammad al-Farjani, an IS supporter from Sirte.⁸¹ In the video, released just weeks after IS seized control of neighbourhoods in Sirte, al-Farjani exhorted the “sons of Misrata” to abandon the Dawn factions, whom he claims “defend the flag of paganism and apostate democracy”. Instead, he urged them to join IS’ ranks. Farjani made a similar appeal to politicians, promising that if they repented, they would receive protection. This promise of leniency was coupled with a menacing threat, warning that IS fighters “have not found more satisfying blood to shed than that of the *sahwat*”. Such a carrot-and-stick approach is a trademark of IS’ global messaging.

Despite Farjani’s threats, IS and Dawn fighters on the outskirts of Sirte maintained a tenuous peace in the weeks following IS’ takeover of the city. But fighting broke out between the two groups in mid-March, with IS supporters blaming Dawn factions for initiating an “unprovoked” attack.⁸² The eruption of clashes between Dawn and IS in Sirte was a watershed moment for IS’ Libya propaganda, prompting IS to intensify its rhetorical (and military) campaign against the Dawn/GNC coalition. Farjani remarked in an audio message released shortly after the clashes broke out, “Now that you have revealed your true intentions and injected your venoms, know that this is a war we have been hoping for a long time”.⁸³

IS has adopted several narratives in its efforts to delegitimise the Dawn/GNC coalition. One of its most common themes is that Dawn forces are puppets of the West. Abu Abdullah al-Libi, a former high-ranking Ansar al-Sharia religious official who defected to IS, accused Dawn/GNC of handing Libya “over to the West on a gold plate”, and of fighting IS on the West’s behalf.⁸⁴ These allegations echoed the claims of Abu Irhim al-Libi, a prolific IS propagandist in Libya, who accused Dawn of fighting IS to gain political recognition from the West.⁸⁵ A similar IS refrain was that Dawn factions are tools of the United Nations and Bernardino Leon, the now-replaced UN official in charge of facilitating a political reconciliation between the GNC and HoR. In a sermon given at a

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⁸¹ Abu Muhammad al-Farjani, “Take Warning, Then, O Ye With Eyes [Arabic]”, Wa A’iddu Establishment for Jihadist Media, February 22, 2015.

⁸² Tweets from Mu’awiyah al-Qahtani (aka Ibn al-Siddiqah), @bnalsdeQa, March 14-16, 2015.

⁸³ Abu Muhammad al-Farjani, “Smite Ye Above Their Necks [Arabic]”, Sarab Media Center, March 18, 2015.

⁸⁴ Abu Abdullah al-Libi, “O People of Libya! You Have Entered a New Phase of History, So Be Glad [Arabic]”, March 25, 2015.

⁸⁵ Tweets from Abu Irhim al-Libi, @jihad_liby_110, March 14-16, 2015.

Sirte mosque in March 2015 (later released as an audio recording online), Hassan al-Karami, a high-ranking IS religious official in the city, claimed that IS “fight[s] for God” while Dawn fights “for the Zionist Jew Leon”.⁸⁶ Through these accusations, IS hopes to discredit Dawn and scuttle the peace process. Reconciliation between the GNC and HoR would be a major challenge to IS, which would become one of the unity government’s primary targets.

IS has also challenged the religious legitimacy of the GNC/Dawn bloc, accusing GNC/Dawn of wearing an “Islamic shroud” that masks the group’s democratic agenda.⁸⁷ IS propagandists have launched a full-blown media offensive against the bloc’s top religious authority, Mufti al-Sadiq al-Gharyani. IS has assailed Gharyani for accepting democracy, with al-Karami calling the mufti a “charlatan”, and the “head of the abode of falsehood and democracy”.⁸⁸ In the same vein, Farjani has labelled the Dar al-Ifta (fatwa council) “preachers of non-belief”.⁸⁹ Karami also accused Gharyani of being subservient to the West and taking orders from Leon and the UN.

Another target of IS’ verbal attacks is Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). In the eleventh issue of *Dabiq*, IS alleges that Belhadj and other former members of LIFG had committed apostasy by participating in the political system.⁹⁰ IS also accuses Belhadj of being behind the “Ikhwanization of jihad” in Libya.⁹¹ IS’ rhetorical assault against Belhadj, like its campaign against Gharyani, is strategic in nature, as Belhadj is one of the most prominent Islamist figures in the GNC/Dawn coalition.

IS has supplemented its campaign against GNC/Dawn with a winner’s messaging initiative designed to sow fear in its enemies. IS has vowed that it will decimate Dawn—whom it portrays as a feeble opponent—just as it destroyed other *sahwat* factions in Syria and Iraq.⁹² In a statement ominously titled “Smite Ye Above Their Necks”, Farjani promised that IS would “suck the blood” of its opponents in Libya and “conquer Misrata as we conquered Mosul”, severing the heads of its foes along the way. At the same time, IS has sought to conceal any news that would reveal the group’s vulnerabilities in Libya. In April 2015, IS supporter Shaykh Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadhi published an article, titled “War Policy Against the Enemy Does Not Allow Showing of Weakness”, in which he instructed individuals in Sirte not to discuss the hardships that they had experienced in the city, and warned that doing so would create the perception that IS was vulnerable.⁹³

⁸⁶ Hassan al-Karami, Friday sermon at Al-Ribat Mosque in Sirte, March 27, 2015.

⁸⁷ “Interview with Abul Mughirah al-Qahtani”, *Dabiq* issue 11, September 2015, p. 60.

⁸⁸ Hassan al-Karami, “The Missile and the Cannon on the Libyan Fatwa Abode [Arabic]”, June 26, 2015.

⁸⁹ Abu Muhammad al-Farjani, “You Began Fighting Me [Arabic]”, Sarab Media Center, June 11, 2015.

⁹⁰ “Interview with Abul Mughirah al-Qahtani”, *Dabiq* issue 11, September 2015, p. 60.

⁹¹ “From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of the Coalitions”, *Dabiq* issue 11, September 2015, p. 53. The phrase “Ikhwanization of jihad” alludes to IS’ claim that former militants had abandoned their commitment to jihad, instead embracing political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood model.

⁹² Abu Muhammad al-Farjani, “Smite Ye Above Their Necks [Arabic]”, Sarab Media Center, March 18, 2015.

⁹³ Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadhi, “War Policy Against the Enemy Does Not Allow Showing of Weaknesses [Arabic]”, April 2, 2015.

Foreign Fighter Recruitment

A frequently overlooked element of IS' messaging strategy in Libya is the group's effort to attract foreign fighters. IS envisions Sirte as a third capital of its caliphate and a possible fall-back option if the group loses significant territory in Syria and Iraq.⁹⁴ Thus, IS has gone to considerable lengths to promote its promising new province to foreign fighters on social media. For instance, immediately following IS' establishment of a



Figure 4: Video from Wilayat Tarabulus, “A Message to Our Monotheist Brothers in Tunisia.”

wilayat in Derna in November 2014, supporters on Twitter launched a hashtag campaign urging individuals from Sudan, the Maghreb, and other parts of Africa to travel to Libya if they could not reach Syria and Iraq.⁹⁵ Similarly, three English-speaking women believed to be living in IS-controlled territory in Libya have issued numerous calls on various social media platforms for *hijra* to Libya. Posting under the pseudonym Umm Unknown, one woman said, “Come to Libya. Hijra is not only to Shaam [Syria] now. Libya needs you too”.⁹⁶ In April 2015, the media branch of Wilayat Tarabulus, the official name of the IS faction in Sirte, released a video calling on Tunisians to migrate to Sirte.⁹⁷ The call for migration from Tunisia to Libya suggests that IS' strategy in North Africa is to strengthen its position in Libya, rather than immediately spreading its resources between Libya and neighbouring countries.

As part of its recruitment pitch to foreign fighters, IS has trumpeted life in its wilayat in Sirte. For instance, in February 2015, shortly after IS seized most of Sirte, IS supporters on Twitter began posting pictures of nature scenes in Sirte, using the hashtags #migration_to_the_State_in_Libya and #when_will_you_travel_to_join. A video produced by Wilayat Tarabulus in March 2015 showed IS fighters destroying tombs and

⁹⁴ David Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, “ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option”, *New York Times*, November 28, 2015. Not all analysts agree that IS views Sirte as a fallback option. For a skeptical take on this point, see Hassan Hassan, “Five Years Later, Libya is Becoming a Jihadist Academy”, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, February 17, 2016 (arguing that IS simply sees Libya as a new front, and not as a contingency plan).

⁹⁵ See tweets from Ajil Suria wa-Iraq, @ShAm_KhiLaFa, November 4, 2014.

⁹⁶ Shiv Malik and Chris Stephen, “English-Speaking Female Jihadist in Libya Issue Islamic State Call to Arms”, *Guardian* (U.K.), September 27, 2015.

⁹⁷ “Risala Ila Ikhwanina fi'Soumal”, Wilayat Tarabulus, April 7, 2015.

gravesites in Sirte, part of the group's efforts to demonstrate its implementation of *sharia*.⁹⁸

Wilayat Khorasan

The Taliban poses a significant barrier to the Islamic State's expansion efforts in Afghanistan. For much of its history, the Taliban stood out among hard line Islamist organisations for its internal cohesion and the unchallenged authority of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the group's emir. The announcement of Mullah Omar's death has created unprecedented divisions within the Taliban's ranks, with the emergence of a splinter group in November 2015 being considered the first major split within the Taliban since the group was established in the mid-1990s.⁹⁹ However, the group has nonetheless maintained a strong front against IS encroachment.

Confronted with a formidable opponent in Afghanistan, IS has launched a vicious messaging campaign against the Taliban in the hopes of discrediting the group and persuading disillusioned supporters to join IS. This campaign is at the core of IS' propaganda strategy in Afghanistan: In a recent segment of an IS radio show produced in the eastern province of Nangarhar, IS propagandists claimed that Taliban fighters were "higher-priority targets" than the Afghan government.¹⁰⁰ The precedence given to the fight against the Taliban is reflective of IS' overarching strategic thought: For IS to secure and expand its foothold in new countries, it must first weaken its primary competitors within the jihadist community.

IS' attacks on the Taliban also play into the former group's competition with al-Qaeda. In 2001, Osama bin Laden pledged *bayat* to Mullah Omar on al-Qaeda's behalf, and soon after the Taliban announced that Mullah Omar had died, Zawahiri pledged *bayat* to Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, the Taliban's newly appointed emir.¹⁰¹ In both pledges, al-Qaeda's leader referred to the Taliban leader as *Amir al-Muminin*, the Commander of the Faithful. This title places Mullah Mansour in direct competition with the caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—or, more accurately, portrays Baghdadi as a would-be usurper of the title. Consequently, IS has challenged both Mullah Omar and Mullah Mansour's credentials, in an effort to prove that Baghdadi is the only true leader of the *ummah* (worldwide body of Muslims).

IS has paired its messaging campaign against the Taliban with a propaganda initiative aimed at demonstrating IS' growing strength in Afghanistan. Similar to its messaging in

⁹⁸ "Ezalat Ma'alim as-Shirk fi Wilayat Tarabulus. Mar'iy", Wilayat Tarabulus, March 16, 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/03/16/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-removing-tombs-of-polytheism-in-wilayat-%E1%B9%ADarabulus/>.

⁹⁹ "Afghan Taliban Splinter Group Names Mullah Rasool as Leader", BBC, November 4, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Pamela Constable, "A New Islamic State Radio Station Spreads Panic in Eastern Afghanistan", *Washington Post*, December 22, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Pledging Bayat to Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour", Al-Sahab Media, August 13, 2015.

other theatres, IS has used a variety of tactics, including instrumental brutality, shows of force, and misinformation to project its strength in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁰²

IS' Anti-Taliban Propaganda

IS' rhetorical assault on the Taliban has been multi-faceted, targeting the group's leadership, religious methodology, and politico-military strategy. Several themes emerge from IS' anti-Taliban propaganda. First, IS aggressively criticises the Taliban's allegedly close relationship with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). Similarly, IS focuses on the Taliban's relationship with other state actors—Iran being the most frequently mentioned—asserting that by recognizing the Westphalian system, the Taliban has abandoned the path of jihad. Second, IS accuses the Taliban of being nationalist in orientation, thus further discrediting it in the eyes of globally-oriented jihadists.

Third, IS condemns the Taliban's Deobandi religious methodology, claiming that the



Figure 5: Image from Wilayat Khorasan's video "On That Day Shall the Believers Rejoice"

Taliban has abandoned *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and deviated in its understanding of *sharia*. This section explores each of these themes in IS' anti-Taliban propaganda.

The Taliban's Relationship with Pakistan and Other States

IS has pointed to the Taliban's relationship with Pakistan's ISI as evidence that the Taliban cannot be considered a legitimate jihadist actor. IS has accused the Taliban of pursuing Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, and of being little more than a puppet of the ISI.¹⁰³ IS has also claimed that the Taliban is waging its anti-IS campaign at the ISI's behest. This line of argument has helped IS to downplay the losses it suffers at the Taliban's hands.

In a video produced by Wilayat Khorasan in May 2015, IS accused Taliban fighters of attacking IS positions after being "provoked by the ISI".¹⁰⁴ In contrast, the video said

¹⁰² Wilayat Khorasan, IS' official province in Central Asia, encompasses Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also ostensibly other countries in Central Asia, as well as Iran. This section focuses primarily on IS' messaging in Afghanistan, which is the focal point of Wilayat Khorasan's propaganda operations, though it also covers some of the group's messaging in Pakistan.

¹⁰³ See Charles Recknagel, "Militants In Afghanistan, Pakistan Claiming Allegiance To IS", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 26, 2014; Mirwais Adeel, "ISIS in Afghanistan Nothing But a Movement Formed by Pakistani Militants", *Khaama Press*, August 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ "On That Day Shall the Believers Rejoice [Arabic]", Wilayat Khorasan, May 31, 2015.

that IS “prefers living in the mountains over living under the rule of Pakistan”. This latter claim helped to justify its expansion struggles in Afghanistan, noting that it would rather suffer and remain autonomous than succumb to the ISI’s control.

IS’ attempt to link the Taliban to the ISI serves dual purposes for its expansion strategy. For one, these accusations help to discredit the Taliban as a jihadist actor. But more importantly, IS hopes to capitalise on disillusionment and discontent within the Taliban surrounding the ISI-Taliban relationship. Several high-level Taliban members have expressed their frustration, either internally or publicly, with the ISI, and IS likely believes that it can appeal to these commanders by presenting itself as more autonomous. Thus, after Wilayat Khorasan beheaded a Pakistani soldier in a January 2015 video, IS noted in *Dabiq* that the killing of this soldier “highlight[ed] the stark contrast between the ‘aqīdah [creed] of the Islamic State—the ‘aqīdah of Ahlus-Sunnah—and that of some jihād claimants” who have a “deviant and feeble stance towards the Pakistani army”.¹⁰⁵

The Taliban’s pragmatic stance toward Muslim majority states has been another major source of criticism. IS has seized on the Taliban’s efforts to establish relations with state actors as an example of its illegitimacy as a jihadist organisation. In a video produced by the Wilayat Salah al-Din media branch in Iraq in August 2015, IS fighters said that the Taliban was “not pure” because it had sent “ambassadors to the countries of tyrants and praised the tyrant rulers, including Hamas [and] Qatar”.¹⁰⁶ IS has also accused the Taliban of seeking to appease the international community and the United Nations.¹⁰⁷ Even more damning, according to IS, is that the Taliban “consider[s] Iran a friend”¹⁰⁸ IS has made reference multiple times to the strength of Taliban-Iran ties, and has accused Mullah Mansour of being pro-Iran. One robust critique of Mullah Mansour’s stance on Iran appeared in the eleventh issue of *Dabiq*, which remarked irately that Mansour had “officially dispatche[d] political delegations to Safawī Iran ... name[d] the Iranian regime an ‘Islamic state’ and call[ed] the Rāfidī leaders and masses ‘Muslim brothers’ ”.¹⁰⁹ For IS, which views Shias as the caliphate’s greatest enemy, the Taliban’s relations with Iran are prime evidence of the Taliban’s deviations.

The Taliban as a Nationalist Movement

For IS, the fact that the Taliban maintains national objectives is further proof that the Afghan group possesses no jihadist credentials. Moreover, according to IS, the Taliban’s allegedly nationalistic outlook disqualifies the group’s emir from serving as the *amir al-muminin*: As IS explained in the tenth issue of *Dabiq*, the Taliban’s embrace of

¹⁰⁵ “Wilayat Khurasan and the Bay’at from Qawqaz”, *Dabiq* issue 7, February 2015, p. 33.

¹⁰⁶ “Al-Jasadul Wahed Part 3”, Wilayat Salah al-Din, August 21, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Abu Maysarah al-Shami, “The Qa’idah of Adh-Dhawahiri, al-Harari and an-Nadhari, and the Absent Yemeni Wisdom”, *Dabiq* issue 6, December 2014, p. 24.

¹⁰⁸ “Al-Jasadul Wahed Part 3”, Wilayat Salah al-Din, August 21, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ “Foreword”, *Dabiq* issue 11, August 2015, p. 5. The first of these allegations likely stems from reports that the Taliban sent envoys to Iran in May 2015. See Hekmatullah Azamy and Abubakar Siddique, “Taliban Reach Out to Iran”, *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation) 13:12, June 12, 2015.

nationalism fails to fulfil “the meaning of the general imāmah concerning rules, responsibilities, and liabilities”.¹¹⁰ Criticizing the Taliban for its nationalist orientation allows IS to pursue both local and global messaging objectives.

On the local level, IS has sought to turn its opposition to the Taliban’s nationalism into a recruiting tool aimed at those in Afghanistan and Pakistan who do not recognise the boundaries between the two countries. IS has vowed to eliminate the Durand Line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan that was drawn by colonial Britain’s Sir Henry Mortimer Durand and imposed on Afghanistan in 1893.¹¹¹ Such rhetoric may appeal to Pashtuns on both sides of the border who wish to redraw national boundaries between Pakistan and Afghanistan or remove them entirely. The pledge to eliminate the Durand Line is also consistent with IS’ global efforts to eliminate national borders that divide the *ummah*.¹¹²

IS has also held up the Taliban’s nationalistic outlook as an example of the latter group’s flawed religious methodology (which is explained in more detail in the subsequent section). Nationalism is anathema to IS’ brand of salafist Islam, and IS has derided the Taliban for recognizing artificial, man-made boundaries. In the tenth issue of *Dabiq*, IS claimed that the Taliban “greatly contradict the sharī principles that command to fight the kuffār wherever they may be found”.¹¹³ IS has promised to return the Afghan jihad to the “correct” path: In a video released by Wilayat Khorasan in May 2015, IS asserted that under the Taliban “jihad was limited up to Torkham”, a border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but “that mentality no longer holds. Every infidel, apostate, and tyrant should be called an infidel, an apostate, and a tyrant—regardless of where they live”.¹¹⁴

The Taliban’s Religious Methodology

IS’ criticism of the Taliban’s nationalist leanings is one way that IS has sought to discredit the Taliban from a religious perspective. In contrast to al-Qaeda—which, though a salafi organisation, did not attack the Taliban’s Deobandi practice of Islam—IS openly regards the Taliban’s Deobandi creed as deviant. Nothing better encompasses IS’ view of the Taliban’s approach to religion than a statement in *Dabiq* from an al-Qaeda member who defected to IS. This defector explained of his time in Afghanistan with the Taliban: “I looked around and did not find a place to go where I would see Islam truly with its laws established”.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ “A Fatwa for Khurasan”, *Dabiq* issue 10, July 2015, p. 20.

¹¹¹ “ISIS Loyalists Vow to Eliminate Durand Line”, *Khaama Press*, September 9, 2015.

¹¹² For instance, IS launched a media campaign in June 2014 publicizing the group’s destruction of the border between Syria and Iraq, an action which the group framed as the death knell for the Sykes-Picot treaty.

¹¹³ “A Fatwa for Khurasan”, *Dabiq* issue 10, July 2015, p. 20.

¹¹⁴ “On That Day Shall the Believers Rejoice [Arabic]”, Wilayat Khorasan, May 31, 2015.

¹¹⁵ Abu Jarir ash-Shamali, “Al-Qaidah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within”, *Dabiq* issue 6, December 2014, p. 46.

IS highlights several themes in arguing that the Taliban has a flawed approach to religion. For one, IS accuses the Taliban of being too lenient in punishing *sharia* violators, and of adopting *irja*, a religious principle holding that decisions about whether an individual is a true Muslim should be postponed.¹¹⁶ This concept contradicts IS' takfiri doctrine, which is eager to determine whether other Muslims have apostatised themselves through their alleged religious deviancy. IS also accuses Taliban members of engaging in activities, including "circumambulating graves and wearing amulets", that, according to IS, contradict the principles of *tawhid*.¹¹⁷ The argument that the Taliban's religious practice contradicts principles of *tawhid* emerges repeatedly in IS' propaganda. An article in the seventh issue of *Dabiq* eulogizing Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim, a former high-ranking member of IS in Afghanistan who defected from the Taliban, claimed that Khadim had been dismissed from his position as Taliban commander because he had advocated for a stricter understand of *tawhid*.¹¹⁸

IS' criticism of the Taliban's religious methodology appears to be intended more for a global audience than a local one. Much of this discussion has been published in *Dabiq*, an English-language magazine that is unlikely to be widely read by an Afghan audience. Thus, one primary purpose of IS' religious criticism of the Taliban may be to delegitimise Mullah Mansour—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's sole competitor in the jihadist sphere for the title of *amir al-muminin*, and the person to whom al-Qaeda has pledged allegiance—in the hope of drawing al-Qaeda supporters into IS' network. Conversely, IS' criticism of the Deobandi creed could *undercut* the group's local efforts. Most Afghan militants are Deobandi, and may be repulsed by IS' denigration of their sect.

The Taliban's Leadership Crisis

The leadership crisis that the Taliban experienced in the summer of 2015 gave IS its most powerful piece of propaganda in its media campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The fact that the Taliban had covered up Mullah Omar's death for years called into question its leadership's credibility. Further, the succession crisis that erupted within the Taliban gave IS the opportunity to try to exploit fissures within the militant group, and to recruit disenchanted commanders. The cover-up also represented a public relations disaster for al-Qaeda, which had to explain why the group had renewed its pledge of *bayat* to Mullah Omar in June 2014, when the Taliban leader had been dead for about a year.¹¹⁹

Interestingly, IS was one of the first jihadist groups to publicly raise questions about Mullah Omar's health, even before the Taliban publicly announced the emir's death in July 2015. A footnote to an article in the sixth issue of *Dabiq*, published in December 2014, noted suggestively that some senior commanders in Afghanistan and the tribal

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹¹⁸ "Among the Believers are Men: Shaykh Abu Talhah", *Dabiq* issue 8, March 2015, p. 30.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda Renews Its Oath of Allegiance to Taliban Leader Mullah Omar", *Long War Journal*, July 21, 2014.

areas of Pakistan “doubt that Mullā ‘Umar is still alive and are convinced that he was either killed or imprisoned”.¹²⁰ IS made a similar claim in the tenth issue of *Dabiq*, published in mid-July 2015, when it hypothesised that Mullah Omar may have died, a scenario which, according to IS, would mean that those who previously pledged allegiance to Omar should now give *bayat* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi instead.¹²¹

In addition to its discussion in *Dabiq*, IS also raised the possibility of Taliban deception about Mullah Omar’s status to a local audience in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In June 2015, Dawat-e-Haq, a pro-IS media outlet based in Pakistan, published a letter from a Taliban commander in Nangarhar province calling on Mullah Omar to release a video statement proving that he was alive. The commander vowed that he would pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi if Mullah Omar did not release the statement. Dawat-e-Haq’s release of this letter was accompanied by the commander’s subsequent pledge of *bayat* to Baghdadi, suggesting that the original letter had been written weeks or months before.¹²²

Once Mullah Omar’s death became public knowledge, IS and its social media supporters launched a campaign aimed at capitalizing on the cover-up. Immediately after the Taliban announced that Mullah Omar had died in 2013, IS Twitter supporters feverishly posted tweets in Arabic with the hashtag #Taliban’s_Lie, accusing the Taliban of being untrustworthy.¹²³ IS’ Wilayat Salah al-Din echoed this claim in an August 2015 video in which IS fighters claimed that the Taliban had covered up Mullah Omar’s death to “rule the Taliban from backstage”.

Meanwhile, IS’ media apparatus attacked al-Qaeda for pledging allegiance to a dead man. In August 2015, Abu Maysarah al-Shami, an IS sharia official, wrote a damning article accusing the Taliban’s leadership of deceiving the *ummah* and even their own rank and file for years. Al-Shami provocatively suggested that al-Qaeda may be “following the Taliban’s path” by pledging allegiance to “someone who has gone missing”. a reference to the fact that al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri had not publicly commented on recent developments in the jihadist community.¹²⁴ Interestingly, al-Shami had also authored the December 2014 *Dabiq* article alluding to the possibility that Mullah Omar was dead. Similarly, in the twelfth issue of *Dabiq*, IS noted that al-Qaeda’s pledge of *bayat* to Mullah Omar “highlighted the deception that al-Qaeda regional leaders are capable of”.¹²⁵ Essentially, IS insinuated that al-Qaeda’s leadership

¹²⁰ Abu Maysarah al-Shami, “The Qa’idah of Adh-Dhawahiri, al-Harari and an-Nadhari, and the Absent Yemeni Wisdom”, *Dabiq* issue 6, December 2014, p. 25.

¹²¹ “A Fatwa for Khurasan”, *Dabiq* issue 10, July 2015, p. 18.

¹²² “Open Letter from Former Nangarhar Governor Muhammad Idris Sirat to the Leaders of the Islamic Emirate [Urdu]”, Dawat-e-Haq, June 24, 2015.

¹²³ For an example of IS tweets using this hashtag, see <https://twitter.com/search?q=%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A8%D8%A9%20%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86&src=typd>.

¹²⁴ Abu Maysarah al-Shami, “Conditions of Those Pledging Allegiance to the Dead and Missing [Arabic]”, August 5, 2015.

¹²⁵ “Interview with Abu Muharib as-Sumali”, *Dabiq* issue 12, November 2015, p. 61.

had been aware that Mullah Omar had died, and purposely misled its foot soldiers.

Projecting Strength

At the same time that IS has sought to challenge the Taliban's legitimacy, it has mounted a campaign aimed at projecting strength in Afghanistan. Maintaining the perception of momentum is essential to IS' expansion strategy in Afghanistan, as is the case in virtually all other theatres where the group seeks to expand.

IS faces an uphill battle, however, in showing that it will have staying power in Afghanistan. It must compete with a numerically and militarily superior foe in the Taliban, which has an entrenched presence. With its prospects for military success and territorial expansion somewhat limited in the short term, IS has resorted to its media apparatus to create the impression that it is ascendant and capable of beating the Taliban militarily.

The Pamphlet Offensive

IS did not officially announce its expansion into Afghanistan/Pakistan until January 2015, but IS supporters and operatives were involved in laying the groundwork and building anticipation for IS' arrival months before Wilayat Khorasan was declared. The first signs emerged in late July 2014, when Afghan salafists began distributing pro-IS CDs in Kabul.¹²⁶ The CDs included an introduction to IS' ideology, discussions about jihad, and criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to engage in politics.

IS' media footprint expanded considerably in September 2014, when news outlets reported that IS supporters were distributing pro-IS pamphlets across eastern Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan.¹²⁷ The similarities among these pamphlets suggest a degree of coordination in the production and distribution of these materials. Subsequently, Pakistani authorities confirmed that the mastermind behind the pamphlet initiative was Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee whom IS appointed as one of its top regional officials.¹²⁸ During the same period that the pamphlets were distributed, pro-IS graffiti appeared in various cities throughout Pakistan.¹²⁹ There is no evidence indicating whether the graffiti campaign was part of Muslim Dost's pamphlet initiative; it could have been the work of mischievous youths. Still, the combination of the pamphlet campaign and graffiti created the perception that IS' influence was steadily expanding in the region.

¹²⁶ Borhan Osman, "Messages in Chalk: 'Islamic State' Haunting Afghanistan?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 17, 2014.

¹²⁷ "ISIS Propaganda Material Turns Up in Pakistan, India", Reuters, September 7, 2014.

¹²⁸ "Ex-Gitmo Prisoner Behind IS Campaign in Pakistan", *The News* (Pakistan), November 16, 2014.

¹²⁹ Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Islamic State Footprints Surface in Parts of Bannu", *Dawn*, November 14, 2014.

Highlighting Military Strength

Following the declaration of Wilayat Khorasan in January 2015, IS focused its messaging on the group's budding military strength. IS advanced this narrative through two tactics: 1) publicizing the group's military successes and the battlefield defeats of its enemies, and 2) using instrumental violence and brutality to intimidate its adversaries, including the Taliban and local anti-IS militias.



Figure 6: Wilayat Khorasan's "Healing Minds by Slaughtering the Spy—Part 2"

Wilayat Khorasan's media operations were slow to get off the ground in its earliest months, but the group rapidly escalated its output in the summer of 2015, when it began releasing videos, pictures, and statements through Dawat-e-Haq, which served for a period of time as a major clearinghouse for Wilayat Khorasan material. In June 2015, Wilayat Khorasan launched a media campaign showcasing IS killing Afghan residents in Nangarhar Province—IS' stronghold in the country—whom IS accused of being spies for the Afghan government. The centerpiece of the campaign was a three-part video series, titled "Healing Minds by Slaughtering the Spy", in which IS fighters beheaded purported spies, explaining that they did so "as a lesson to those considering the same path".¹³⁰ Shortly after releasing the first of these videos, IS posted a statement and image showing villagers from a town in Nangarhar Province pledging allegiance to IS.¹³¹ The combination of these propaganda pieces sent a message to Afghan residents in Nangarhar: Pledge allegiance to IS and live in peace, or suffer the consequences of defying the group.

Wilayat Khorasan drove this message home in a brutal video released in mid-August 2015, which featured ten Afghan civilians involved in an anti-IS militia whom IS had captured. As the hostages knelt before a line of armed militants, an unidentified narrator intoned: "Oh organisations of Khorasan! Have you not learned your lesson? ... What is it that has incited you to fight against the Islamic State? Do you really wish to

¹³⁰ "Shifa' Alnofous Bidhabh al-Jasous, Part 2", Wilayat Khorasan, July 13, 2015.

¹³¹ "All Residents of the Village of Longpur in Afghanistan Have Pledged Allegiance to the Caliph of the Muslims [Urdu]", Dawat-e-Haq, June 27, 2015.

dig your own grave? Do you really wish for your head to be chopped off or your home be destroyed?" The hostages were then forced to sit on buried explosives, which IS militants detonated.¹³² The video was a chilling warning to Afghans.

Wilayat Khorasan has waged a similar media campaign against the Taliban. Starting in May 2015, the group released several pieces of propaganda, many of them posted on Dawat-e-Haq, highlighting clashes with the Taliban in Nangarhar Province. As is typical with IS, the propaganda only showcased IS' military victories, seeking to create the perception that the Taliban's military resistance to IS was futile. For instance, in an article published in May 2015, IS claimed that an Afghan Taliban faction had launched an ambush against IS, but that IS had fended off the attack and killed the Taliban commander in charge of the offensive.¹³³ Another statement claimed that 50 Taliban fighters had surrendered to IS after having been sent to "wage war" against the group.¹³⁴

Dividing the Taliban

At the same time IS has presented itself as an ascendant force in Afghanistan, it has fuelled the impression that the Taliban is a deeply divided, declining organisation. IS' propaganda presents itself as a beneficiary of the Taliban's fragmentation.

The succession crisis that followed the announcement of Mullah Omar's death created rifts within the Taliban, and presented IS with an opportunity to try its divide-and-conquer strategy in Afghanistan. IS immediately fomented rumours that disgruntled Taliban fighters were defecting to IS. In September 2015, a Wilayat Khorasan spokesman claimed that Mullah Abdul Manan, the brother of Mullah Omar, favoured joining IS over pledging allegiance to Mullah Mansour.¹³⁵ The claim was false: Later that month, Manan and other members of Mullah Omar's family reconciled their differences with Mullah Mansour, and pledged allegiance to the new Taliban emir.¹³⁶

IS adopted a similar tack with Mullah Mansour Dadullah, a senior Taliban leader, who, like Mullah Manan, had spoken out against the new Taliban emir. In September 2015, an IS supporter in Afghanistan alleged that Dadullah had been rescued from a Taliban offensive by IS fighters, and had subsequently pledged allegiance to IS.¹³⁷ This was not the first time that IS spread rumours about Dadullah's defection to IS, as an aide to a top IS official in Afghanistan made a similar claim in early 2015.¹³⁸ But Dadullah publicly rejected this claim. In early November, the spokesman of a Taliban splinter faction that

¹³² "Qatl al-Murtadeen Tha'ran lil-Muwahideen, Part 2", Wilayat Khorasan, August 9, 2015.

¹³³ "Afghan Taliban Commander Who Launched Operation Against Khorasan Branch of Islamic State Has Been Killed Along With His Companions [Urdu]", Dawat-e-Haq, May 17, 2015.

¹³⁴ "Untitled [Urdu]", Dawat-e-Haq, May 22, 2015.

¹³⁵ "ISIS Loyalists Vow to Eliminate Durand Line", *Khaama Press*, September 9, 2015.

¹³⁶ "Mullah Omar: Taliban 'Resolve Splits' over Successor Mansour", BBC, September 16, 2015.

¹³⁷ Javed Hamim Kakar, "Disaffected Dadullah Denies Joining Daesh after Rumors", *Pajhwok News*, September 17, 2015.

¹³⁸ Borhan Osman, "The Shadows of 'Islamic State' in Afghanistan: What Threat Does it Hold?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 12, 2015.

both opposed Mullah Mansour's leadership and also rejected IS' claims to Afghanistan announced that Dadullah had joined the group.¹³⁹

Egypt: Wilayat Sinai

On November 10, 2014, jihadists in several different countries—including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen—swore allegiance to IS on the same day. IS' expansion into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula was dissimilar from the other areas into which IS publicly expanded that day. While the other organisations had either been established with IS' covert support or were splinters from larger al-Qaeda-aligned groups,¹⁴⁰ in the Sinai Peninsula IS acquired a full-fledged organisation, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM). Among other things, ABM already had a media structure and strategy, albeit a relatively crude one. From a messaging perspective, this meant that rather than having to build an entirely new propaganda apparatus from scratch, IS could work with ABM (which was renamed Wilayat Sinai after its pledge of *bayat*) to strengthen existing narratives and incorporate new themes into its propaganda. As such, Wilayat Sinai's propaganda strategy has included both themes that had been used previously by ABM and also new concepts and arguments from IS' propaganda playbook. IS has also implemented a propaganda campaign aimed at facilitating the group's expansion into mainland Egypt.

The propaganda strategy that IS and Wilayat Sinai have implemented in Egypt envisions four target audiences: The Sinai population and local tribes, political Islamists in Egypt, the Sisi regime and Egyptian security forces, and the international community (including both fellow jihadists and adversaries of the jihadist movement). As an insurgent movement, Wilayat Sinai is quite dependent on the local population, and so the lion's share of Wilayat Sinai's propaganda output has been directed at local communities. IS views the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islamist organisations as a potential recruitment pool, and as a vehicle through which to expand its presence into mainland Egypt. Thus the group has tailored its propaganda to appeal to Islamists who loathe the Sisi regime and are disillusioned with the approach taken by the Muslim Brotherhood's old guard.

Unlike Wilayat Sinai's messaging toward the Sinai population and political Islamists, its propaganda directed toward the Sisi regime and security forces is not intended to appeal to disillusioned individuals. Instead, Wilayat Sinai seeks to intimidate and frighten its adversaries, presenting an image of unstoppable strength that resembles the winner's message IS had deployed across the globe. Wilayat Sinai's messaging

¹³⁹ Shereena Qazi, "Afghan Taliban Faction Appoints New 'Supreme Leader'", Al Jazeera, November 5, 2015. Though it is clear that Dadullah—who was killed in clashes with the Mullah Mansour-led Taliban in November 2015—never pledged allegiance to IS, he and his forces did collaborate with members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had pledged allegiance to IS. See Bruce Pannier, "The Islamic Movement Of Uzbekistan Comes Unraveled", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 28, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ For example, IS deployed fighters to Yemen and Libya in the spring and summer of 2014 to establish footholds in those countries. Jund al-Khilafah, the Algerian group that pledged allegiance to IS, was comprised of former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb fighters.

toward international audiences is similarly focused on intimidation and projecting strength. Wilayat Sinai seeks to distinguish itself as a lethal actor capable of striking Western interests, and may also be trying to frighten away tourists—which would in turn harm the Egyptian economy.

This section now explores how Wilayat Sinai and IS tailor propaganda to address each of these four target audiences.

Inducements and Threats: Wilayat Sinai Messaging Toward the Population of Sinai

Gaining the support of the Sinai's population is one of Wilayat Sinai's critical objectives. Local tribes wield considerable influence in the North Sinai, controlling key smuggling routes along which Wilayat Sinai needs to move weapons and fighters. Wilayat Sinai also views the tribes as a recruiting pool: If the wilayat can replenish its fighting force through local recruitment, it can offset its high battlefield attrition rates and lessen its dependence on foreign fighters, who may find it difficult to enter the Sinai region because of Egyptian security measures. But the tribes also pose a potential threat to the militants. As the *sahwa* uprising in Iraq illustrated, tribal uprisings can present an immense military challenge to militant groups. Given the intimate knowledge that the tribes have of Wilayat Sinai's inner workings—the majority of the wilayat's fighters are themselves members of the tribes¹⁴¹—the tribes could provide valuable intelligence to Egyptian security forces.

With the tribes holding the key to Wilayat Sinai's future prospects, the wilayat has launched a multifaceted campaign aimed at winning them over. Like IS' propaganda strategies toward local populations in other theatres, Wilayat Sinai's approach to the Sinai tribes has presented both sticks and carrots. On the one hand, Wilayat Sinai has sought to capitalise on the local population's sense of grievance against the central government, which has long marginalised and discriminated against Sinai's population, and is currently employing a deeply unpopular scorched-earth policy in its military efforts in the Sinai region. Wilayat Sinai's propaganda portrays it as the only actor capable of exacting revenge against the state and restoring the tribes' honour.

On the other hand, however, Wilayat Sinai has resorted to intimidation and brutality as a means of cowing the tribes into submission and deterring cooperation with security forces. Since pledging allegiance to IS, Wilayat Sinai has more heavily emphasised the coercive aspect of its messaging toward the tribes, suggesting that the wilayat has, to a certain degree, embraced the heavy-handed tactics IS used in Syria, Iraq and Libya to maintain control. Still, Wilayat Sinai has attempted to maintain a balance between positive persuasion and coercion, perhaps acknowledging that exerting too much

¹⁴¹ Zack Gold, "Sinai Tribes: Between the Egyptian State and the Islamic State", The Institute for National Security Studies, May 18, 2015 (noting that "the majority of the State of Sinai's active fighters and supporters—and ABM's founders—are sons of Sinai's tribes").

pressure on the tribes could spark a backlash.

Using the Egyptian Government’s Crackdown as a Mechanism for Recruitment

An omnipresent theme in Wilayat Sinai’s propaganda directed at Sinai’s population is that of humiliation and oppression at the hands of the Egyptian state. In response to Wilayat Sinai’s military operations, the Sisi regime has implemented a host of harsh measures directed at the North Sinai, including implementing a state of emergency and curfew, razing hundreds of homes in the border town of Rafah to create a buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and conducting sweeping arrests of North Sinai residents. North Sinai locals have also alleged that Egyptian air strikes have killed large numbers of civilians (though the absence of independent reporting has made it difficult to verify these claims).¹⁴² These policies have generated considerable frustration among local populations, and Wilayat Sinai has sought to tap into those sentiments to galvanise local support.

Wilayat Sinai has made the suffering of the Sinai’s population a central element of its propaganda. Vivid and gruesome images of death and destruction feature prominently in the wilayat’s videos and pictorial reports. In November 2014, Wilayat Sinai released the first video in a four-



Figure 7: Wilayat Sinai’s “Documenting Crimes by the Egyptian-Zionist Alliance Against the People of Sinai, Part One” shows citizens digging graves for those killed by the security forces.

part series, entitled “Documenting Crimes by the Egyptian-Zionist Alliance Against the People of Sinai”, which highlighted alleged atrocities committed by the Egyptian military. The beginning of the first video opened with disturbing images of the bodies of dead and disfigured children and infants, before panning to a young boy who says, “Everyday, an Israeli drone comes and bombs houses. We did not do anything bad to them”. Another man in the video alleges that recent air strikes had killed women and children, and that there were no terrorists in Sinai.¹⁴³

While the first video in that series focused on civilian casualties resulting from air strikes, the second video showed the Egyptian security forces’ seemingly indiscriminate arrests of local civilians. The video opened with footage of local women trying to stop

¹⁴² Michael Horton, “Egypt’s Heavy-Handed Tactics Offer IS a Foothold in Sinai”, *World Politics Review*, July 17, 2015.

¹⁴³ “Tawtheeq Jara’im al-Tahaluf Al-Masri—al-Sahyouni Dudd Ahali Sina”, part 1, Wilayat Sinai, November 27, 2014.

security forces as they arrested a man, with a caption reading “terrorizing the virtuous women” flashing across the screen. The humiliation of women is a major offense in Bedouin culture, and Wilayat Sinai frequently references the Egyptian government’s oppression of local women in its propaganda. Then, as the video showed a clip of five dead bodies, Usamah al-Masri, who is believed to be Wilayat Sinai’s emir, accused the Egyptian government of killing unarmed and innocent civilians, and said that one purpose of the wilayat’s jihad was to free all the prisoners who had been unjustly arrested by the security forces. At the end of the video, al-Masri issued a call to arms, exhorting Sinai residents to “face this army and defend your honour, your lives, and your property”.¹⁴⁴

Indeed, the Egyptian government’s repressive measures in Sinai have served as a convenient foil for Wilayat Sinai’s own violence. The wilayat has framed its battle against the state as a just response to the government’s atrocities. This motif can be seen in a statement issued by Wilayat Sinai following a major insurgent offensive in January 2015 that killed over 30 Egyptian soldiers. Wilayat Sinai stated that the recent attacks were part of a concerted campaign, the purpose of which was to “avenge the oppression against the Muslims and against our righteous sisters in the apostate Egyptian government’s prisons”.¹⁴⁵

In fact, Wilayat Sinai has used revenge as a blanket justification for its actions, citing it as a rationale even for attacks against targets that have little to do with the government’s crackdown. In a statement claiming responsibility for a rocket attack on an airport housing international peacekeepers monitoring the treaty between Egypt and Israel, Wilayat Sinai alleged that the attack came “in response to the apostate Egyptian army’s arrest of women belonging to proud Sinai tribes”. The group vowed that the attack would be the “first raindrop in avenging the honor of Muslims”.¹⁴⁶

In addition to its violence, Wilayat Sinai’s propaganda has also showcased the group’s efforts to provide goods and services to local communities harmed by Egyptian military operations. For instance, in January 2015, Wilayat Sinai released a pictorial report showing militants providing money to North Sinai residents whose homes had allegedly been destroyed by the military.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, a statement chronicling Wilayat Sinai military activities in April and May 2015 included a note that militants had provided food to populations in North Sinai who had been deprived of sustenance by the Egyptian military.¹⁴⁸ Such propaganda is designed to foster a perception of Wilayat Sinai’s intentions and ability to meet the needs of the local population.

¹⁴⁴ “Tawtheeq Jara’im al-Tahaluf al-Masri—al-Sahyouni Dudd Ahali Sina”, part 2, Wilayat Sinai, December 5, 2015.

¹⁴⁵ “Series of Operations of ‘We Swear We Shall Take Revenge’ [Arabic]”, Wilayat Sinai, January 30, 2015.

¹⁴⁶ “Bayan/Silsilat Amaliyaat (Qasaman Linath’arna)”, Wilayat Sinai, October 2, 2015.

¹⁴⁷ “Pictorial Report of the Distribution of Funds to Muslims Affected by the Army of Apostasy’s Burning and Demolition of their Homes [Arabic]”, Wilayat Sinai, January 12, 2015.

¹⁴⁸ “Harvest of Military Operations for the Month of Rajab [Arabic]”, Wilayat Sinai, May 23, 2015.

Wilayat Sinai's use of service delivery in its propaganda, coupled with the group's efforts to portray its violence as retaliation, illustrates the group's strategic campaign to ingratiate itself with the local population. Through its propaganda, Wilayat Sinai has depicted itself as the protector and defender of North Sinai's population. And even though the group has aligned itself with IS, which is transnational in focus, Wilayat Sinai has framed much of its actions in local terms.

Intimidating the Local Population

While Wilayat Sinai has sought to appeal to local populations, the group has also used its propaganda apparatus to intimidate North Sinai residents. The wilayat's intimidation campaign is in part a strategy of deterrence: Through a combination of threatening rhetoric and instrumental violence, Wilayat Sinai discourages the population from cooperating with security forces or otherwise resisting the group's expansion. This coercive approach is one that IS has perfected in territories under its control, where public displays of brutality and punishment are used as a tool of social control.

Wilayat Sinai has used execution videos as a primary means of intimidating local populations and dissuading them from cooperating with security forces. One of these videos, released in February 2015, featured six tribesmen from North Sinai who "admitted" to having collaborated with Egyptian security forces and the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service. The men were then beheaded by Wilayat Sinai militants.¹⁴⁹ In another video, released in June 2015, Wilayat Sinai provided the names and addresses of several alleged "agents" working for Mossad and living in Jerusalem, illustrating the wilayat's supposed ability to identify spies and collaborators.¹⁵⁰ The two videos send a chilling message to Sinai residents: collaborators will be found and killed. In addition to these displays of intimidation and violence, Wilayat Sinai has also issued threats through local propaganda channels. In March 2015, the wilayat handed out leaflets in North Sinai vowing to decapitate anyone who collaborated with the Egyptian military.¹⁵¹ In mid-April, the group published a leaflet warning "anyone aiding the apostate army in any way" that Wilayat Sinai's "swords are pointed and sharp", and that the group would "not distinguish between an apostate and his helper".¹⁵² After Ibrahim al-Arjani, a prominent Egyptian businessman originally from North Sinai, spoke out against Wilayat Sinai at an economic summit in Sharm El-Sheikh in March 2015, the wilayat issued threats against his family and stole one of Arjani's cars.¹⁵³ Wilayat Sinai issued a leaflet in June 2015 accusing Arjani of assisting the Egyptian army, and promising that anyone who did business with his company was a "legitimate target".¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ "Isdar Mar'i bitawtheeq Jara'em al-Yahoud wa-Jayshal Ridda Dudd Ahlina fi Seenaa", part 4, Wilayat Sinai, February 9, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ "Harb al-Uqqoul," Wilayat Sinai, June 8, 2015.

¹⁵¹ "Maqtal 6 min Ansar Baytul Maqdis Shamaal Seenaa", *Al-Arabiya*, March 1, 2015.

¹⁵² Shamikh1.info, July 14, 2015.

¹⁵³ "Narsud Tafaseel Hard al-Tarabeen li-Wilayat Sinaa", *Masr Alarabia*, May 6, 2015.

¹⁵⁴ Untitled leaflet, Wilayat Sinai, June 24, 2015.

Wilayat Sinai's menacing rhetoric and violence against the local Sinai population marks one way the group's propaganda strategy has evolved since its pledge of allegiance to IS. According to Zack Gold, an analyst who studies Sinai militancy, ABM and other Sinai-based groups "took care to avoid civilian casualties and they occurred rarely".¹⁵⁵ Sinai-based groups did target local populations on occasion prior to ABM's pledge. In late August 2014, for example, ABM released a video showing militants beheading four local residents accused of spying for Israel.¹⁵⁶ Still, this kind of violence against local populations was the exception rather than the rule in the period prior to ABM's pledge. But since November 2014, Wilayat Sinai has adopted a more aggressive approach toward the local population with respect to the group's propaganda and military operations. Data collected by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy reveals that there were more militant attacks against civilians in Sinai in January 2015 than in the entirety of the previous year.¹⁵⁷ While Wilayat Sinai continues to try to appeal to local populations, its recent behaviour indicates that it places more faith than before in violent coercion.

But Wilayat Sinai's efforts at intimidation have failed to quell all local opposition. To the contrary, its heavy-handed measures may have sparked tribal backlash. In April 2015, the Tarabin, a major North Sinai tribe, issued a statement vowing to fight the wilayat.¹⁵⁸ The motivations behind the tribe's decision to publish the statement appear to be varied. One tribal figure cited the growing threat that the insurgency posed to Tarabin economic activities, while the businessman al-Arjani, another of the signatories, was likely inspired by his own personal history with Wilayat Sinai.¹⁵⁹

The Tarabin's declaration set off an escalatory spiral. Wilayat Sinai militants released a statement threatening to kill anyone who signed the statement or collaborated with the military.¹⁶⁰ The group made good on its threat, killing a prominent Tarabin figure, kidnapping another tribesman, and blowing up Arjani's home.¹⁶¹ Around 30 Sinai tribes then convened and released a statement recommending that tribes increase intelligence cooperation with Egyptian security forces, and refuse to provide refuge or other types of support to tribal members involved in the insurgency.¹⁶² But this tribal gathering has not at this point spurred a broader uprising against Wilayat Sinai, and

¹⁵⁵ Zack Gold, "North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt", The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, May 18, 2015.

¹⁵⁶ "Video Shows Beheading of Four Egyptians in Sinai", *Al-Arabiya*, August 28, 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Gold, "North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt".

¹⁵⁸ "Qabeelat al-Tarabeen Tata'ahad fi Bayan Bimuwajibat al-Jama'at al-Irhabiyya fi Sina", *Youm7*, April 18, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Mokhtar Awad and Mostafa Abdou, "A New Sinai Battle?: Bedouin Tribes and Egypt's ISIS Affiliate", *EgyptSource* (The Atlantic Council), May 14, 2015.

¹⁶⁰ "Are Tribes in Sinai Really Unifying against Terrorism?" *Al-Monitor*, May 15, 2015.

¹⁶¹ Muhammad Miqlid, Ahmad Abd-al-Azim, and Huda Muhammad, "Al-Watan Reveals: Terrorists in Sinai Protected by 'Peace-Keeping Forces' [Arabic]", *Al-Watan*, April 28, 2015.

¹⁶² "Nanfarid Binashr Bayan Mu'tamar Qaba'el Wasat Sina'...Ijdar Dam Man Yusharek fil 'Amaliyyat al-Irhabiyya...Ghalq al-Anfaq Amam al-Takfeeriyeen...Watashkeel Majmou'at Min al-Shabab Limusharakat al-Jaysh Lilqadaa' 'ala B'ur al-Tataruf that Liwa' Itihad Qaba'el Sina", *Youm7*, May 10, 2015.

despite its heavy-handed brutality, the jihadist group has still managed to attract recruits from some disillusioned tribes.

Wooing the Islamists, Bashing the Brotherhood

One objective of IS' expansion strategy is to establish a foothold in mainland Egypt. Unlike the Sinai, which is often viewed by Egyptians as a provincial backwater, Egypt's Nile Valley is considered one of the power centres of the Middle East and the Islamic world. If IS were to establish a base in mainland Egypt, it would be a major symbolic victory, as well as a strategic one.

IS' early attempt to establish a presence on the mainland was unsuccessful. Before pledging allegiance to IS, ABM had extensive networks in the Nile Valley. But many of the Nile Valley cadres, who were loyal to al-Qaeda, opposed an alliance with IS and broke from the Sinai-based group when the latter pledged allegiance to IS.¹⁶³ The loss of these Nile Valley networks was a major blow to IS' expansion into Egypt.

IS now views the rank-and-file of the Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islamist movements as a possible vehicle through which to expand into the mainland. Many young Brotherhood members are increasingly disillusioned with their leadership's relatively passive approach, and are spoiling for a fight with the Sisi regime. IS perceives an opportunity to capitalise on these internal disagreements, calculating that it can peel away Brotherhood hardliners.

Interestingly, IS' global media network, and not the Wilayat Sinai media apparatus, appears to be spearheading the messaging campaign aimed at the Brotherhood. The fact that IS' global media apparatus has led the messaging campaign demonstrates that expansion into the Nile Valley is a significant priority for IS organisationally, and suggests that IS is sceptical of whether Wilayat Sinai, with its roots in the Bedouin community, can appeal to mainland Egyptians.

Just as Wilayat Sinai has adopted an approach of sticks and carrots toward the Sinai population, IS has also adopted a two-pronged approach, incorporating encouragement and condemnation, aimed at wooing rank-and-file members of Egypt's political Islamist movement. At the heart of IS' messaging strategy is a campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, intended to discredit the group and its leadership. The Brotherhood's passive approach to political change and its involvement in democratic politics have both been major sources of derision and ridicule for IS. At the same time, IS asserts that violence is the only way to bring about revolution and to establish *sharia* in Egypt, and has exhorted Islamists to join its cause.

¹⁶³ David Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS", *New York Times*, November 10, 2014.

IS' Anti-Brotherhood Campaign

IS' smear campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood has focused on its leadership's reluctance to embrace violence as a means of resisting the Egyptian state. IS' propaganda portrays the Brotherhood's approach as both ineffective and a deviation from Islamic principles. This narrative has been prominent from the moment that Wilayat Sinai joined IS: In the statement announcing its *bayat* to IS, Wilayat Sinai pointedly criticised the Brotherhood with a *hadith*: "When people abandon jihad, they will be humiliated".¹⁶⁴ IS supporters on Twitter piggybacked on this theme, with one media operative tweeting: "You have tried peaceful means and you know what has become of you. Therefore, jihad it is".¹⁶⁵

One article in particular epitomises the strident rhetoric that Wilayat Sinai and its supporters in the IS media network have employed to denigrate the Brotherhood. In the article—published in November 2014 under the title "Muslim Brotherhood Members Are Bizarre Creatures"—the author, an IS supporter known only as al-Jilani, accused the Brotherhood of "betray[ing] this religion and the blood and honor of Muslims" by endorsing non-violence and criticizing those who take up arms. He argued that the Brotherhood had allowed its own supporters to die, as it instructed them to "take to the streets, scream, dance, jump, and then die silently" without ever picking up a weapon for self-defence. Al-Jilani wrote that the Brotherhood had not learned from its mistakes, as it continued to advocate for peaceful demonstrations even after the Egyptian security forces had killed its supporters.¹⁶⁶

But while al-Jilani's article was scathing in its criticism of the Brotherhood's strategy, it also left the door open for Brotherhood members to join Wilayat Sinai. Toward the end of the piece, al-Jilani commended Brotherhood members for being willing to sacrifice their souls, but urged them to do so in a "honorable manner", by embracing IS' violent jihad. This call to arms revealed a central theme in IS' messaging and recruitment strategy: political Islamists who join IS can restore their dignity and avenge the humiliation they have experienced at the hands of the Sisi regime. This theme emerges repeatedly in propaganda produced by IS and Wilayat Sinai supporters. For instance, in November 2014, the Twitter account for the Al-Battar Media Establishment, a prolific pro-IS media group, released a series of tweets calling for Egyptians to "sacrifice your blood for jihad ... instead of shedding blood in squares and protests without achieving any results or progress".¹⁶⁷ Even Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alluded to this theme in a speech released in May 2015, where he praised the Sinai militants for denouncing pacifism and "treading the path of honor, dignity, and manhood and refusing humiliation and subservience".¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, untitled audio statement, November 9, 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Tweets from Qalam Hur, @glm_100. November 10, 2014.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Jilani, "Muslim Brotherhood Members Are Bizarre Creatures [Arabic]", The Media Front to Support the Islamic State, November 30, 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Tweets from Mu'assasat al-Battar al-I'lamiyah, @Bat_Media_, November 27, 2014.

¹⁶⁸ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "March Forth Whether Light or Heavy [Arabic]", Al-Furqan Establishment for Media Production, May 14, 2015.

Another narrative IS has employed to attract the Islamist rank-and-file is portraying its jihad as part of the Islamists' struggle against the state. For example, in late November 2014, IS claimed responsibility for several attacks in Sinai and mainland Egypt that occurred at the same time Islamist parties were holding massive protests, termed the "Islamic Youth Uprising". The attacks' timing appeared intentional, designed to appear to be IS' contribution to the broader uprising.

In sum, IS' messaging toward political Islamists presents IS' approach as a superior alternative to the Brotherhood's strategy. Peaceful activism, IS argues, will only lead to more humiliation and suffering. IS is appealing to the most militant elements of the Brotherhood, who are agitating for the Brotherhood's leadership to abandon its current posture. Though this strategy of exploiting ideological and strategic fissures within opposing Islamist movements is an approach IS has adopted across the world, in Egypt the political conditions may be ripe for IS' messaging to take hold.

Confronting the Egyptian State

The Egyptian security forces present the greatest obstacle to IS expansion in both the Sinai Peninsula and mainland Egypt. While other violent non-state actors present the greatest challenge to IS' expansion in countries with weak and fragmented governments, the Egyptian government has maintained control throughout Egypt, even in Wilayat Sinai's area of operations in North Sinai. Egyptian security forces have aggressively pursued Wilayat Sinai militants, waging a vicious counterinsurgency campaign that has constrained the wilayat's freedom to manoeuvre.

In response, Wilayat Sinai has resorted to guerrilla tactics and psychological warfare. While the wilayat keeps Egyptian security forces off-balance by conducting ambushes and planting IEDs on roads used by military vehicles, it has also launched a robust propaganda campaign aimed at the Egyptian military. The purposes of this campaign are to demonstrate that Wilayat Sinai remains a potent actor in North Sinai despite the ongoing counterinsurgency, and to intimidate Egyptian security forces engaged in the fight against Wilayat Sinai.

The Sisi regime has done little to counter the Wilayat Sinai's propaganda initiative. The Egyptian military's spokesman did not release a single statement on the North Sinai military offensive in February 2015, in what appeared to be an effort to impose a media blackout. This approach was counterproductive, as it allowed Wilayat Sinai to dictate the media narrative.¹⁶⁹ The government changed course and began releasing statements in early March 2015, but it still struggled to wrest control of the narrative from Wilayat Sinai.

¹⁶⁹ Gold, "North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt".

Maintaining a Winner's Message

At the heart of Wilayat Sinai's propaganda campaign against the Egyptian military is its winner's message, designed to prove that Wilayat Sinai is gaining ground and momentum. Facing an intense counterinsurgency campaign, Wilayat Sinai must rely on its propaganda apparatus to combat the narrative, propagated by the Egyptian government, that it is a flagging force.

Wilayat Sinai's winner's messaging targets multiple audiences, including both adversaries and allies. One obvious audience is Egyptian security forces: Menacing threats and claims of major military operations and enemy fatalities are intended to break the security forces' morale. But such messaging may be intended even more for the jihadist community, as well as those on the hard line fringes of the political Islamist movement. If Wilayat Sinai can demonstrate its resilience against the state, it may be able to attract fence-sitters to its ranks.

From the moment that Wilayat Sinai joined IS, it sought to portray itself as an ascendant and expanding power in Egypt. Days after pledging allegiance to IS, Wilayat Sinai released a sleek video showcasing its military operations against Egyptian security forces, and threatening future attacks.¹⁷⁰ The video shared many stylistic elements with IS' propaganda videos, suggesting that IS had coordinated with Wilayat Sinai to produce a major video as a way of announcing the Egyptian group's pledge of allegiance. Wilayat Sinai's video also adopted two further characteristics of other IS videos: depictions of extreme violence and the use of menacing language. The graphic images included the execution of two Egyptian soldiers and a suicide attack on the Karam al-Qawadis military checkpoint in North Sinai. In the latter clip, the soon-to-be suicide bomber issued a series of threats against the Sisi regime, vowing that Wilayat Sinai would be the "swords that will decapitate your heads", and the "explosives that will destroy your thrones and strongholds". The video's focus on the Karam al-Qawadis operation, which occurred in late October 2014, was significant, as it marked the first time any group had claimed responsibility for the attack, a major assault that killed over 30 soldiers. Weeks after the video was released, Wilayat Sinai also claimed responsibility for the killing of William Henderson, an American oil worker who had been killed in western Egypt in August 2014.¹⁷¹

Since then, Wilayat Sinai has released a steady stream of propaganda advertising the group's military strength and capabilities in the North Sinai. The most visible manifestation of this campaign is the "Harvest of Military Operations" series. Every month of the Islamic calendar, Wilayat Sinai releases a statement documenting the group's military operations and activities for the previous month. Several of these statements have included detailed, albeit exaggerated, tallies of enemy fatalities, as

¹⁷⁰ "Sawlat al-Ansar," Wilayat Sinai, November 14, 2014.

¹⁷¹ Tweet from Wilayat Sinai, @W_SINA55, November 30, 2014.

well as weapons and vehicles seized from Egyptian security forces.¹⁷² In November 2015, Wilayat Sinai released a video chronicling the group's operations since it pledged allegiance to IS in November 2014, claiming that it had killed over 800 soldiers and 130 "spies" over the past year.¹⁷³ Though these numbers appear to be inflated, they fuel the perception that Wilayat Sinai has maintained a steady tempo of operations despite the counterinsurgency campaign being waged against it.



Figure 8: In “War of Minds,” an alleged spy is forced to make a telephone call to his handlers before he is executed.

Further buttressing this narrative, IS has sought to advance the notion that the Egyptian military offensive has been ineffective. One propaganda video in particular, a June 2015 release titled “War of Minds”, illustrates the group's efforts to portray the counterinsurgency campaign as futile.¹⁷⁴ As the video opens, two militants assert that Wilayat Sinai is fighting a “complicated, fierce war” against the state. The video explains that the intelligence services had implemented a plan to infiltrate Wilayat Sinai following the “failure” of the military campaign in North Sinai. But according to IS, the intelligence services' plan was thwarted when the wilayat exposed the man who had been selected to infiltrate the group. The alleged spy then appears in the video, issuing a plea for the Egyptian government to stop sending “spies to Sinai Province because their members are more intelligent than you”. He is then forced to dig his own grave, and is shot in the head.

Intimidation of the Egyptian Security Forces

The “War of the Minds” video also exemplifies Wilayat Sinai's intimidation campaign against the state. This campaign can be seen as complementary to the winner's messaging narrative. Since pledging allegiance to IS, Wilayat Sinai has produced a number of videos showing militants killing soldiers, police officers, and alleged spies,

¹⁷² For instance, see “Hasaad al-'Amaliyaat al-'Askariyya Lishahr Dhi al-Qi'dah 1436,” Wilayat Sinai, September 18, 2015.

¹⁷³ “Annual Harvest of Military Operations for the Year 1436AH [Arabic],” Wilayat Sinai, November 12, 2015.

¹⁷⁴ “Harb al-Uqqoul,” Wilayat Sinai, June 8, 2015.

some of whom are captured shot execution-style.¹⁷⁵ These grotesque videos, which are ripped straight from the IS propaganda playbook, are intended to reduce the morale of Egyptian forces.

One of the primary targets of Wilayat Sinai's intimidation campaign is local police officers who reside in the North Sinai, and are thus particularly vulnerable to coercion. In late January 2015, Wilayat Sinai released a video showing the kidnapping and execution of a police officer who had been stationed in the town of Rafah.¹⁷⁶ The chilling video, in which the officer is shot at point-blank range in the head, marked only the beginning of the group's campaign against police officers, which has involved both propaganda and instrumental violence. In July 2015, an Arabic-language media outlet reported that Wilayat Sinai militants were blowing up and setting fire to the homes of police officers from North Sinai.¹⁷⁷ According to the report, militants evacuated the buildings before they were destroyed, indicating that the primary purpose of the attacks was to intimidate police officers rather than to kill civilians. Wilayat Sinai also began including attacks against police officers' homes in its monthly summary of military operations, maximizing the attention these symbolic acts of violence received.¹⁷⁸

Yemen

IS' messaging strategy in Yemen has centred on two primary tactics. First, IS has sought to exploit the civil conflict between the Iranian-backed Houthis and forces allied with Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, including the Saudi-led military coalition. IS has fashioned itself as the vanguard of Yemen's Sunnis, while at the same time attempting to exacerbate sectarian tensions through its threatening rhetoric and instrumental violence against Houthi targets. Second, IS has waged a rhetorical campaign against AQAP, al-Qaeda's most important affiliate, in an effort to disrupt al-Qaeda's centre of gravity. IS' criticism of AQAP has revolved around the core claims that AQAP has lagged in its implementation of *sharia*, and has deliberately abstained from attacking Houthis, thus allowing the Shia group to sweep through Yemen.

Exploiting Sectarian Tensions

IS' expansion into Yemen has come against a backdrop of civil conflict and growing chaos. In 2014, tensions intensified between the Hadi regime and the Houthis, a movement based in northern Yemen that follows the Zaidi school of Shia Islam. In September 2014, Houthi militants moved into the capital of Sana'a, heightening concerns about a broader national conflagration. Those concerns were realised in February 2015, when the Houthis, backed by forces loyal to deposed president Ali

¹⁷⁵ For instance, see "al-Hasaad al-Sanawi lil 'Amaliyaat al-'Askariyya Li'aam 1436 AH", Wilayat Sinai, April 10, 2015.

¹⁷⁶ "Qasaman Li'Nath'arna", Wilayat Sinai, January 26, 2015.

¹⁷⁷ "Istratijiyyat Wilayat Seena' Istihdaf Manazel al-Shurta", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, July 24, 2015.

¹⁷⁸ "Hasaad al-'Amaliyaat al-'Askariyya li Shahr Ramadan 1436 AH", Wilayat Sinai, July 21, 2015.

Abdullah Saleh, dissolved the parliament and raided the presidential palace, placing Hadi under house arrest. (Hadi managed to flee to Saudi Arabia in March 2015.) As the Houthis, backed by Iran, pushed toward the last major pro-Hadi bastion in the coastal city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and Sunni state partners from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) launched a military offensive aimed at driving back the Houthis and restoring Hadi's government. The GCC coalition's intervention added a regional dimension to the conflict. The GCC views the Houthis' advance as part of a broader trend of Iranian encroachment, and has carried out a campaign of air strikes against the Houthis.

The civil war in Yemen has presented IS with a significant propaganda opportunity. Conflicts pitting Sunnis against Shias play to IS' strengths, as it has experience inflaming tensions with Shia adversaries while portraying itself as the defender of the Sunni population. This approach allows IS to position itself as an integral part of the local Sunni community. In many ways, IS is attempting to export to Yemen the same sectarian strategy it used successfully in the mid-2000s, when the group was still known as AQI. During that time, IS/AQI presented itself as a champion of the Sunni population even while it launched attacks against Shia interests that were specifically designed to provoke the Shias into carrying out retaliatory strikes against Sunnis.

IS supporters began their propaganda campaign against the Houthis even before IS established an official presence in Yemen. In October 2014, a group calling itself Supporters of the Caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula released a statement pledging *bayat* to Baghdadi. The content of the statement mirrored IS' two-pronged sectarian messaging strategy, involving appeals to Yemeni Sunnis and attacks against the Houthis. On the one hand, the militants assured Yemeni Sunnis they were their "brothers" and "sons". On the other hand, the group vowed to confront the Houthis with a "fierce, brutal, and crushing response beyond limits". The speakers threatened to behead and burn all Houthis, and warned Sunnis to steer clear of Houthi areas.¹⁷⁹

In November 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accepted the pledge of allegiance from IS' supporters in Yemen. Baghdadi's comments on Yemen focused overwhelmingly on the Houthi threat, calling the Houthis kuffar and apostates, and urging IS members to "stake their shirk [polytheism] with your tawhid".¹⁸⁰

IS' Yemen branch created an official media wing soon after its creation, thus underscoring the importance of media to IS.¹⁸¹ IS supporters created an Arabic-language hashtag on Twitter to promote the group's new Yemen presence. But as IS members in Yemen focused on developing the group's media apparatus, they faced pressure from outside supporters to mobilise to action in the country more quickly. In a statement posted on a jihadist forum in January 2015, an IS media operative urged IS in Yemen to "seize this opportunity" and defend Yemen's Sunnis "before it becomes too

¹⁷⁹ "Bayan Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Jazirat al-Arab", posted by YouTube user Hafid Sayf Allah al-Maslul, October 10, 2014.

¹⁸⁰ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Wa-law Kariha al-Kafirun", al-Furqan Media, November 13, 2014.

¹⁸¹ Observation made by BBC Monitoring, December 10, 2014.

late”.¹⁸² The operative stated that Yemen’s Sunni tribes lacked the proper “combat doctrine” to counter the Houthis, and would soon be defeated if IS did not come to their rescue.

In March 2015, IS began the next phase of its expansion in Yemen, which focused on announcing separate administrative units in Yemen. On March 2, IS released a statement announcing the establishment of Wilayat Lahij, a territory that encompasses south-western Yemen. In the statement, IS vowed to sacrifice itself to protect the Sunni people of Yemen, assuring them that the Houthis’ actions would “not go without accountability and punishment”. IS vowed to carry out attacks against the Houthis “in the upcoming days”.¹⁸³ Masked IS gunmen later distributed leaflets of the statement in the governorates of Lahij, Hadramawt, Ibb, Shabwah, and Sana’a.¹⁸⁴ After distributing the statement in Lahij, IS deployed dozens of gunmen who wandered the streets with RPGs and machine guns.¹⁸⁵ These actions were designed to advertise IS’ presence in Yemen. Announcing itself with a show of force is consistent with the way IS has carried its winner’s message into other theatres.

Soon after the leaflets were distributed, IS made good on its threats against the Houthis. On March 20, 2015, suicide bombers carried out attacks on two mosques frequented by Houthis in Sana’a, killing 137 in the deadliest terrorist attack in Yemen’s history.¹⁸⁶ The group followed this attack with a barrage of propaganda highlighting its expansion into Yemen, boasting about the mosque attacks and threatening more violence against Houthis. IS portrayed the attacks as the “tip of the iceberg”, vowing that it would continue its assaults until it had eradicated the Houthis altogether.¹⁸⁷ Since the March 2015 attacks, IS has claimed several additional operations against Houthi mosques.¹⁸⁸

Competition with AQAP

IS’ audacious move into Yemen, a key al-Qaeda stronghold, has brought to the fore the growing competition between IS and al-Qaeda. Indeed, IS’ strategic calculation to enter the Yemeni civil war appears to be driven less by its actual possession of a strong on-the-ground presence than by its competition with al-Qaeda. AQAP is al-Qaeda’s most important branch, as illustrated by the fact that the group’s late emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in a June 2015 drone strike, had also been named the al-Qaeda

¹⁸² Posted on al-Minbar al-Ijami jihadist forum by al-Mujahid al-Hliktruni, January 20, 2015.

¹⁸³ “Glad Tidings: Important Statement by the Islamic State in Wilayah al-Yemen: ‘The Official Emergence of Islamic State in Wilayah Lahij,’” posted on Al-Minbar al-Ijami jihadist forum by Abu al-Abbas al-Dali’i, March 2, 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Observation made by BBC Monitoring, March 2, 2015.

¹⁸⁵ “Da’esh Yu’lin ‘An Thuhurihi al-Awwal fi al-Yaman (Wathiqah)”, Sanaa Al-Taghyir, March 2, 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Sami Aboudi, “Islamists Rise as Chaos Descends in Yemen’s Cosmopolitan Port”, Reuters, October 27, 2015.

¹⁸⁷ “Bayan Tabani al-Amaliyaat al-Istishadiyya Dud Awkar al-Houtha”, Wilayat Sana’a, March 20, 2015, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/the-islamic-state-22adopting-the-martyrdom-operations-against-the-dens-of-the-e1b8a5c5abthc4abs-wilc481yat-e1b9a3anac48122.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, “Detonating a Parked Car Bomb against a House of Worship Belonging to the Polytheist Rejectionists, the ‘Qubbah al-Mahdi Husayniyah [Arabic]”, Wilayat Sana’a, June 20, 2015.

organisation's general manager. IS, as a former al-Qaeda affiliate, is also well aware that AQAP is responsible for guiding al-Qaeda's Africa network. If IS mounted a significant challenge to AQAP, or at least chipped away at the group's dominance in Yemen, it would be a major blow to al-Qaeda. Indeed, even if IS proved unable to build a competitive network to challenge AQAP, if its propaganda fostered the *perception* that it has done so, IS could paint al-Qaeda as a doomed organisation and persuade al-Qaeda members to jump ship to IS.

Thus IS has mounted a robust messaging campaign to discredit AQAP, accusing the group of complacency during the Houthis' rise to power, and denouncing AQAP for following a flawed political and religious methodology.

Attacking AQAP's Approach to the Houthis

IS has pinned blame for the Houthis' success on AQAP, and has promised that as it expands in Yemen, it will correct AQAP's "mistakes in creed and methodology", and reverse the Houthis' gains.¹⁸⁹ IS has accused AQAP of deliberately avoiding confrontation with the Houthis, allowing them to gain an edge. This criticism stems from the General Guidelines for Jihad, a document Ayman al-Zawahiri distributed in 2013, which instructed al-Qaeda affiliates to "avoid fighting" with the Shia unless the Shia attack first.¹⁹⁰

IS' online supporters have been heavily involved in amplifying this anti-AQAP campaign. Many of these commentators have blamed AQAP for the "fall of Yemen".¹⁹¹ For instance, one prominent pro-IS media group released a statement suggesting that AQAP "had no one to blame" but themselves for the situation in Yemen, adding that the Houthis were able to take "advantage of all the available means that [AQAP] left behind".¹⁹²

IS' military operations against Houthi forces reinforce the group's anti-AQAP messaging campaign. By carrying out and publicizing attacks on Houthi targets, IS shows onlookers that it is correcting AQAP's corrupted methodology, and acting against the Houthi threat.

¹⁸⁹ "Remaining and Expanding: Yemen", *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 28.

¹⁹⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for the Work of a Jihādī", Al-Sahab Media, September 2013.

¹⁹¹ Observation made by BBC Monitoring, January 23, 2015.

¹⁹² "It is the Rule of God, O Al-Qaeda in Yemen? [Arabic]", Sariyyat al-Malhamah, January 21, 2015.

It should be noted that al-Qaeda's network in Yemen dwarfs that of IS, and IS' ability to survive in the country hinges largely on its ability to convince its audience that it has momentum. The group has often released slick propaganda videos promoting its strength, and highlighting its capabilities against the Houthis. For example, on April 24, 2015, IS announced the creation of Wilayat Sana'a, releasing a nine-minute video entitled "Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Yemen".¹⁹³ The polished video portrayed IS in Yemen as a cohesive and well-trained military organisation, as some twenty IS members wearing matching camouflage were filmed conducting training exercises in synchrony. The narrator vowed to establish the caliphate in Yemen, urging fellow Muslims to join him and emphasizing that the group is "thirsty for [the] blood" of the Houthis.¹⁹⁴



Figure 9: Wilayat Sana'a: "Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Yemen"

As of this writing, the efforts that IS' Yemen branch has made to cultivate an aura of success are fundamentally threatened by a wave of defections from the organisation. Tensions within IS' Yemen branch exploded into public in December 2015, when 70 Islamic State members and several senior leaders released a statement on Twitter announcing that they were defecting from the group's local governor (*wali*).¹⁹⁵ The statement did not renounce the Islamic State as an organisation. The defectors explained that their former *wali* had committed *sharia* violations by dismissing fighters who had brought a lawsuit against the Islamic State's military commander in Yemen and failing to provide sufficient resources to militants in Hadramawt Province. The group also accused the *wali* of committing "injustice against the weak" and expelling foreign fighters.

This statement opened the floodgates, and revealed the extent of discontent within IS' ranks in Yemen. Immediately after the statement's release, another IS defector from Yemen released an article on Twitter outlining his own reasons for leaving the group, and called on the 70 defectors to renounce their pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi entirely. IS adopted a characteristically pugnacious response to the defections, with IS *sharia* council member Abu Ubaydah Abd-al-Hakim al-Iraqi condemning the defectors for denying their *wali*. But this warning did little to curb the flood of defecting Yemeni jihadists. On December 24, over 30 militants, including three

¹⁹³ "Junud Al-Khilafa fi Ard Al-Yaman", Wilayat Sana'a, April 23, 2015, available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/04/24/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-soldiers-of-the-caliphate-in-the-land-of-yemen-wilayat-%E1%B9%A3anaa/>.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Divisions Emerge within the Islamic State's Yemen 'Province'", *Long War Journal*, December 23, 2015.

senior officials, released a statement declaring that they would no longer obey the Yemen *wali*. Several days later, a former IS *sharia* official in Yemen released a 30-minute video outlining numerous transgressions committed by the group, comparing IS' operations in Yemen to the "work of children who have not reached puberty and who have not participated in any jihadist work". Days after this testimony was released, another 24 militants announced that they were breaking away from IS' Yemen leadership. At least one hundred fighters have defected from the Yemen affiliate since mid-December 2015, a striking number considering that IS is believed to have fewer than a thousand fighters in the whole country.¹⁹⁶

Attacking al-Qaeda's Methodology

IS and al-Qaeda take different approaches to governance, *sharia*, and the utility of violence. IS favours the use of extreme forms of violence and immediate, coercive implementation of *sharia*. In contrast, al-Qaeda often will opt not to try to govern areas where it is militarily strong. Consonant with the organisation's strategy of appearing to be an organic part of the local landscape, and thus avoiding the full wrath of counterinsurgents, in areas where al-Qaeda branches do govern territory, these branches often do so as a part of coalitions or front groups. Al-Qaeda favours a relatively gradualist introduction of *sharia*.

IS has relentlessly attacked al-Qaeda for its governance paradigm. IS often cites al-Qaeda's alleged unwillingness to implement *sharia* to accuse the group of abandoning Islamic principles. IS has accused AQAP of being "ashamed of achieving *tamkin*", or consolidation, in Yemen, as AQAP missed its opportunity to advance jihadist goals even in areas that offered "ideal conditions for large-scale jihad".¹⁹⁷

IS has even alleged that AQAP's leadership regrets its approach to the country. In *Dabiq*, Abu Maysarah al-Shami penned an article, entitled "The Qa'idah of Adh-Dhawahiri, Al-Harari, and An-Nadhari and the Absent Yemeni Wisdom", focused on discrediting AQAP's governance approach in Yemen. Al-Shami writes:

It's also reached me from thiqāt in Yemen that the organisation's leadership in Yemen is regretful about the period of consolidation during which they administered the areas that they took control of in Abyan and elsewhere for close to a year, to the extent that one of them said, "If we had taken the wealth and effort that we spent administering these areas and applied them towards recruitment and purchasing weapons, it would have been more beneficial for us".¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Taylor Luck, "In Yemen, Islamic State is Struggling to Claim the Mantle of Sunnis' Champion", *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 2015.

¹⁹⁷ "Remaining and Expanding: Yemen", *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 27.

¹⁹⁸ Abu Maysarah ash-Shaami, "The Qa'idah of Adh-Dhawahiri, Al-Harari, and An-Nadhari, and the Absent Yemeni Wisdom", *Dabiq* issue 6, October/November 2014, p. 22.

Thus IS frames AQAP as a failing organisation, unable to realise longstanding jihadist goals.

Defections from AQAP to IS

IS has been able to win over several AQAP figures who in turn have featured prominently in its messaging. The most prominent defector was Mamun Hatim (killed in a May 2015 U.S. drone strike), who held a leadership position in Ibb province, and served on AQAP's shura council and *sharia* committee in that capacity. Hatim was an early IS supporter. Shortly after IS captured Mosul, Hatim publicly congratulated the group for its victories in Iraq and Syria, and encouraged al-Qaeda branches "in every country and region" to "bury all old rivalries" and "join the battle alongside" IS.¹⁹⁹ Thereafter, Hatim became a significant figure in IS' Yemen propaganda. For instance, after IS established an official wilayat in Yemen, Hatim urged AQAP accept to IS' presence there.²⁰⁰ Shortly thereafter, Hatim encouraged "the different ranks to unite", and for al-Qaeda branches throughout the world to "engage in a virtuous battle under the only righteous banner". This reference to a single righteous banner clearly implied that al-Qaeda and its affiliated should pledge allegiance to Baghdadi.²⁰¹ Hatim was joined in these entreaties by other jihadist figures in Yemen, such as salafi cleric Abdul Majeed Alefara Rimi, who said that the "al-Qaeda leadership cannot deny realities on the ground".²⁰² Though the bench of defectors to IS was in reality relatively thin, IS' skilful manipulation of the media, and constant promotion of defection statements, convinced many observers, including some counterterrorism analysts, that IS would soon eclipse al-Qaeda in the Yemen jihad.

One such heavily-promoted defection came in October 2014, when Supporters of the Caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula, believed to be composed of AQAP defectors, announced their switch from AQAP to IS.²⁰³ Immediately after the group pledged to Baghdadi, hundreds of journalists based in Yemen received an email from an unknown sender informing recipients of the IS group's existence. The email featured AQAP's logo, along with the name of the new group, in an apparent attempt to foster the perception that the whole of AQAP—or at least a significant portion—had defected to IS.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Mamun Hatim, audio statement posted to Twitter June 17, 2014.

²⁰⁰ Series of tweets from Mamun Hatim, @mam1346, November 19, 2014.

²⁰¹ Mamun Hatim, audio message posted to Twitter by user @u7_10, November 26, 2014.

²⁰² "Salafi Cleric Urges Al-Qa'ida to 'Pledge Allegiance' to ISIL Caliphate", *Yemen Post*, July 19, 2014.

²⁰³ Observation made by BBC Monitoring, November 26, 2014.

²⁰⁴ Ali Saeed, "Email Declares Pro-Islamic State Group in Yemen", *Yemen Times*, October 14, 2014.

Direct Engagement

In its pursuit of territorial expansion, IS has supplemented its global propaganda campaign with an approach that can be described as direct diplomacy, consisting of covert engagement with jihadist groups in far-flung locales. Even before declaring the establishment of the caliphate, IS began deploying emissaries to various countries to strengthen its relationship with jihadist actors and query whether they would be willing to pledge *bayat*. As IS built relationships and intensified its expansion efforts, courtships ensued, with IS offering a variety of inducements to persuade jihadist groups to join the IS network.

IS' direct diplomacy has been largely overlooked as an aspect of the group's expansion strategy. While IS propaganda is readily available, information about the group's covert initiatives is far more scarce in open source reporting. This information gap is critical, as it leaves analysts with an incomplete picture of IS' expansion strategy. However, enough information has emerged through social media, news reporting and secondary sources to allow this report to present a preliminary assessment of how IS pursues direct diplomacy. This section takes a paradigmatic look at IS' direct engagement strategy. There are several discernible trends in IS' direct engagement efforts, including the deployment of emissaries to liaise with the leadership of regional jihadist groups; the delivery of funds, weapons, and manpower to these jihadist groups; and the provision of assistance and expertise, especially relating to social media and propaganda development. It should be noted, however, that this report's overview of IS' direct engagement is based on a limited number of sources due to the paucity of information about IS' efforts in this regard. Thus, the analysis that follows represents only a preliminary step toward building a more comprehensive assessment of IS' direct engagement.

The Use of Emissaries

A crucial aspect of IS' direct diplomacy is its use of emissaries in the courtship of regional jihadist groups. IS has deployed ambassadors across the Middle East and North Africa to initiate direct communications with these groups. These initiatives are perhaps the most integral component of IS' expansion strategy, as they allow IS officials to build personal relationships with prospective jihadist allies. These emissaries may also negotiate pledges of allegiance, offering inducements in exchange for a group's loyalty, gathering pledges of allegiance themselves, and instructing jihadist groups in how and when to announce their pledge.

IS rarely discusses emissaries, who frequently operate covertly, in its propaganda. IS' silence on this issue likely reflects its hesitancy to reveal its techniques for wooing other jihadist groups, and also its desire to make *bayat* pledges seem like they stem from spontaneous enthusiasm for IS rather than from material inducements. Nonetheless,

information about these emissaries' activities in several countries has come to light through reporting and social media. For instance, IS' leadership in Syria and Iraq sent several high-level officials, including the Yemeni Abu al-Bara al-Azdi and the Saudi Abu Habib al-Jazrawi, to the Libyan city of Derna in September 2014 to collect pledges of allegiance from a group of fighters who had previously fought with IS in Syria and Iraq.²⁰⁵ The two aforementioned individuals remained in Derna, and became high-ranking IS officials in the city, indicating that IS had deployed them both to secure pledges of allegiance and to serve as leaders in IS' Libya contingent.

IS also deployed emissaries in its courtship of ABM. The Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Shahed* reported in September 2014 that IS had dispatched a jihadist known as Musa'id Abu Qatmah to the Sinai Peninsula through Gaza—and that, once in Sinai, he set about trying to win oaths of loyalty from local militant groups.²⁰⁶ Nor was Abu Qatmah the only IS figure attempting to win over Sinai groups during that period. When Egyptian authorities arrested eleven alleged militants in early September 2014, they found that the men were carrying three letters from a Libya-based IS figure known as Abu Ahmad al-Libi, who encouraged Sinai-based jihadist groups to unite under the banner of IS in exchange for IS providing all the funding and arms they required. Al-Libi's letter provided a clear indication of the incentives IS emissaries were willing to provide to jihadists in exchange for their pledges of allegiance.

One group in particular, a pro-IS media outlet known as Africa Media (Ifriqiya lil-I'lam), has played a critical role in liaising with jihadist organisations in North Africa, the Sahel and West Africa. Africa Media—which claims to include individuals from jihadist groups in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania—first emerged in September 2014 as a pan-African media outlet, disseminating content on Twitter relating to both al-Qaeda and IS-linked jihadist groups.²⁰⁷ Africa Media's pro-IS sympathies soon became clear, and in late November 2014, the group released a statement on Twitter noting that its purpose was to “disseminate the news of the Islamic State in the wilayat of Barqa, Tripoli, Algeria, Tunisia, al-Sahil [the coast], and the desert”.²⁰⁸ In early December 2014, the group went a step further, officially pledging allegiance to IS, and in May 2015, Africa Media released a statement clarifying that its mission is to collect “pledges of allegiance to the caliph of Muslims from all active organisations and groups”.²⁰⁹

In keeping with that mission, Africa Media has aggressively promoted IS propaganda in Africa, and has worked to build out IS' network through covert means. By its own admission, Africa Media was intimately involved in facilitating Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to IS. In an article published by Africa Media in March 2015, an individual purporting to be a member of both Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Africa Media explained that he reached out to Boko Haram and began assisting in the group's

²⁰⁵ *Al-Hayah* (Arabic), November 3, 2014.

²⁰⁶ *Al-Shahed* (Arabic), September 4, 2014.

²⁰⁷ See “At Long Last!” Ifriqiyah lil-I'lam, May 20, 2015 (stating that the media outlet's staff “consists of a group of media operatives, members of various jihadist groups in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and the Grand Desert area”).

²⁰⁸ Tweets from Ifriqiya lil-I'lam, @ifrikya3, November 21, 2014.

²⁰⁹ “Jihadi Media Group Afriqiyah Media Pledges Allegiance to IS”, SITE Intelligence, December 1, 2014.

propaganda operations. The author explained that Africa Media helped to facilitate communications between IS and Boko Haram media operatives, leading to the creation of a new Boko Haram media outlet, known as al-Urwah al-Wuthqah. Ultimately, the author claimed, these communications and IS' technical assistance to Boko Haram resulted in Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to IS.²¹⁰ Additional information substantiates the unidentified author's claims that Africa Media was involved in running al-Urwah al-Wuthqah and securing Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to IS. For instance, Africa Media published information about Boko Haram's General Command before the Nigerian group pledged allegiance to IS.²¹¹ Jacob Zenn, a Jamestown Foundation analyst who studies Boko Haram, concluded that Africa Media had co-authored a threat to West African countries that was posted on al-Urwah al-Wuthqah.²¹²

Africa Media has also been pivotal in building support for IS in Tunisia. Shortly after its establishment, Africa Media emerged as the primary media outlet for news about pro-IS activity in Tunisia, often releasing inside information about intra-jihadist dynamics that illustrated the group's connections with jihadist networks in the country. For instance, in December 2014, Africa Media released a video in which a pro-IS splinter group from the al-Qaeda-aligned Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi revealed its links with IS.²¹³ In March 2015, after an IS media outlet in Syria released a video asking why Tunisian jihadists had not pledged allegiance to IS, Africa Media tweeted a response, stating that Tunisian IS supporters were preparing for a pledge and would be publicly announcing it soon.²¹⁴ Following the March 2015 attack at TunIS' Bardo museum, Africa Media continued to serve as a primary mouthpiece for IS supporters in Tunisia. After people on Twitter launched a hashtag campaign, titled "I will come to Tunisia this summer", to show their support for the Tunisian people after the Bardo attack, Africa Media responded with a hashtag campaign of its own in which it vowed that IS militants would carry out attacks in Tunisia that summer.²¹⁵ In April 2015, Africa Media was the first outlet to report that IS militants had carried out an attack on a Tunisian military checkpoint in western Tunisia.²¹⁶

In addition to its media activities, Africa Media also openly admits to playing a role in recruiting on the ground for IS in Tunisia. In May 2015, Africa Media released a statement detailing its operations in Tunisia and other countries. The group explained that it had "turned [to] ground operations after being limited [at first] to the media. We supported the mujahedin, treated their wounded, provided them with shelter, facilitated their emigration, and provided them with means of support and coordination". The group also alleged in the statement that it had been responsible for setting up communications between IS and Tunisian jihadists, and had played a role in

²¹⁰ Untitled article published by Ifriqiyah lil-I'lam, March 12, 2015.

²¹¹ Jacob Zenn, "Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate", *CTC Sentinel*, August 2015, p. 11.

²¹² Jacob Zenn, "Islamic State and West Africa", *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, December 17, 2015.

²¹³ Video posted on Twitter by Ifriqiyah lil-I'lam, @ifriqya3, December 19, 2014.

²¹⁴ Tweets from Ifriqiyah lil-I'lam, @riifCBA9, March 15, 2015.

²¹⁵ Tweets from Ifriqya lil-I'lam, @riifFBA9, March 25, 2015.

²¹⁶ Tweets from Ifriqya lil-I'lam, @IFRIK11, April 7, 2015.

facilitating pledges of allegiance from Boko Haram and a pro-IS splinter group within al-Murabitun, an al-Qaeda-aligned organisation operating in the Sahel.²¹⁷

Money and Weapons

IS' emissaries make a point of offering jihadist groups something tangible in return for their new allegiance to the caliphate. There are several documented instances of IS reaching into its once-deep coffers to try to buy the loyalty of jihadist organisations. IS was flush with cash after sweeping through Mosul and seizing much of western Iraq in the summer of 2014: according to one estimate, the group generated over \$1.2 billion over the course of that year.²¹⁸ In short order, IS began offering significant amounts of money, and sometimes weapons, to regional jihadist organisations.

IS' courtship of Shabaab provides an instructive example of how IS has used monetary incentives to try to gain the support of al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist organisations. In mid-2014, several IS members travelled to Somalia and offered Ahmed Abdi Godane, Shabaab's then-emir, millions of dollars to shift allegiance to IS.²¹⁹ But Godane rebuffed the offer, expelling IS' emissaries and IS sympathisers from Shabaab-controlled territory. He then publicly renewed his pledge of *bayat* to al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, a very public rebuke of IS' outreach.²²⁰

Though IS was unsuccessful in convincing Shabaab to pledge allegiance to IS, its offerings appear to have been persuasive in other instances. After Adil Ibrahim, the emir of a Sinai-based militant group known as al-Muhajirun wal-Ansar, was captured by Egyptian authorities, he revealed that he had spoken with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a voice call in August 2013, and that Baghdadi had offered him \$10,000 in exchange for his group's pledge of allegiance. Ibrahim took this deal.²²¹ (Ibrahim's confession also shows that IS began thinking about global expansion even before its formal split with al-Qaeda.) Similarly, in August 2014, captured militants revealed to Egyptian prosecutors that there had been contact between ABM and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, resulting in an agreement that Baghdadi would fund the Sinai-based group and supply it with weapons in return for ABM providing him fighters and pledging allegiance.²²² The *New York Times* also reported that, a month prior to ABM's pledge of allegiance to IS, two ABM fighters travelled to Syria to request weapons and money in exchange for a pledge of allegiance.²²³

IS' ability to offer money to jihadist groups outside of Syria and Iraq is likely to diminish as military pressure on the group's key sources of financial strength intensifies. Air strikes have degraded IS' oil exploitation and refining capabilities, and the Iraqi

²¹⁷ "At Long Last!" *Ifriqya lil-H'lam*, May 20, 2015.

²¹⁸ Sarah Almukhtar, "ISIS Finances Are Strong", *New York Times*, May 19, 2015.

²¹⁹ A U.S. drone strike subsequently claimed Godane's life in September 2014.

²²⁰ See tweets from @abuabeida, October 13, 2014.

²²¹ *Al-Masry al-Youm* (Arabic), December 20, 2013.

²²² Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis' Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State* (Wikistrat, 2015).

²²³ David Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS", *New York Times*, November 10, 2014.

government's decision to stop paying salaries to state employees living in IS territory will further reduce the group's finances. Territorial losses will also take a toll on IS' coffers, since the group relies heavily on extortion and taxation of local populations. Though IS will still be able to make money from its multiple revenue streams, much of this income will be spent in Syria and Iraq, putting a squeeze on money available for foreign expansion efforts.

Media Assistance

IS' social media expertise is a marketable skill that it can provide to other jihadist groups. In several cases, jihadist groups have shown a sudden and perceptible improvement in the quality of their propaganda content immediately after (or sometimes just before) joining IS, indicating that IS offers social media assistance as a perk of joining its network. Boko Haram, for example, received a major boost in its propaganda immediately before the group pledged allegiance to IS. In early January 2015, Boko Haram established the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha Twitter account, the Nigerian jihadist group's first-ever Twitter account. Until that point, Boko Haram's media capabilities had been remarkably crude, but the quality of the group's propaganda improved considerably following the creation of Urhwa al-Wutqha.

After that Twitter account's establishment, Boko Haram's propaganda also began to more closely resemble that of IS. Boko Haram began providing subtitles in multiple languages in its videos, an IS trademark, and started using sleek graphics and other special effects that are also characteristic of IS.²²⁴ In March 2015, Boko Haram released a video of the beheading of two alleged Nigerian spies that bore a close resemblance to IS' beheading videos. The similarities between the propaganda produced by Boko Haram and IS led analysts to conclude that IS was providing social media assistance to Boko Haram—a theory that was later borne out when Africa Media revealed that it had helped manage the al-Urhwa al-Wutqha account.

Another reason IS has provided social media assistance to new wilayats is because it seeks to maintain continuity and consistency in the propaganda produced with the IS logo. Thus, the quality of ABM's propaganda improved just after the group pledged allegiance to IS. The change in quality was evident even from the first video that Wilayat Sinai produced, which bore many trademarks of IS' battlefield videos. Wilayat Sinai propaganda videos are now demonstrably better from a production standpoint than the videos produced by ABM had been. Some analysts believe that Wilayat Sinai may now be sending its raw footage to IS media professionals, who refine the videos to make sure they meet IS standards.²²⁵

²²⁴ "Is Islamic State Shaping Boko Haram Media?" BBC Monitoring, March 4, 2015.

²²⁵ See R. Green, "ISIS In Sinai Increases Military, Propaganda Pressure on Egypt", Middle East Media Research Institute, Report No. 1201, November 8, 2015.

The Successes and Failures of IS' Global Propaganda Strategy

While IS seeks to maintain the perception that it is expanding and succeeding in all theaters, the truth is more muddled. IS' propaganda strategy and direct engagement operations have helped facilitate and accelerate the group's expansion in some countries, but the group's messaging has fallen flat elsewhere, and potentially even aggravated tensions with local communities. Although IS has sought to adapt its messaging to local dynamics, it has frequently struggled to generate public support and assimilate into the local landscape. Many of IS' struggles in this regard are linked to the group's organisational makeup.

For one, IS' hardline salafi jihadist ideology is foreign and abhorrent to local populations in many countries where IS is seeking to expand its presence. IS' inflexible approach to the implementation of *sharia* runs the risk of alienating local communities, and its use of corporal punishment could be particularly unpopular. Thus, IS propaganda advertising the group's implementation of *sharia*—including its now-ubiquitous images of whippings, amputations, and executions—could repulse locals, even while appealing to foreign fighters.

IS' use of threats and coercive messaging could also backfire in some theatres. As this report details, IS frequently employs menacing rhetoric, and advertises its violence against alleged dissidents. This strategy has been successful in dissuading locals in Syria and Iraq from mounting campaigns of resistance against IS.²²⁶ But the effectiveness of IS' intimidation propaganda is largely predicated on the group's ability to project power locally. Thus, IS' threatening propaganda has the potential to spark a backlash in new theatres where the group does not have an internal security apparatus in place.

IS' Arab-centric worldview could also undermine its appeal and messaging in theatres outside the Arab world. Though IS claims that it does not discriminate on the basis of race, nationality, or ethnicity, the group's leadership ranks are dominated by Arabs, with Iraqis holding many of the top positions. IS' Arab-centric composition has influenced its propaganda strategy. Most of IS' official propaganda has focused on issues relating to the Arab world, some of which have limited relevance to non-Arab Muslim populations. For instance, IS has been openly dismissive of non-Arab religious customs, including in Afghanistan.

The following section assesses the strengths and weaknesses of IS' propaganda and direct engagement strategies in each of the four countries profiled in this report. It is

²²⁶ For a discussion of how IS has used intimidation and targeted violence to repress opposition movements in Syria and Iraq, see Dan Trombly and Yasir Abbas, "The Case for a 'Raqqqa First' Strategy against the Islamic State", *War on the Rocks*, September 10, 2015.

often difficult to determine the direct effects of propaganda on local populations, especially absent polling data. But when considered alongside IS' political and military activities, it is possible to draw preliminary conclusions about how IS' propaganda and direct engagement strategies have influenced the group's global expansion efforts.

Libya



Figure 10: Wilayat Tarabulus's "Message to our Brothers in Somalia"

Libya is IS' most promising outpost outside of Syria and Iraq, and a focal point for the group's future expansion efforts. In late 2015, IS reportedly dispatched top official Abu Ali al-Anbari to manage the group's affairs in Libya.²²⁷ And as previously noted, U.S. intelligence officials believe that IS recently instructed several

hundred foreign fighters to join the group in Libya, rather than attempting to travel to Syria. Both of these developments attest to IS' commitment to building out its base in Libya.

Libya is likely to be a hub for IS' future propaganda and outreach activities in North Africa. IS' territorial control over the city of Sirte gives the group a secure base from which to produce and disseminate propaganda to national, regional, and global audiences. Indeed, Wilayat Tarabulus's media office has already produced several videos targeting IS supporters in the surrounding region, including a video message directed at militants in Somalia that was released in mid-January 2016.²²⁸ Moreover, because IS' central leadership maintains direct communications with its Libya affiliate, top-level IS media operatives based in Syria and Iraq can provide guidance on, and potentially help produce, propaganda released by IS' Libyan branch.

But even as Wilayat Tarabulus's global profile grows, it may face challenges at home. IS' trajectory in Libya has been uneven, due in large part to the group's inability to win over or subjugate local communities and rival militant groups. IS' defeat in Derna in the summer of 2015 marked a major setback, and provided an instructive example of how IS' heavy-handed tactics and unyielding verbal attacks on rival militant groups can trigger blowback. Indeed, the fact that the local population in Derna immediately rallied to the side of armed groups fighting against IS showed that IS had worn out its welcome in the city.²²⁹ IS has faced an uprising in Sirte as well, further attesting to IS' challenges

²²⁷ Patrick Markey and Ahmed Elumami, "Islamic State in Libya Fights to Emulate Iraq, Syria Success", Reuters, November 13, 2015.

²²⁸ "Message to Our Brothers in Somalia", Wilayat Tarabulus, January 12, 2016.

²²⁹ Mohamed Eljarh, "A Victory Over the Islamic State in Libya", *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2015.

in Libya. In August 2015, IS fighters killed a salafi preacher from Sirte who had publicly denounced the group. The assassination set off a local rebellion in one of the few neighbourhoods not yet under IS' control. Salafists, former members of Sirte's security forces, and youths from the slain preacher's tribe mobilised against IS. The uprising was short-lived, though: IS brought in reinforcements from Nawfaliyah, a town about 150 kilometres east of Sirte, and crushed the rebellion.²³⁰

While IS now maintains a firm grip on power in Sirte, the fact that the group endured two local uprisings in Libya in as many months raises questions about IS' prospects in the country. IS has successfully recruited from the ranks of disillusioned tribes and Libyan jihadist groups, but it has not managed to gain widespread popular support. This means that IS must rely on its coercive apparatus, and on the continued support of foreign fighters, to maintain control over the local population in Sirte. Indeed, the available evidence shows that foreigners have played a critical role in IS' operations in Sirte: Libyan intelligence sources claim that as many as 70 percent of IS fighters in the city are non-Libyans.²³¹

Afghanistan

IS has rolled out a multifaceted propaganda strategy aimed at wooing Taliban defectors, but recent developments suggest limitations to the group's efforts. The establishment in November 2015 of a Taliban splinter faction, composed of several prominent commanders, amounted to a repudiation of IS' Afghanistan strategy. Rather than joining IS, the disgruntled commanders remained faithful to the Taliban worldview, even while denouncing Mullah Mansour's leadership. The splinter group publicly rejected collaboration with IS in Afghanistan.²³² Other Taliban leaders who have expressed discontent with Mullah Mansour have similarly elected not to defect to IS, defying some analysts' predictions that the succession crisis within the Taliban would provide a major recruitment boost to IS.

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why IS has failed to capitalise on the Taliban's internal turmoil, the group's culturally tone-deaf messaging in Afghanistan has not helped. IS has undermined its own prospects for expansion in Afghanistan by criticizing Pashtunwali, the tribal code to which Pashtuns adhere. And as previously discussed, IS has been highly critical of Deobandism, the prevailing theological strain within the Taliban. In short, IS has struggled to navigate Afghanistan's complex web of tribal, ethnic, and religious identities.

²³⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the rebellion in Sirte, see Nathaniel Barr, "The Islamic State's Uneven Trajectory in Libya", *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 13:19 (September 2015).

²³¹ Colin Freeman, "Isil Recruiting Migrant 'Army of the Poor' with \$1,000 Sign-Up Bonuses", *The Telegraph* (U.K.), February 1, 2016.

²³² "Afghan Taliban Splinter Group's New Chief Backs Islamic State 'Brothers'—But Only Abroad", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 8, 2015.

The Taliban's formidable ground networks and influence within the Afghan militant landscape is another factor behind IS' expansion struggles in Afghanistan. Though it is internally fractured, the Taliban still possesses the strength to inflict significant damage upon rival militant movements. Thus, even when IS has succeeded in recruiting Afghan splinter groups, the Taliban has often prevented these factions from establishing a significant foothold.

The case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant group composed of Central Asian fighters that operated for about two decades in Afghanistan and Pakistan, illustrates how the Taliban has kept a lid on IS' expansion. With a predominantly Central Asian membership, the IMU had close ties to the Taliban and al-Qaeda dating back to the 1990s. But after the Islamic State expanded into Afghanistan, the IMU switched its loyalties and joined the budding caliphate.²³³

The decision to break with the Taliban proved costly. Shortly after the IMU pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, the Taliban launched an offensive against its erstwhile ally. Many IMU members, including emir Usman Ghazi, decided to seek out a safe haven in Afghanistan's Zabul province, where Mullah Dadullah led a Taliban splinter faction that maintained a tactical military alliance with the IMU. In November 2015, the Taliban carried out a second operation against the IMU and Dadullah that rapidly overwhelmed these outgunned adversaries. Dadullah and dozens of his family members were killed, as were over 100 IMU fighters. Usman Ghazi was apparently killed or captured by the Taliban, though his exact fate remains unknown.

The IMU's precipitous collapse was remarkable, especially considering that the group had been part of the militant landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan for so long. An IMU supporter reporting on the group's destruction on Twitter acknowledged this when he remarked: "What America and its agents could not do in 14 years, the Taliban did in 24 hours".²³⁴

The IMU's rapid demise is a cautionary tale for other Afghanistan-based groups. With the Taliban threat looming large, IS' expansion efforts in that theatre are likely to be slow-going and precarious. And if IS cannot broaden its appeal beyond Afghanistan's salafist population, its future prospects for growth in Afghanistan will remain limited.

Egypt

It is difficult to ascertain how IS' propaganda strategy has impacted the organisation's growth and expansion in Egypt. On the one hand, it is clear that Wilayat Sinai's menacing rhetoric and increasingly aggressive approach toward the local population in

²³³ See Damon Mehl, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Opens a Door to the Islamic State", *CTC Sentinel* 8:6 (June 2015) (providing overview of events leading up to the IMU's pledge of allegiance to IS); Bruce Pannier, "The Islamic Movement Of Uzbekistan Comes Unraveled", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 28, 2015.

²³⁴ See "Jihadist Gives Account of Afghan Taliban Nearly Eliminating IMU, Demands IS Address Happenings", *SITE Intelligence*, December 11, 2015.

the Sinai has aggravated tensions with some tribes. The Tarabin tribe's rebellion against Wilayat Sinai, while probably more limited than some news reports suggest, indicates that IS' heavy-handed tactics may cause a backlash, as has been the case in Libya. But the Sinai tribes are divided in their response to Wilayat Sinai, with news outlets and analysts reporting that the wilayat's recruitment numbers have actually increased in some areas of North Sinai in recent months in response to the Egyptian government's iron-fisted security measures.²³⁵ Judging from the conflicting reports of tribal discontent and support for Wilayat Sinai, it appears that the group's propaganda strategy toward the Sinai tribes has yielded mixed results.

Evidence is similarly inconclusive with regard to IS' appeal to political Islamists. The Sisi regime and anti-Brotherhood activists have tried to paint the Brotherhood with the same broad brush as IS, but there has been no mass exodus of Brotherhood members to IS. Indeed, though there have been limited reports of Brotherhood members joining IS in Syria and Iraq, IS does not seem to have fully capitalised on the wellspring of discontent and frustration among young political Islamists in Egypt.

But the situation in Egypt may ultimately benefit IS in the long run. The Sisi regime has showed few signs of relenting in its crackdown on the Brotherhood, which is simultaneously experiencing an internal crisis. Revolutionary factions and younger members within the Brotherhood call for the movement to abandon its current approach and instead adopt a more violent strategy for resisting the Sisi regime. These two trends could play into IS' hands, as Mokhtar Awad has noted. "The reservoir of angry Islamist youths who are susceptible to recruitment will only deepen if the violent faction of the Brotherhood continues to indoctrinate thousands of Brotherhood youth with its new treatise and if the government continues with its extreme repression of Islamists", he writes.²³⁶

Yemen

The conflict between the Houthis and forces aligned with the Hadi regime has created an opportunity for IS to galvanise local Sunni populations through its sectarian propaganda. This is an approach that IS has already mastered in Syria and Iraq, where the group successfully exploited sectarian dynamics. But despite investing considerable propaganda assets in Yemen, IS has been clearly overshadowed by AQAP, and its deep troubles had reached the public eye by early 2016.

IS has been largely unsuccessful in its efforts to inspire high-level defections from AQAP. Several of AQAP's senior leaders have rejected IS' entreaties and strongly

²³⁵ See, for example, "Assault in Sheikh Zuweid: A Turning Point in Egypt's Fight against Terrorism", Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, July 2, 2015; "Army's Attempts to Win Over the Sinai Tribes Produce the Opposite Results [Arabic]", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, November 17, 2015.

²³⁶ Mokhtar Awad, "Egypt's New Radicalism", *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2016.

denounced the upstart organisation.²³⁷ Additionally, Mamum Hatim, one of the few high-profile AQAP leaders to defect to IS, was killed in a May 2015 drone strike, dealing a considerable blow to IS' expansion prospects.

But IS' biggest setback in Yemen has been the wave of defections that rocked its nascent branch. As explained previously, in December 2015, 70 IS members and several senior leaders publicly defected from the group's *wali*, and thereafter a further wave of unhappy IS members came forward. By early 2016, at least one hundred fighters had defected from an affiliate believed to have fewer than a thousand fighters.

Despite IS' setbacks, political conditions in Yemen play to the organisation's strengths. With no end to the conflict in sight, IS will have additional opportunities. But IS faces a tall order in trying to challenge AQAP, which has been the biggest winner in Yemen's civil war.

²³⁷ For one example, see Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP Rejects Islamic State's 'Caliphate,' Blasts Group for Sowing Dissent Among Jihadists", *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2014.

A Policy Menu for Countering the Islamic State's Global Expansion

To effectively counter the Islamic State's strategic messaging and disrupt the group's global expansion and foreign fighter recruitment operations, key stakeholders will need to implement a multilayered strategy that incorporates hard and soft power policies.

IS is a savvy and adaptive opponent. As Michael Clarke, the director general of the London-based Royal United Services Institute, remarked in May 2015 after IS seized the city of Ramadi, IS is "like the air in a balloon". When one of its physical territories comes under attack, it will move elsewhere, popping up in a new location where counterinsurgents are not present.²³⁸ The jihadist group also attempts to employ this approach in the propaganda sphere. With Twitter aggressively taking down IS accounts, IS expanded to the social media platform Telegram, just four days after Telegram launched a new "channel" function that allows users to disseminate content to an unlimited number of users.²³⁹ Telegram also allows users to encrypt their private chats, providing a secure platform for jihadists to communicate with one another. The dexterity that IS exhibited when conditions for the group deteriorated on Twitter underscores the need for a comprehensive counter-messaging strategy.

The following policy menu envisions roles for a wide variety of actors, including governments, civil society groups, and private-sector technology companies that are on the front lines of the fight against IS messaging. An examination of the strengths and weaknesses of various actors in this sphere makes clear why fusing voices and capabilities is desirable. Government actors, though they possess an abundance of resources and technical expertise, are not well-equipped to lead the public counter-messaging campaign, given their lack of credibility with key target populations. In December 2015, a panel of marketing specialists from tech companies who convened to assess the U.S. State Department's messaging operations expressed "serious questions about whether the U.S. government should be involved in overt messaging at all", according to a government official who was briefed on the panel's findings.²⁴⁰ In January 2016, the State Department announced that it would no longer produce videos or other original content in English, an admission that English-language counter-messaging had fallen flat.²⁴¹

²³⁸ "Islamic State 'Like Air in a Balloon,' Says RUSI's Michael Clarke", BBC, May 15, 2015.

²³⁹ "IS Exploits Telegram Mobile App to Spread Propaganda", BBC, October 7, 2015.

²⁴⁰ Greg Miller, "Panel Casts Doubt on U.S. Propaganda Efforts against ISIS", *Washington Post*, December 2, 2015.

²⁴¹ Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, "Obama Administration Plans Shake-up in Propaganda War against ISIS", *Washington Post*, January 8, 2016.

On the other hand, civil society actors may have greater capital with at-risk audiences, but often lack the resources and know-how to implement an effective counter-messaging campaign. In the past two years, non-governmental organisations have produced a large number of messaging campaigns, often with the assistance of major tech companies, aimed at undermining IS' various narratives. For instance, a former extremist based in London has created a cartoon character known as Abdullah X, a young and hip British Muslim who speaks about the dangers of violent extremism and salafi jihadist ideology in a series of short YouTube videos. Other campaigns reveal the inaccuracies and hypocrisy behind IS' propaganda. But civil society actors have faced obstacles. For one, IS propaganda is circulated far more widely than counter-messaging content produced by civil society actors. Another challenge is that civil society counter-messaging efforts are often uncoordinated. Civil society-led campaigns are often redundant, or incongruous. The absence of consistent and coordinated counter-messaging is particularly problematic when confronting a bureaucratic organisation like IS, which maintains strict control over its propaganda output, and can count on an army of online supporters.

Addressing the obstacles to effective counter-messaging will involve a variety of policies and approaches. This section provides a menu of policy options related to anti-IS counter-messaging. Unlike policy recommendations, the purpose of the policy menu is not to advocate for any particular policy. Instead, the policy menu is intended to provide decision-makers and stakeholders with an array of possible approaches. This section highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each policy. The policies outlined in this section include both soft and hard power options, and involve state and non-state actors.

Highlighting IS' Struggles in Africa

As this report explains, IS' prospects for international growth are highly dependent on the group's ability to sustain its winner's message. If IS is to attract foreign fighters and persuade al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist organisations to join the IS network, it must project the image of strength and momentum. But despite IS' boisterous claims about its international growth, the group has hit significant roadblocks in its efforts to expand into Africa. IS' struggles in Africa, if more widely known, could undercut the group's winner's message.

From the Sahel to North Africa to the Horn of Africa, IS has experienced considerable challenges as it tries to poach jihadist organisations and disgruntled militants from al-Qaeda. Algeria initially seemed like a promising area of expansion for IS, when in September 2014 around 30 militants from AQIM's centre zone announced that they were defecting from al-Qaeda and joining IS.²⁴² Just weeks after the group adopted the name Jund al-Khilafah, it released a video announcing that it had kidnapped Hervé Gourdel, a French mountain climber, and intended to kill him unless France stopped its

²⁴² "Algeria's al-Qaeda Defectors Join IS Group", Al-Jazeera, September 14, 2014.

air campaign in Iraq. Two days later, Jund al-Khilafah made good on its threat, releasing a video of Gourdel's beheading.

The Frenchman's beheading would be Jund al-Khilafah's first and last hurrah. With this ostentatious and brutal display, the former al-Qaeda militants placed themselves squarely in the crosshairs of Algeria's security forces. About a month after Jund al-Khilafah's inception, Algerian security forces killed the group's emir, Abdelmalik Gouri.²⁴³ The loss of a key leader, while rarely crippling for well-established jihadist groups, damaged Jund al-Khilafah while it was still building its network. But the Algerian security forces' next strike was even more paralyzing. In May 2015, Algerian soldiers killed at least 25 Islamic State militants in two days of raids in the mountains of north-eastern Algeria, in an operation that left five of Jund al-Khilafah's six commanders dead, including Abdullah Othman al-Asimi, who had been appointed to lead the group after Gouri's death. Though the Islamic State should not be counted out in Algeria, the group's first attempt at expansion in the country was a dismal failure.

IS experienced a similar trajectory in the Sahel, though its collapse in that region came at the hands of rival jihadists, not state security forces. Al-Murabitun is an al-Qaeda affiliate formed in 2013, when Mokhtar Belmokhtar—an Algerian jihadist who left AQIM in 2012 to establish his own brigade—joined forces with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Despite his breakup with AQIM, Belmokhtar remained aligned with al-Qaeda in its competition with the Islamic State. Despite Belmokhtar's allegiance to al-Qaeda, several key leaders from al-Murabitun's MUJAO contingent drifted into the Islamic State's orbit. In May 2015, al-Murabitun spokesman Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, a MUJAO member, pledged allegiance to IS.²⁴⁴ He incurred Belmokhtar's wrath by speaking not just for his own faction, but seemingly taking an oath of *bayat* on behalf of the entire al-Murabitun organisation.

Sahraoui's announcement ushered in a turbulent period within al-Murabitun. Belmokhtar immediately issued a statement rejecting this realignment.²⁴⁵ He then went on the offensive against Sahraoui and his fellow IS devotees. Belmokhtar killed 14 pro-IS militants and seriously wounded Sahraoui, who is now reportedly being hunted by Belmokhtar's men.²⁴⁶ In December 2015, AQIM released a statement following the attack on Bamako's Radisson Blu Hotel proclaiming that al-Murabitun had rejoined AQIM. This chain of events shows that Belmokhtar and his contingent of al-Qaeda loyalists came out on top in the internal struggle within al-Murabitun.

IS has not fared much better in Somalia, despite focusing a large amount of propaganda on the country. IS has been repeatedly rebuffed by Shabaab's senior leadership, which has reaffirmed the group's loyalty to al-Qaeda several times. IS then shifted to appealing to al-Shabaab's foot soldiers and mid-level commanders to

²⁴³ "Leader of Algerian 'Beheading Group' Killed", Al-Jazeera, December 23, 2014.

²⁴⁴ "Sahel : Un Chef d'Al-Mourabitoune Prête Allégeance à l'Organisation de l'État Islamique", Agence France Presse, May 15, 2015.

²⁴⁵ Tweets from "imad stitou", @Stitoulmad, May 15, 2015.

²⁴⁶ *El-Watan* (French), June 17, 2015; Radio Adaar (Tamasheq), October 27, 2015.

establish pro-IS splinter groups, but Shabaab's leadership has ruthlessly cracked down on IS sympathisers. In a November 2015 radio broadcast, an al-Shabaab commander said that the group "will not tolerate the acts of saboteurs", and vowed to "cut the throat" of any IS supporters within the movement.

Shabaab has deployed its intelligence and security wing, the *amniyat*, to arrest or kill IS supporters in a purge as vicious as it is far-reaching. In June 2015, al-Qaeda supporters on Twitter reported that al-Shabaab had arrested a spy who was trying to generate support for IS. In October 2015, Somali media outlets reported that Shabaab had detained as many as 30 militants, some of whom were accused of disseminating pro-IS leaflets. Other pro-IS militants fled from Shabaab-controlled territory. In late 2015, two Shabaab militants believed to be IS sympathisers turned themselves in to Somali security forces to avoid the crackdown. One Shabaab commander explained that IS supporters within Shabaab preferred "to fall into the enemy's hands instead of meeting death in the hands of brothers", referring to the *amniyat*.²⁴⁷

With the *amniyat* bearing down on IS supporters, the group's widely publicised campaign of expansion into Somalia has been largely unsuccessful. The caliphate's biggest splash there came in October 2015, when Abdulqadir Mumin, a Shabaab religious official based in the Puntland region, pledged allegiance to the caliphate on behalf of a group of fighters. Yet Mumin's faction consisted of fewer than 100 militants, fraction of Shabaab's total fighting force in the Puntland region. And though Puntland is geographically removed from Shabaab's largest strongholds, the group has already begun hunting for Mumin and his supporters. Clashes erupted between Shabaab and IS factions in Puntland in late December 2015, raising questions about the likely longevity of Mumin's undermanned contingent. Despite several small elements in southern and central Somalia pledging allegiance to IS since Mumin's statement, IS' efforts to establish a foothold in Somalia have been largely thwarted by vigilant Shabaab militants.

IS' failures in Africa threaten to undermine the winner's message that the group has sought to project. Yet these fiascos have received little public attention. Analysts and reporters continue to discuss IS' wilayat in Algeria even though the group has effectively been dismantled there. Similarly, IS' setback in the eastern Libyan city of Derna, one of the group's biggest defeats to date, was largely overlooked, in part because IS was consolidating its control over Sirte at the same time. Al-Murabitun's crackdown on Sahraoui and his pro-IS contingent has gone almost completely unnoticed.

Thus, an opportunity exists to exploit IS' military losses in Africa. By publicizing and drawing attention to IS' missteps and misadventures, counter-messaging actors can shift the narrative surrounding IS in Africa from one of success and strength to one of weakness and failure. If jihadist groups and militants in Africa see IS as a struggling or

²⁴⁷ For examples of media reporting on the *amniyat*'s crackdown on pro-IS supporters in Shabaab, see "Somalia's al-Shabaab Detains Own Officials for Planning to Join ISIS (Somali)", *Midnimo*, October 1, 2015; tweets from @Ummkhaddab, June 6, 2015.

declining force, they will be disinclined to mobilise to support the group. This could also have consequences beyond Africa, especially if this narrative is interwoven with discussion of other major setbacks beyond the continent, including the IMU's defeat in Afghanistan and the internal meltdown that IS has experienced in Yemen. However, if IS manages to reverse its downward trajectory and make new gains in Africa, it will be difficult for counter-messaging actors to sustain the narrative that IS is struggling to grow globally.

Messaging Campaign Specifically Countering IS Misinformation

IS derives considerable success in the propaganda from the group's ability to distort public perceptions about its capabilities and strengths. Both in Syria/Iraq and in new theatres, IS has implemented a robust misinformation campaign aimed at perpetuating its winner's message. This campaign has been effective at convincing IS supporters, rival jihadists, and fearful audiences in the West and Middle East that IS is a military behemoth, and a capable governor and administrator of territory. Exposing IS' misinformation campaign and countering the group's exaggerations and deception will diminish the effectiveness of IS' propaganda.

IS has systematically exaggerated its military capabilities, sometimes persuading even objective journalists that the group is more powerful than it actually is. As previously noted in this report, IS was able to convince several prominent Western news agencies that it had seized control of all of Derna. Similarly, IS convinced observers that it was responsible for the Bardo Museum attack in Tunisia in March 2015, even though Tunisian authorities concluded in subsequent investigations that the al-Qaeda affiliate Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi was actually responsible.²⁴⁸ IS has also utilised propaganda to foster the perception that its caliphate is an Islamic utopia.

But IS' propaganda masks a more destitute reality in the caliphate. Several news reports have revealed that the quality of life in the caliphate is similar to life in some of the world's most impoverished countries.²⁴⁹ Public services are deteriorating or non-existent, electricity is sporadic, and food, medicine and essential goods are often in short supply. Exposing the poverty and strife in the caliphate would undercut IS' claims about the inherent goodness of the society it has established.

Civil society groups and government actors have taken some steps toward debunking IS' utopic narrative. A YouTube channel, Truth About ISIS, has produced several short videos documenting the caliphate's substandard living conditions.²⁵⁰ Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, an activist group that produces clandestine footage of life in the

²⁴⁸ Patrick Markey, "Tunisia Signals Local al-Qaeda Links to Bardo Museum Attack", Reuters, March 26, 2015.

²⁴⁹ See, for example, Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is Failing at Being a State", *Washington Post*, December 25, 2014.

²⁵⁰ For instance, see "ISIS Special Report: Healthcare", Truth About ISIS YouTube Channel, June 16, 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su3LRLR8m30>.

caliphate, has released several videos highlighting citizens in IS-controlled territories waiting in long lines for basic goods.

But there has been no concerted initiative aimed at undercutting IS' misinformation campaigns. Part of the challenge relates to a lack of information. It is virtually impossible for independent journalists and videographers to gain access to IS territory, making it exceedingly difficult to produce accurate reports on life in the caliphate. Another major challenge relates to the fact that IS maintains a quantitative and qualitative edge in propaganda production, often allowing it to drown out counter-messaging actors. Thus, in order to combat IS' misinformation campaign, actors involved in counter-messaging could develop a media apparatus capable of competing with IS in output, speed, and agility. Civil society actors and tech companies would have to partner together to develop a sleek and robust messaging team that can produce compelling content rapidly and continuously. Government actors, while not being the voice of the effort, could play a role in providing information about IS' erroneous claims to civil society actors. Through such a public-private partnership, key counter-messaging stakeholders could dispel IS' veneer of invincibility.

As with the previous policy option, the effectiveness of this campaign is partially contingent on the success of the military campaign against IS. If IS manages to make significant gains, either in Syria/Iraq or new theatres, the group will be less reliant on misinformation and exaggeration to support its winner's narrative. Thus, a policy aimed at revealing IS' exaggerations and embellishments is likely to be most effective at times when IS is actually losing territory. Counter-messaging actors should adapt their strategies to account for evolving ground conditions.

Information Operations to Draw Attention to IS' Internal Divisions and Weaknesses

Just as IS seeks to exaggerate its strengths, the group also focuses on concealing its vulnerabilities. The appearance of divisions or disagreement within the caliphate undermines the image IS seeks to project, and IS has gone to considerable lengths to prevent rumours of internal dissension and hardship from leaking out.

But despite these efforts, a growing body of evidence highlights disharmony and internal conflict within IS. This report has already discussed the internal dissension that has caused massive defections from IS' Yemen affiliate. IS' Wilayat Khorasan (its province encompassing Afghanistan and Pakistan) has also been rocked by infighting. In October 2015, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and one of the leading IS officials in Afghanistan, announced in a statement that he would no longer obey Hafiz Saeed Khan, the group's *wali*. Muslim Dost's grievances with Saeed Khan related to the latter's proclivity for using brutality against civilian populations, an approach that "insulted the Afghan people". Saeed Khan's decision to kill ten Afghan villagers by "detonating explosives on which he forced them to sit" particularly angered

Muslim Dost.²⁵¹ Strategic disagreements were also a factor: New York University political scientist Barnett Rubin, an Afghanistan specialist, has noted that Muslim Dost preferred to fight the Pakistani army, while Saeed Khan was focused on expanding the Islamic State's territory in Afghanistan.²⁵²

In addition to squabbling within the provinces in IS' near abroad, glimpses of such internal strife can also be seen in the seat of the caliphate's power, the Iraq/Syria theatre. A Syrian activist from IS-controlled Deir Ezzor province told the *Financial Times* in December 2014 that tensions between Iraqi and Syrian IS members and foreign fighters were high: "Local fighters are frustrated—they feel they're doing most of the work and the dying," while "foreign fighters who thought they were on an adventure are now exhausted".²⁵³ A March 2015 *Washington Post* article reported numerous incidents of infighting between foreign and local IS militants, including one clash in the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal that erupted after local Syrians refused to heed the orders of a Kuwaiti commander.²⁵⁴ Dozens of IS fighters have been killed after trying to flee the group, consistent with reports that IS had established a military police unit to monitor fighters and punish deserters.²⁵⁵ There even appears to be discord within IS' senior leadership. In the summer of 2015, over a dozen IS commanders were killed after allegedly plotting a coup against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁵⁶

This internal conflict and dissent can provide a counter-narrative to IS' claim of being a unified, cohesive organisation. Highlighting IS' internal fragmentation can have a powerful deterrent effect for both prospective foreign fighters and regional jihadist organisations who are considering joining IS. Further, propagation of this narrative of internal incoherence could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If IS members learn of defections and discord in other IS-controlled areas, they might be prompted to abandon what they see as a sinking ship.

To this point, IS' Western foes have done little to expose the group's internal fractures, other than a defector initiative led by the State Department. Al-Qaeda's propaganda has likely been more effective at exposing IS' internal disagreements. There are clear opportunities to raise questions about IS' narrative of unity.

Infiltrating IS' Social Media Networks

Civil society actors can become involved in counter-network operations by infiltrating IS' online social networks. Online communications platforms can be both a blessing and curse for IS. On the positive side of the ledger, IS online recruiters based in Syria and Iraq can engage with potential recruits living all over the world without risking arrest.

²⁵¹ Barnett Rubin, "ISIL Won't Get Very Far in Afghanistan—For Now", *Al Jazeera*, November 2, 2015.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Erika Solomon, "ISIS Morale Falls as Momentum Slows and Casualties Mount", *Financial Times*, December 19, 2014.

²⁵⁴ Liz Sly, "Islamic State Appears to be Fraying from Within", *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2015.

²⁵⁵ Solomon, "ISIS Morale Falls as Momentum Slows and Casualties Mount".

²⁵⁶ "Islamic State Baghdadi Foils Attempted Coup", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, July 7, 2015.

But on the other hand, the anonymity of online communications makes it difficult for recruiters to vet potential recruits (and vice versa). The anonymity of online communications creates opportunities for key CVE and counter-terrorism stakeholders to penetrate IS' online networks, and to weaken the networks from the inside.

Law enforcement agencies have already begun infiltrating IS' online networks to detect and disrupt recruitment and plots. Recent arrests and indictments of would-be militants make clear that law enforcement officers sometimes pose as IS recruiters and supporters online to identify both domestic operatives and individuals planning to travel abroad to fight with IS. IS has already adapted to law enforcement penetration efforts to some extent. According to one report, IS online recruiters may be encouraging unvetted recruits whose sincerity is in question to carry out lone wolf attacks.²⁵⁷ This course of action does not require physical interaction with other operatives, whose security could be jeopardised if the recruit turns out to be an undercover agent.

Civil society actors can supplement the work being done by law enforcement. Some civil society actors have already begun infiltrating IS online networks, and have yielded interesting results. Several journalists, for example, infiltrated IS' online social networks by posing as supporters. A French female journalist masquerading as a teenage convert to Islam established a relationship with an IS recruiter and fighter in Syria, who revealed significant details about IS' recruitment tactics and foreign fighter facilitation networks.²⁵⁸ In a similar case, Junaid Hussain, a British IS hacker and operative, tried to recruit an undercover reporter from *The Sun*, a British tabloid, to carry out an attack involving a pressure cooker bomb.²⁵⁹

Civil society infiltration of IS' online networks can have a disruptive effect on IS' online operations. In addition to assisting law enforcement, civil society network infiltrations can reduce IS' confidence in its online social networks. If civil society actors saturate IS online networks with fake accounts, IS recruiters' trust in the security of online networks will diminish.

A parallel can be drawn with British counterterrorism efforts against the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, British intelligence infiltrated IRA networks, sending dozens of spies to penetrate the IRA's top ranks. The British even succeeded in placing undercover operatives inside the IRA's internal security unit, a group known as the Nutting Squad that was responsible for identifying and eliminating snitches and spies.²⁶⁰ British intelligence agencies' mass infiltration of the IRA crippled the terrorist organisation, leaving operatives unable to trust one another, and greatly inhibiting operational security.

²⁵⁷ J.M. Berger, "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy", *CTC Sentinel* 8:10 (2015).

²⁵⁸ Anna Erelle, "Skyping with the Enemy: I Went Undercover as a Jihadi Girlfriend", *Guardian* (U.K.), May 26, 2015.

²⁵⁹ "I.S. Plot to Bomb UK Today", *The Sun* (U.K.), June 26, 2015.

²⁶⁰ Matthew Teague, "Double Blind", *The Atlantic*, April 2006.

IS is likely to adapt to civil society network penetrations in various ways. For one, IS may choose to move to new social media platforms where access to IS' networks is restricted, and vetting is easier. In this scenario, IS' online social networks would more closely resemble the jihadist online forums of the early 2000s, which users often required a password to access. If it took this approach, IS' ability to engage with mass audiences would be limited, and the pool of potential recruits would be reduced.

Incorporating IS Defectors into Counter-Messaging

IS has sought to portray life for foreign fighters in the caliphate as luxurious. IS propaganda frequently highlights the modern amenities that are available, and would-be male recruits are frequently reminded of the possibilities for marriage, often to more than one woman, when they arrive. IS also depicts foreign fighters as members of a tight-knit brotherhood.

But there is a disconnect between the life portrayed in IS propaganda and the reality of life for foreign fighters. Stories from foreign fighters and local fighters who defected illustrate how their experience often fails to live up to the promises that IS makes in its propaganda. A recent report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence catalogued all public accounts given by IS defectors, and identified four common explanations that defectors gave to justify their departure.²⁶¹ Many foreign fighters who believed that they were going to Syria to fight the Assad regime soon realised that most of IS' violence was directed at fellow Sunni groups, prompting some defectors to accuse IS of fueling *fitna* (discord within the *ummah*). IS' use of extreme violence against its own citizens was another major source of disaffection among defectors. Defectors also complained of corruption within IS' leadership ranks, accusing some commanders of engaging in un-Islamic, self-enriching behaviour. Others fled IS for more practical reasons. Some foreign fighters complained of the poor quality of life in the caliphate and expressed frustration that their experience did not meet expectations. One Indian foreign fighter left IS after six months because he never saw combat, and was instead tasked with cleaning bathrooms.²⁶²

These defector accounts are some of the most effective counter-messaging content. Defectors provide an insider's account of life with IS that exposes the myths and exaggerations of the group's propaganda. Stories from disillusioned defectors will be particularly effective at countering the narrative of "jihadi cool" that IS uses to attract teenage and young adult men. At-risk and radicalizing audiences may also perceive defectors as legitimate because they shared similar grievances and ideologies.

²⁶¹ Peter Neumann, *Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2015).

²⁶² Ishaan Tharoor, "Indian Student Went to Join the Islamic State, But All He Got Was This Lousy Job Cleaning Toilets", *Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

The State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" YouTube platform has produced the most comprehensive IS defector campaign to date. Starting in June 2015, the platform began posting video testimonials of defectors sharing their stories about leaving IS. Many of the early videos in the campaign, which was labelled "Daesh Defectors", had originally been produced by news outlets, and were repurposed and formatted for the State Department's use. In late 2015, Think Again Turn Away released a new defector video campaign, #WhyTheyLeftDaesh, featuring new content produced entirely by the State Department.²⁶³ But neither of these campaigns has received much attention. The most watched defector video posted by Think Again Turn Away has received just over 6,000 views as of February 2016. Videos produced as part of the #WhyTheyLeftDaesh campaign have received even fewer views, attesting to the challenges that the State Department has faced in finding credibility with target audiences.

Incorporating defectors into counter-messaging campaigns may be problematic for political and security reasons. Governments may open themselves up to accusations that they are soft on terrorism if they use defectors in counter-messaging campaigns rather than imprisoning them. There are legitimate security concerns associated with trying to reintegrate defectors into society. Defectors, though disillusioned with IS, may still harbour a salafi jihadist worldview, and may be pose the risk of carrying out attacks domestically. Further, the defectors may be targeted by IS and other jihadists.

These security and political risks are not, however, an insurmountable obstacle. It would be short-sighted to exclude defectors from counter-messaging entirely, given the potential impact of defectors' testimony in undercutting IS' propaganda. In order to mitigate the security risks, governments can carefully vet and then monitor foreign fighter returnees to guard against their reengagement with radical actors. Additionally, states can invest resources in rehabilitation and reintegration programs to guard against defectors' return to violent extremism. Through this combination of soft and hard power policies, governments can reduce the likelihood that utilizing defectors in counter-messaging will backfire, while maximizing the value of foreign fighters' testimony.

²⁶³ For examples of the State Department's defector campaigns, see https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEgxdxdGxt4rUYPe9qp_0cLnpYQ_lbjYb and <https://www.youtube.com/user/ThinkAgainTurnAway/videos>.

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