

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Islamic State Galaxy

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The current primary arena of the Islamic State's intensive activity is in the Arab world, particularly the Fertile Crescent, where it seized large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq. One of the most important – if not the most important – perspectives from which to examine the phenomenon of the Islamic State is that of the civilians who come into direct or nearly direct contact with it.

This article traces the voices emerging from Arab countries on various subjects related to the Islamic State: What is its ideology? What is their strategy for recruitment? What are its fundraising methods? What is its target audience? And, most significantly, how and for what purposes does it make use of social networks?

The analyses and conclusions presented below are the products of conversations with leaders of public opinion on social media between 2014 and 2015 in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Libya. The intention here is not to analyze how the Islamic State views itself, but rather to come to a better understanding of its image and its perception among the public, as expressed in public discourse within Arab society. Thus, preparation of this article did not make use of any social media accounts of the Islamic State's military or media wings, the forums (open or closed) of its activists, or the "ISIS fanboys" accounts and its online supporters.

Profiling the Islamic State: The Idea, the Goal, the Method, and the Means

The key to undermining the Islamic State's long term sustainability is understanding the essence of the phenomenon. The Islamic State's primary goal is to establish a caliphate for all Muslims. What began as an al-Qaeda

splinter group in Iraq has turned into the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” or simply the “Islamic State,” to which new *wilayat* (provinces) are gradually annexed, both in the original regions and beyond.

Underlying this goal of the Islamic State is the concept that serves as the ideological foundation of the phenomenon as a whole. More specifically, in addition to the establishment of a geographically contiguous caliphate that reflects the ideology of the Islamic State, the citizens of this state must accept an interpretation of Salafist Sunni doctrine that goes back to the Prophet Muhammad. The first goal on the road to the caliphate is to redirect Sunni Muslims who have “strayed from the path” to “the straight path.” The Islamic State views these people as “infidels” who are unwilling to accept true Islam. The second goal is to win the struggle first against the Shiites, known by members of the Islamic State as *rafida*, that is, “opponents” or “rejecters,” then against the Alawites (Nusayris), and lastly against the Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis, Kurds, Druze, and finally, the Jews.

From the perspective of the Islamic State, these goals must be broken down into several levels. On the geopolitical level, the first course of action is to eliminate the nation states. According to Islamic State philosophy, these are artificial, imperialist Western constructs crafted in the nineteenth century to destroy the tribal, religious, and historical identity of the Middle East. By doing away with these borders, the Islamic State can create the geographical contiguity needed to establish a strong and just caliphate. The weakening of Middle East regimes and the governance capability of various states and the failure of political Islam since 2011 have provided the Islamic State with an opportunity to advance its particular aims and garner public support.

On the organizational level, the Islamic State maintains hierarchical decision making mechanisms that provide it with substantial fluidity and mobility. It relies on a dual mode of operation: a centralized senior leadership on the one hand, and fighters and field leadership plus a media wing that works in a dynamic and decentralized manner, on the other hand. The caliph and his deputies set policy and strategy, but grant freedom of action to the field leadership when it comes to tactics, timing, and alliances created on the ground in real time. As a result, any damage inflicted on the Islamic State will have limited impact on the performance capabilities of its leadership from the middle echelon downward.

On the personal level, the Islamic State relies on an effective traditional mechanism, namely, an oath of allegiance (*al-bay'ah*) to the caliph in Islam.

The *bay'ah* does not require being under the geographical rule of the caliph or being part of the caliphate structure. The moment subjects recognize the rule of the caliph, the caliph recognizes them; the enemies of the caliph are the enemies of his subjects, who will sacrifice everything, including their lives, in the struggle against these enemies. By swearing the *bay'ah*, people state that they recognize the caliph as their ruler, and therefore he should recognize them as his subjects, and that the caliph's enemy is their enemy, and their enemies are the caliph's enemies.¹ For example, if the United States were to attack the Islamic State in Iraq, a US citizen who has sworn allegiance to the caliph and lives in the United States would be obligated, with no advanced coordination, to take action against targets in the US. This obligation is applicable worldwide in the case of any attack by the enemy. Even if the Islamic State is not party to the planning behind such an operation, it will not mind, distance itself from the act, or deny involvement, and most likely will claim responsibility.

On the economic level, the Islamic State finances itself in a number of ways, including through ransom payments for abductions, arms smuggling, the extortion of protection money, seizure of financial institutions, and exploitation of natural resources. Donations solicited at “house gatherings” (*diwaniyat*), parlor meetings of sorts, mentioned frequently on social media, are also an important source of funding. During these events, held primarily in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Maghreb, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the teachings of learned and well-known religious figures in Salafist Islam are used to persuade others to contribute to the Islamic State. Fighters and public relations experts travel to contribute in person to the meetings, with videos produced by each brigade to publicize its importance and its manpower; many of these videos include words of praise and thanks for individual benefactors. The unit with the most impressive presentation receives funding and support. This method was popular in the first phase of the organization's existence, before it reached its current form, and declined somewhat following the international coalition's declaration of war and their attempt to impose sanctions on its sources of funding.

The Islamic State as a Contagious “Disease”

The elements described above comprise the Islamic State's expressed worldview, especially since the announced establishment of the caliphate. The common platform used to realize these elements is social media. This

is, in fact, the major feature that distinguishes the Islamic State from any predecessors and current rivals and thus requires separate discussion. In addition to their ability to circulate information and propaganda with the help of social media tools, Islamic State fighters can coordinate and document their exploits by using self-created applications and production companies. The Islamic State in fact has one of the broadest and most effective information dissemination systems in the Middle East. It has also developed a public relations network that operates in 24 languages throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia, and uses sophisticated marketing to draw foreign Muslim fighters and civilians to the regions under its control.

At present, many people on the internet regard the Islamic State as a cancerous growth in the body of Sunni Islam spread by multiple carriers of its ideology (referred to on the internet as its “fan club”) through social media. Contagion is quick and efficient, requiring negligible investment and simple logistics. The Islamic State compensates for its lack of advanced munitions with innovative communication technologies that offer its members reverberations that are exponentially greater than the actual size and volume of its activity.

The Islamic State is an excellent illustration of what happens when seventh century ideology meets twenty-first century technology. One reason for the mythos of the Islamic State’s success and transformation into a strategic threat to the states of the Middle East and beyond lies in its combined reliance on barbarous means and the radicalization of unemployed youth in Arab countries. The Islamic State draws its scare tactics and methods of deterrence from the Salafist Wahhabi tradition, and implements them with the help of modern technological means in the name of the ideology of the school of Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb. Examples of this dynamic can be seen in the many short videos filmed by Islamic State fighters during and after their conquest of various sites that depict them beheading people, throwing homosexuals off roofs, using children to carry out brutal acts of murder, holding mass executions with firing squads, and incarcerating victims in cages, burning them alive, chopping off their hands and feet, or stoning them.

Whereas the West seeks to distance the public from acts that inspire fear and horror, the Islamic State strives to bring these closer to them and make them accessible to anyone interested in viewing such scenes unmediated and at close range. Consequently, the burning of a pilot or the decapitation

of a journalist is seen on YouTube in less than seven minutes by some 150 million viewers throughout the Middle East and beyond. Shocking videos of this sort are produced for negligible amounts of money and successfully reach broad audiences that can compete in size with those of any Hollywood action film. Such content together with the tools for disseminating it have spawned a mighty communications monster, resulting in a disproportionate relationship between the true scope of the Islamic State phenomenon on the one hand, and the image and fear that it conjures on the other. This impression, accompanied by a sense of victory, serves to attract masses of Muslim youth and immigrants in the West.

Methods of Delivery behind the Use of Social Media

The resonance that the Islamic State has achieved on the internet serves a number of its objectives, first and foremost, the recruitment of manpower.² The internet, however, also serves other ends: it encourages radicalization of the target audience in Arab and Western countries,³ helps with fundraising,⁴ generates fear at a minimal cost and with few logistical needs, effects mass mobilization, enables the creation of a visually prestigious brand through the production of broader and higher quality audio and video tracks, helps coordinate the movement of forces in the field, and finally, grants “eternal life” to its ideas and ideology (since the fighters of the Islamic State themselves can die). Every attempt made thus far to fight the Islamic State on the internet has simply strengthened its power.

The Islamic State has used a variety of social networks to achieve its ends. Although the organization has been blocked on Facebook, Diaspora, and Friendica, it has remained active on Twitter. They have official Twitter accounts that are specialized, diversified, and multilingual. They also have an army just for hashtag engagement and re-tweets, with a focus on messaging and branding concepts that are more sophisticated than what many digital agencies offer. Twitter offers the best degree of anonymity, the fastest and largest reach, and since it is based upon crowdsourcing information, it is perfect for both disseminating propaganda and fundraising. In addition, it has a large, well trained “online army” responsible for discussing religious subjects as well as hashtagging, branding, and focusing discussions. Prior to the internet’s counter-campaign led by Twitter, Google, and YouTube, the Islamic State succeeded in achieving an average of 10,000 tweets and hashtag references⁵ on a daily basis. Although the number has fallen thanks to these

counter-measures, the Islamic State's media apparatus is still able to invade the timeline and trend listings and has created special tools to do just that.

Social Media as Recruitment Centers

The assessment of any digital campaign begins and ends with its target audience, and the Islamic State is no different. Analysis of its conduct indicates that its target audience outside of Iraq and Syria consists of four primary groups: (a) jihad-minded individuals; (b) frustrated Islamists who can be prodded toward violent radicalization (former supporters and members of the Muslim Brotherhood); (c) the citizens of whatever region or town the Islamic State intends to attack, as a form of psychological warfare that aims to break their spirit and limit the resistance they might face; and (d) the "lone wolves": men who suffer from arrested development, wishing to fulfill fantasies of warfare, conquests, and gun battles, probably fueled by many hours of playing violent video games.

The Islamic State's media department, particularly its military propaganda and recruitment wing, has made extensive use of GoPro technology to design realistic simulations of war games in real time. This indicates that the prime target audience of the organization's recruitment of external manpower does not actually consist of fighters of the first category – Islamist jihadi types – as one might expect, but rather fighters of the fourth category, those seeking kicks and action.

The Islamic State makes pointed use of the internet not only for recruitment purposes but also for the coordination and logistics of its forces. One way it does so is through various web applications. The primary one used by Islamic State fighters is Zello, a coded application that transforms cellular telephones into tactical two-way radios and thus makes it possible to provide all fighters with a sophisticated yet logistically simple coordination apparatus. With their "Dawn of Glad Tidings" application, which was launched in April, 2014 and lately killed by Google Play, the Islamic State has effectively managed to replace the drums of war with the tweets of war. Users who download the app register on it with their Twitter accounts, which gives the app creators permission to use their users' timelines to disseminate their messaging. The app thus gives the Islamic State the power to tweet from the accounts of all their registered users when it so desires, allowing it to flood the timeline with the same tweet, which could include a link, a hashtag, and/or an image, while keeping in mind to space those "tweet waves" in order to

avoid triggering Twitter's spam detection algorithms. It allows the Islamic State to have unparalleled reach, which it can use for any of its three goals or target audiences. For example, the day the Islamic State invaded Mosul, it tweeted 40,000 tweets about it, making it seem like an endless legion to anyone monitoring them.

This app may seem invincible, but its main strength is also actually its weakness. Once the identification process became easier and Twitter, Google, and YouTube declared war on the Islamic State, thousands of accounts were suspended and the broadcast time for videos on YouTube was reduced from fifteen to approximately seven minutes before their removal from the sites.

Conclusion

This article has looked at the critical role played by new technological tools in the service of the Islamic State, from its establishment until the present. Such means are actually leading to a new and advanced form of terrorism that relies on a support and communications system that generates maximum fear at a minimum cost and minimum logistics, and thus creates a new language and a new world of images and perceptions. The Islamic State has branded and positioned itself as a successful product (at present) despite its setbacks in the confrontation with international coalition forces, its lack of advanced weaponry, and its loss of more territory each day. All this has made it more difficult for the Islamic State to substantiate the idea of the caliphate that it promotes. The immediate need is to formulate an overall policy and strategy for dealing with the phenomenon of the Islamic State, that is, to consider the reasons behind the emergence of the "disease" within Sunni Islam (e.g., the corruption of regimes; the ineffectiveness of public systems; sectarian discrimination; human rights violations; the absence of liberties; and unemployment among young adults) and treat them as elements of the modern battlefield: the tools (smartphones, tablets, laptop computers), the arena (the various types of social media), and the "doctrine of warfare" used by the Islamic State to facilitate its existence and continue "spreading the disease."

Notes

- 1 Mahmoud Salem, "Egypt's Border with Libya, Sudan Ripe for Islamic State Expansion," *al-Monitor*, September 22, 2104, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/>

iw/originals/2014/09/egypt-sudan-libya-border-lack-control-terrorist-expansion.html.

- 2 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Jihadists in Syria: Tracking Recruitment Networks," *PolicyWatch* 2186, December 19, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-jihadists-in-syria-tracking-recruitment-networks>.
- 3 J. M. Berger and Bill Strathearn, "Who Matters Online: Measuring Influence, Evaluating Content and Countering Violent Extremism in Online Social Networks," *Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence*, March 2013, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR_Berger-and-Strathearn.pdf.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See ActiveHashtags, <https://twitter.com/ActiveHashtags>.