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Final Thesis

# Marketing and Advertising Terrorist Propaganda:

An Analysis of Modern Means and Methods used by Islamic Terrorist  
Organizations

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## المقدمة

مع تزايد المخاوف العالمية من التهديدات الحالية والسابقة التي تشكلها المنظمات الإرهابية ضد الحكومات والمجتمعات الغربية، من المهم التحقيق في كيفية تمكن الجماعات الإسلامية الراديكالية من إيجاد توافق في الآراء، والشعب الذي يؤلف هذا الإجماع.

يبدو الإرهاب السلفي الجهادي حقيقة بعيدة، ولكنه تمكن من الوصول إلى حياتنا اليومية والاستقرار فيها، وزيادة الخوف، وبناء فكرة مثيرة للجدل ضد هذا العدو المشترك. وتهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى تحليل كيفية استخدام المنظمات الإرهابية السلفية الجهادية الحالية لأدوات إعلامية مختلفة من أجل خلق رواياتها الدعائية ونشرها وإضفاء الشرعية عليها، وتخلق بدورها تربة خصبة للتجنيد.

1

وستكون الجماعات الإرهابية التي سيتم فحصها هي القاعدة، والدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا (داعش)، وحركة الشباب، وبدرجة أقل حماس.

وسيتم تقسيم التحقيق إلى 4 أجزاء رئيسية:

1 - استعراض السياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية والأيدولوجية للإرهاب السلفي الجهادي

2 - التوظيف، والإعلان (الشعارات)، والدعاية

3 - التسويق والوسائل الإعلامية

4 - مكافحة الإرهاب

وسيعرض الجزء الأول من هذا التحقيق بإيجاز على القارئ أصول الجماعات

الإرهابية، والسياق التاريخي والاجتماعي - السياسي فيما يتعلق نشأتها. الأهم من ذلك، سوف

أشرح الفلسفة وفقه اللغة وراء المصطلحات المثيرة للجدل المستخدمة في الدعاية لها، مثل الجهاد والسلفية والهجرة والخلافة. غرض هذا الجزء الأول هو إعطاء أساس لفهم كيفية تفسير هذه المصطلحات والتلاعب بها، مما أدى إلى الكثير من التضليل. الجزء الثاني سوف يدرس أولاً تقنيات التوظيف: وسوف تظهر في هذا القسم، استخدمت الأبحاث والكتب في مجالات التوظيف والدعاية السياسية (وعلاقتها بالعلامة التجارية)، ووظيفتها في علم الاجتماع وعلم النفس. وكيف أنها محددة الموضوع. الدعاية، كما هو مبين في وقت لاحق، هي الأداة الرئيسية المستخدمة لجذب المجندين المحتملين. ومع ذلك، تؤثر الدعاية الإرهابية أيضاً على عقول عامة الناس باستخدام الروايات القائمة على الموضوع لتحقيق أهداف محددة. في هذا القسم، استخدمت في الغالب الكتب التاريخية المتعلقة بصعود الدين الإسلامي، والتطرف السلفي الجهادي، ولكن أيضاً الموارد المتعلقة ولادة الجماعات الإرهابية وتنميتها.

2

من خلال الجزء الثاني، سوف يظهر أن الجماعات الإرهابية تهدف إلى تأسيس شعارات فريدة خاصة بها على الرغم من أوجه الشبه بين كل شعاراتها. وهي تقوم بذلك من خلال الأغاني (على وجه التحديد نشيد)، والشهادات ومحتوى وسائل الإعلام المختلفة من أجل إضفاء الشرعية على رواياتها. في هذا القسم، استخدمت الأبحاث والكتب في مجالات التوظيف والدعاية السياسية (وعلاقتها بالعلامة التجارية)، ووظيفتها في علم الاجتماع وعلم النفس.

الجزء الثالث، لبّ هذا البحث، سوف يظهر كيف يتم استخدام التسويق لنشر وشرعية الدعاية لها. أدوات وسائل الإعلام المعتمدة كثيرة، بدءاً من الشبكات الاجتماعية، وأشرطة الفيديو، والمجلات والتقارير الإخبارية، وكل وسيلة تخدم غرض محدد. وستحدد مراجعة أدبية موجزة مصطلحات التسويق الأساسية المستخدمة لاحقاً لشرح وظائفها وفقاً للتسويق الإرهابي.

وسوف نلقي نظرة فاحصة على كيفية استخدام جميع هذه الأجهزة، والطريقة التي يتم إعدادها والإفراج عنها وفقا لخطة التسويق. على سبيل المثال، دور وسائل الإعلام الاجتماعية في الإعلان عن المحتوى الذي تم إنتاجه فضلا عن توسيع قاعدة جماهيرية والدعاية الأفقية. سيتم تحليل المحتوى في النهاية لإظهار ما هي الموضوعات التي تهيمن على السرد وكيف يؤثر هذا ليس فقط على المجندين، ولكن يثير رد فعل الجمهور العام وكذلك من وكالات وسائل الإعلام. وسيغطي الجزء الأخير استراتيجيات مكافحة الإرهاب، وهو مجال يخضع للبحث المستمر. ويظهر أن تكون فعالة في بعض من استخدامها لمحاربة انتشار الدعاية الإرهابية، وعدد قليل من هذه الوسائل هي على سبيل المثال تعليق الحساب، الاختراق السيبراني، والطريقة الأخيرة وهي الأكثر صعوبة للتحقيق، التحقيق. ويأمل هذا البحث في إعلام القارئ بالاعتراف بالدعاية الإرهابية وفهم مجموعة واسعة من المهارات التي اكتسبتها المنظمات الإرهابية فيما يتعلق بالتسويق والإعلان عن منتجاتها. ويسعى هذا التحقيق أيضا إلى التأكيد على المواضيع المستخدمة لإضفاء الشرعية على روايات الجماعات الإرهابية ومساهمة وسائل الإعلام الغربية في نشرها، وكيف يؤثر ذلك على رد فعلها.

## Introduction

With growing global concerns over current and past threats terrorist organizations have been posing against western governments and societies, it is important to investigate how radical Islāmist groups manage to create consensus, and by whom this consensus is composed. A seemingly far reality has managed to reach and settle into our daily lives, rising fear and constructing a controversial idea against a common enemy: Salafi-Jihādīst terrorism. This thesis aims to analyze how current salafi-jihādīst terrorist organizations use various mediatic tools to create, spread and legitimize their branded propaganda narratives and, in turn, create fertile soil for recruitment. The jihādīst terrorist brands examined will be al-Qā'ida, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Ḥarakat al-Shabāb, and to a lesser degree Ḥamās.

The investigation will be divided in 4 main parts:

1. Review of socio-political contexts and ideology of Salafi-Jihādī terrorism
2. Recruitment and branding propaganda
3. Marketing and media products
4. Counter-terrorism

The first part of this investigation will briefly introduce the reader to the origins of the terrorist groups and the historical and socio-political context surrounding their onset. More importantly, the philosophy and philology behind controversial terms used in their propaganda, such as Jihād, Salafism, Hijrah and Khilāfah, will be explained following the trail left behind them. I mostly used historical books related to the rise of the Islāmīc religion and Salafi-Jihādīst extremism, as well as resources treating the birth and development of terrorist groups. The scope of this first part is to give a basis to understand how these terms have been misinterpreted and manipulated, consequently leading to substantial misinformation.

The second part will first examine recruitment techniques by showing their particularity in how “tailored” and subject specific they are. Propaganda, as later shown, is the main tool used to not only attract prospective recruits, but to shape the minds of the general public by using theme-based narratives in order to reach specific goals. Throughout the second part, I will show that, despite the similarities, terrorist groups aim at establishing their own unique brand by means of logos, songs (in Arabic *nashīd*), testimonials and differentiated media content in order to legitimize their narratives. The literature accessed for this part mainly involved research papers and books in the fields of recruitment, political propaganda and its connection to branding, and their sociological and psychological *modus operandi*.

Part three, the core of this research, will show how marketing is used to spread and legitimize their propaganda. The media tools adopted are varied, ranging from social networks, videos, magazines and news reports, and each medium will serve a specific purpose. A brief overview will define basic strategic and content marketing terminology later used to explain their function in accordance to terrorist marketing. A close look will be taken at how all these devices are used, their preparation and release coordinated according to a marketing plan. In turn, the phenomenon of social media as a sales pipeline to advertise content produced as well as expanding their fan-base and horizontal propaganda. The propaganda material produced by terrorist media production companies including print media and video clips will be examined to show the incidence of different narratives used for the legitimization of their propaganda (and thence their brand) and how this affects not only recruits but kindles the reaction of the general public as well as that of news media agencies.

The last part will cover counter-terrorism strategies, a field under constant research which shows to be effective in some of its uses to fight the spread of terrorist propaganda. A few of these means are account suspension, cyberhacking and the more difficult to achieve, investigation.

This research hopes to inform the reader about recognizing terrorist propaganda and understanding the vast set of skills terrorist organizations demonstrate to have gained with regards to marketing and advertising their products; by means of these technicalities, it seeks to underline the themes used to legitimize their narratives and how western media contributes to not only spread them, but to fuel a cycle based on mutual influence.

## Section 1: The Genesis of Salafi-Jihādi Terrorist Groups

### 1.1 The path towards radical Islām: Salafism, Jihād and the Khilāfah

The prophet Muhammad began his preaching in the city of Makkah, however, as the ruling tribe of the city, the Quraysh, grew hostile of Muhammad's practices, the prophet and his companions were forced to exercise their doctrine elsewhere, choosing to make their *hijrah*<sup>1</sup> in the city of Madīna (re-baptized Yathrib by the prophet) where the prophet had already introduced Islām. During this period, Muhammad dedicated more time to armed conflicts, described however not as *harb* or *qitāl* ("war", "killing") but as *ḡazwa* (raiding; looting), the term *jihād* (a more detailed definition later in the section) was here related more to individuals' faith "struggle".<sup>2</sup>

7 After the death of the prophet in 632, Islām grew and so did the territory it converted. Since the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs (who succeeded Muhammad), there was an urge to establish a sort of Islāmic Government to continue the prophet's teachings. However, neither the *Sunnah* nor the *Qur'ān*<sup>3</sup> specified modes and modalities on how to elect a leader who would guide the *Ummah* (the Muslim community). The key terms in defining a legitimate leader are *precedence* and *excellence* and the only verses present in the Qur'ān which indicated a sort of structural logic

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<sup>1</sup> Vercellin, G. (2001). *Jihad: l'Islam e la Guerra*. Firenze: Giunti Editore, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> The *Qur'ān* is the Holy Book of Islam. The *Sunnah* is a collection of norms and good behaviors carried out by the Prophet and his companions. Together they form the basis of Islamic jurisprudence called *Sharī'a law*

point to a hierarchy of moral excellence, both in this world and the next, with political stewardship on earth vouchsafed to those who are the most morally excellent<sup>4</sup>

The criteria to appoint a rightful guide was thus unclear. As a matter of fact, according to some sources, one of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs - 'Umar -, described the election of Abu Bakr as a *falta*, which in that context meant “happening by chance”.<sup>5</sup> As successors of the prophet, the newly selected guides needed to signal their belongingness to Muhammad and his ummah; they therefore decided to adopt the title of *Khalīfat Rasul Allah* (Successor of the Messenger of God) with Abu Bakr and with 'Umar *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (Guide of the Believers).<sup>6</sup>

8

He is called the Khalifah (successor) as he stands in for the Messenger of Allah at the head of his Ummah<sup>7</sup>

Only 120 years after Muhammad's death, the Muslims were at the peak of their expansion, their territories going from the Atlantic Ocean to the Middle East and such an empire needed a structure.<sup>8</sup> Just as it did not provide a line of succession, the Holy Book did not indicate any form of governance and in such a vast area an administrative hierarchical order would have

<sup>4</sup> Afsaruddin, A. (2006). The "Islamic State": Genealogy, Facts, and Myths. *Journal of Church and State*, 48(1), 156. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23920697>

An example of said logic form the Qur'ān is *Sūrat al-A'rāf* [7:29]:

"My Lord has ordered justice and that you maintain yourselves [in worship of Him] at every place [or time] of prostration, and invoke Him, sincere to Him in religion." Just as He originated you, you will return [to life]". The excerpt in Arabic was retrieved from al-quran.info:

قُلْ أَمَرَ رَبِّي بِالْقِسْطِ وَأَقِيمُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ كَمَا بَدَأَكُمْ تَعُودُونَ

<sup>5</sup> Afsaruddin, 2006, p. 156

<sup>6</sup> Afsaruddin, 2006, p. 157

<sup>77</sup> Māwardī, M. (1989). *Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-sultānīyah wa-al-wilāyah al-dīnīyah*. (A. Yate, Trans.) London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd. p. 27. The excerpts in Arabic were retrieved from:

علي الماوردي, نبيل عبد الرحمن حياوي. (2016). *الاحكام السلطانية: والولايات الدينية*. بيروت / لبنان: دار الارقم بن ابي الارقم.

Original excerpt in Arabic:

وَيُسَمَّى خَلِيفَةً لِأَنَّهُ خَلَفَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فِي أُمَّتِهِ فَيَجُوزُ أَنْ يُقَالَ يَا خَلِيفَةَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ

<sup>8</sup> Vercellin, 2001, p. 12

avoided a certain collapse, which came from assembling various institutional frameworks from the conquered populations such as the Byzantines and the Sasanids.<sup>9</sup> It was also important to distinguish between the territories belonging to the *dār al-Islām* (House of Islām) and those named *dār al-harb* (House of War) since the whole point of following God's plan was to spread Islām.

Imamate is prescribed to succeed prophethood as a means of protecting the *dīn* [faith] and of managing the affairs of this world [...] There is a difference of opinion, however, as to its obligation, that is, as whether it is obligatory for rational reasons or because it is prescribed in the sharī'a.<sup>10</sup>

9

For a true Caliphate to work, sharī'a would have to be implemented to make Muslims respect *'ibādāt* and *mu'āmalāt* (cult and law). The need to search a righteous approach to these matters grew, since interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah were starting to be blurred by the subsequent split of Islām into various schools of thought, the biggest being *Sunni* and *Shī'ah*. The basic idea is to follow the version of Islām closest to its beginnings by remaining as true to the Sharī'a as possible. This definition roughly describes an extremely controversial term currently discussed by the media and often related to terrorism: *Salafism*. It comes from the Arabic term *Salafīyya* which refers to the companionship of the prophet (*al-Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ* - the pure predecessors) and the two generations after them.<sup>11</sup> The call to Salafīyya goes back to

<sup>9</sup> Vercellin, 2001, p. 13

<sup>10</sup> Māwardī, 1989, p. 7. Original text in Arabic:

الإمامة موضوعَةٌ لِخِلافةِ النَّبوةِ فِي حِرَاسَةِ الدِّينِ وَسِياسَةِ الدُّنْيا [...] وَاحْتِلافٍ فِي وُجُوبِها هَلْ وَجِبَتْ بِالْعَقْلِ أَوْ بِالشَّرْعِ

<sup>11</sup> Branca, P., & De Poli, B. (2012). *Islam*. Bologna: EMI. p.75

the starter of the *Hanbalite* school, Ibn Hanbal, who appealed to the religious spirit of the origins condemning every *bida'* (innovation), considering it blasphemous. Ibn Taymiyya was later inspired by Hambalism, and greatly contributed to the *Siyasa Sharī'a*, the political administration of Islām, and its consequent development to modern day extremism. As a result of his radical views regarding *jihād* and *takfīr*, and his disregard of other schools of thought, he struggled to breach into the religious and political order of the time.<sup>12</sup>

*Jihād* is often considered to be a physical act and is associated by westerners with the term “Holy War”. Nevertheless, it must be noted that *Jihād* has several nuances and that each applies to a different situation. Two of those meanings are extreme opposites and are the ones responsible of the confusion. *Al-jihād al-Akbar* (the Greater *Jihād*), refers to “allowing Islām to transform one’s soul to achieving internal peace; and forgoing the hatred and anger”<sup>13</sup> and optionally help others pursue internal peace, achieved by means of (peaceful) conversion. *Al-jihād al-asghar* (the Lesser *Jihād*) denotes the physical, more violent form, used only in matters of life and death. Since the ascent of terrorist organizations and the internet as tool for spreading terror, “various jihādist ideologues have attempted to legitimize this activity, often by drawing upon historical or religious precedent”<sup>14</sup> voluntarily making the second version dominate over the first, emphasizing the fight against *kuffār* (apostates) and the accusation of *takfīr* (apostasy), mentioned previously. As Vercellin points out in his *Jihād: l’Islām e la Guerra*<sup>15</sup> (*Jihād: Islām and War*) the idea of “holy war” as intended by today’s *jihād*, was extrapolated from the last 10 years of the prophet’s life, after the hijrah.

Returning to the concept of Salafiyya, pre-modern Salafism has its origins in Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab who, much like ibn Hanbal and ibn Taymiyya, considered that Islām was slowly degenerating and wished to introduce a more rigorist, but loyal to its origins,

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<sup>12</sup> Branca & De Poli, 2012

<sup>13</sup> The True Meaning of Jihad, n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Awan, 2010

<sup>15</sup> Vercellin, 2001, p. 10

version of Islām. He too was ignored and actually expelled for his ideology, deemed to be too extremist; for example, he preached of wanting to reintroduce stoning, a punishment that had long been unused. After his expulsion he found a good counterpart in the Arab Sheikh Abdallah ibn al-Sa'ud, who agreed with his doctrine and the legitimacy of using jihād against the corruption of the faith. Thanks to ibn Sa'ud, he was able to find political support to his Wahhabism and spread it together with the *al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya as-Sa'udiyya* (The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) by agreeing upon signing a pact with the House of Sa'ud to provide his ideological framework.<sup>16</sup>

11 With the Ottoman Empire during the late XIX century and colonial powers during the early and mid XX century, along came a strong wave of reforms (*Tanzīmāt*) which were not quite welcomed by the religious institutions, but some scholars, Muhammad Abduh among them, saw in them a way to evoke the old Muslim identity not by imitation of the old but by adaptation to the new. His interpretation of Salafism was well-received by other intellectuals but died soon after a negative chain of events for the Islāmic world including the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of European colonies. The adverse historical context combined with the wind of reformism, diverted this ideology towards radicalization, where modernity would now be subjugated to Islām.<sup>17</sup>

Hasan al-Banna began what is now called Islāmic fundamentalism, turning Islām into a political belief system engaging with social contexts, inciting jihād and the creation of an Islāmic State, eventually bringing forth the political party named *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brotherhood).<sup>18</sup> With Abu al-'Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb the revolutionary

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<sup>16</sup> Shahi, A. (2013). *The Politics of Truth Management in Saudi Arabia*. New York: Routledge. doi:1134653190. p. 48

<sup>17</sup> Branca & De Poli, 2012, p. 75

<sup>18</sup> ISPI. (2016). *Jihad e Terrorismo. Da Al-Qa'ida all'Isis: storia di un nemico che cambia*. Milan: ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale), p. 25

character of jihād intensifies, urging to establish a PanIslāmic society involving the entire ummah around the world, while expressing

the refusal of modern post-colonial culture and rules,  
kindling a reactionary and archaic vision of society,  
which will find its extreme consequences in Salafi-  
jihādism terrorism.<sup>19</sup>

The initial purist character of the Salafiyya and the utopian but highly regarded ideal of building an Islāmic State guided by a spiritual Sharī'a law, would soon be stained by political interests and transform Islām into what is perceived today as the religion of terror.

### 1.2 A new kind of evil<sup>20</sup>: from al-Qā'ida to Da'ish

The September 11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York City signs the first worldwide attention on Radical Islāmist terrorism. Even though the United States, and specifically the World Trade Center, was not new to terrorist attacks,<sup>21</sup> very few were the people who were aware of al-Qā'ida and its leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawāhirī. The 9/11 tragedy also signed the beginning of what was to be (unfortunately) considered thereon the religion of terror.

Al-Qā'ida did not start as a movement on its own, it was rather part of a slow process initiated by Osama Bin Laden. After having moved to Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to provide financial aid and military training to mujāhidīn during the Soviet-Afghan war, Bin Laden, under the guidance of 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf al-'Azzām, decided it was time to begin his

<sup>19</sup> Branca & De Poli, 2012, p. 77

<sup>20</sup> The words pronounced by George W. Bush during his speech days after September 11

<sup>21</sup> In 1993 there was another attack on the Twin Towers, the reason behind it was the U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

own project and start fighting according to his own goals.<sup>22</sup> Influenced also by the increased involvement of the United States, first in Afghanistan and then in Kuwait, he funded *al-Qā'ida*, in Arabic meaning “the base”<sup>23</sup>, in order to bring back order by establishing an Islāmic State completely ruled by *Sharī'a* Law.

During the Kuwait war, he offered his aid to the Saudi family in order to fight back Saddam Hussein's occupation; nevertheless, his offer was ignored and the US' was favored instead. This decision was a key element in his radical political stance, to the point where Bin Laden's goal increasingly focused on the battle “Against Jews and Crusaders”.<sup>24</sup>

According to one line of thinking, tortures within Egyptian prisons were what gave birth to the appetite for revenge characterized by Jihādi terrorist groups. It started in Sayyid Qutb first, and later in his followers, including Ayman al-Zawāhirī.<sup>25</sup> After having publicly stated his opposition to Saudi Arabia and its ruling family in his “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places”,<sup>26</sup> he was exiled to Sudan and this is where an old acquaintance from the Pakistan experience, al-Zawāhirī, co-authored a new chapter in Bin Laden's history of global jihād.

In 1998 they launched an audacious campaign, fusing both propaganda (typically with Bin Laden as mouthpiece) and ‘propaganda of the deed’ (simultaneous

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<sup>22</sup> Brome, W. H. (2017). *Conflict in the Arab World: Al-Qaeda*. Research paper, American University of Beirut, Beirut.

<sup>23</sup> القاعدة

<sup>24</sup> Bin Laden, O. (1998) *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders*: World Islamic Front Statement. <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>. Retrieved from Ingram, H. J. (2014). *A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications*. ICCT Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), The Hague.

<sup>25</sup> Wright, 2017, p. 23

<sup>26</sup> Bin Laden, O. (1996). *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*. London: Al Quds Al Arabi. Retrieved from [https://web.archive.org/web/20100812060339/http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa\\_1996.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20100812060339/http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html)

mass-casualty terrorism) in a strategy that became its  
trademark<sup>27</sup>

In February 1998, the terrorist group *al-Qā'ida* under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden merged with the Egyptian extremist group *al-Jihād* headed by Ayman al-Ẓawāhirī. The fusion resulted in the formation of *Qā'ida al-Jihād*. Even if what was shown by public media was in fact Bin Laden's and al-Qā'ida's face, its backbone and organization was managed by al-Ẓawāhirī and his team.<sup>28</sup> The reason behind this structural division was that al-Ẓawāhirī had been a revolutionary for half of his life, since he had joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt at a very young age and had acquired significant political skills, was hence more apt to leadership.<sup>29</sup> Bin Laden, on the other hand, had lived comfortably all his life, managing his father's Multinational Company "Saudi Binladin Group", finding Islāmic radicalization only after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, where he actively funded the mujāhidīn groups, together with the US' "Operation Cyclone", in their resistance.<sup>30</sup>

The two leaders found fertile grounds in Afghanistan and thus decided to move there their headquarters. Their idea was funding a social movement, focused on spreading their extremist political vision of Islām "to reform society and govern it under a strict interpretation of sharī'a".<sup>31</sup> Their group grew in strength and organization, terror attacks were being executed such as the coordinated US embassies bombings in 1998,<sup>32</sup> but the world saw their true potential in September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

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<sup>27</sup> Ingram, 2014, p. 24

<sup>28</sup> Wright, L. (2017). *Gli anni del Terrore: Da al-Qaeda allo Stato Islamico*. (J. M. Colucci, Trans.) Milano: Adelphi. doi:9788845979101

<sup>29</sup> Wright, 2017, p. 40

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> United States Institute of Peace, Woodrow Wilson Center, 2017

<sup>32</sup> Munson, H. (2006, May 6). *Lifting the Veil - Understanding the Roots of Islamic Militancy*. The Harvard International Review. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20110928085258/http://hir.harvard.edu/religion/lifting-the-veil?page=0%2C1>

As a result of the September 11 attacks, George W. Bush announced the American “War on Terror” and invaded Afghanistan in order to combat al-Qā‘ida. The American occupation created a lot of dissent among Islāmic extremists, one in particular named Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Zarqāwī, a ruthless Jordanian criminal, fled to Afghanistan however not to join Bin Laden but to fight corrupted Arab dictators.<sup>33</sup> He later moved to Iraq due to the American occupation in 2003, and formed the *al-Tawhīd wa-l-Jihād*,<sup>34</sup> whose primary objective was to fight the heretic religion that was Shī‘ah Islām in order to create a better cohesion among Sunni Muslims; Bin Laden accepted al-Zarqāwī’s invitation and made an alliance.<sup>35</sup>

Zarqāwī, unlike Bin Laden, had a more capillary vision of Jihād. His project, delineated by Abu Musab al-Suri, was to create a gang-like model, easily reproduceable and spreadable worldwide: each gang was to carry out single acts of terror within Europe while in Iraq they would be responsible of controlling the territory.<sup>36</sup> Not only did his plan differ in strategy, but also in execution. The beheading of the American hostage Nick Berg, violent attacks such as the destruction of the UN headquarters in Baghdad, were starting to be his trademark, something which went the opposite direction of what Bin Laden and al-Zawāhirī had originally in mind. Before Zarqāwī joined the organization, al-Qā‘ida counted around 3200 victims (most of them as result of the 9/11 attacks); with his presence, the number almost doubled.<sup>37</sup> In a 2004 letter by Maqdisi, Zarqāwī’s mentor, he explained how Zarqāwī’s doings were only damaging the reputation of mujāhidīn and were causing a great deal of anger among people. Al-Qā‘ida, however, needed a leader to coordinate its actions in Iraq and, despite Zarqāwī’s questionable methods, he was appointed in 2004 to the position of Amir of al-Qā‘ida in Iraq (AQI). Such a decision turned out to increase Zarqāwī’s visibility and made his desire to create his own brand

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<sup>33</sup> Wright, 2017, p. 40

<sup>34</sup> Meaning “Monoteism and Jihad” Wright, 2017, p. 42

<sup>35</sup> Wright, 2017, p. 218

<sup>36</sup> Wright, 2017, p. 219

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

grow. A year later, Bin Laden and his team were starting to face what Abu Bakr Naji had previously predicted in his book “Management of Savagery”:

If we succeed in the management of this savagery, that stage (by the permission of God) will be a bridge to the Islāmic state which has been awaited since the fall of the Caliphate. If we fail - we seek refuge with God from that - it does not mean end of the matter; rather, this failure will lead to an increase in savagery!!<sup>38</sup>

In 2006, al-Zarqāwī was killed during an U.S. airstrike which meant that AQI had to be restructured. This led to the decision to appoint Abu Omar al-Baghdādī as new the Amir in charge.<sup>39</sup> Al-Baghdādī had in mind to continue Zarqāwī’s project to take over Iraq, which was not a goal Al-Qā’ida was willing to pursue. The re-branding process thus began to intensify and in 2006 the Islāmic State in Iraq (ISI) was born.

The new Amir vowed to reverse the fate of the movement, reorganizing its ranks, stepping up its activities in its northwestern strongholds and returning to organizing high-level attacks all over Iraq.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Naji, A. B. (2004). *The Management of Savagery*. (W. McCants, Trans.) Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University

<sup>39</sup> With a controversial past, his real name being “Hamed Dawood Mohammed Khalil al-Zawi”, Al-Baghdādī seemed to have been an officer in Iraqi security forces but was discharged “because of his extremism”. For further information see Roggio, B. (2008, September 14). Who is Abu Omar al Baghdādī? *FDD's Long War Journal*. Retrieved from

[https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/09/who\\_is\\_abu\\_omar\\_al\\_b.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/09/who_is_abu_omar_al_b.php)

<sup>40</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 10

ISI started to gain territory and seen the relative vicinity to the Syrian border, al-Baghdādī decided to also study the Syrian revolution and fight pro-Assad movements. Al-Baghdādī's plan to impose Shari'a as the superordinate rule of law was being initiated in the region and their campaign was increasingly gaining momentum. The feedback they were receiving from local populations, international benefactors and resistance groups was extremely positive to the point where Assad forces were often struggling to fight back. One of these groups in particular, named Jabhat al-Nuṣra (JAN – "the al-Nuṣra front"), on April 9, 2013 was declared by al-Baghdādī as subservient, this way officially "merging the two groups into the Islāmic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)".<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, many of JAN's militants opposed the move, together with the group's leader al-Jawlānī who, in a public statement "praised al-Baghdādī's support for JAN, but reaffirmed his loyalty to Ayman al-Zawāhirī, de facto opposing the merger"<sup>42</sup>. This move increased the Islāmic State's competition with al-Qā'ida as did their need for creating their own brand.

Having now officially ended the collaboration with al-Qā'ida and all its affiliates, Al-Baghdādī could officially start his own war against whoever opposed his Islāmic State.

A new stance which considered the 'other' (i.e. everyone not recognizing ISIS' dominance) an enemy to be crushed using every means, no matter whether he belongs to regime or insurgent forces or whether the fight provokes humanitarian tragedies and widespread violations of human rights.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 12

<sup>42</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 13

<sup>43</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 14

ISIL reached its prime. Assad's regime seemed to be on its last legs, particularly after the conquest of two major cities like Raqqa and Mosul. This showed the group's military coordination and dexterity as well as an extremely cohesive hierarchical structure. 2014 became a crucial year for ISIL, as their influence over the region grew as a result of:

- accessing the huge military deposits of the north,
- acquiring over 450 million dollars stored in Mosul banks,
- controlling a series of oil-rich areas, both in Syria and Iraq<sup>44</sup>

Taking advantage of this prosperity, in June of the same year al-Baghdādī officially declared the birth of his Caliphate, the *Islāmic State of Iraq and Syria*, also known as “Dā'ish” (al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī al-‘Iraq wa al-Sham)<sup>45</sup> hence proclaiming himself as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Believers). “Abu Omar al-Husseini al-Hashimi al-Qurashi al-Baghdādī” became his official name, this way legitimizing his stance as direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>46</sup> The creation of his own brand was in fact a key move, well-studied and well-timed, aiming at gaining international attention to the birth of the first Khilāfah on planet earth during modern times:

This has attracted many foreign fighters to its side. [...] Additionally, individuals like winners and, unlike al-Qaeda, which has not had a clear victory in a decade, ISIS continues to build its prestige and legitimacy within the overall movement.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 18

<sup>45</sup> الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام

<sup>46</sup> ISPI, 2014, p. 20

<sup>47</sup> Zelin, A. (2014). The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement. *Research Notes: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (20)*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote\\_20\\_Zelin.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf)

### 1.3 Al-Shabāb in Somalia

This essay will later analyze al-Shabāb's brand, and although less frequent in western media, its impact in Somalia has been quite relevant in determining the country's stability. Affiliated to al-Qā'ida, *Ḥarakat al-Shabāb*<sup>48</sup> (meaning "Movement of the Youth" in Arabic) manages its influence mainly in Somalia, though it has triggered the intervention of other neighboring states like Ethiopia and Uganda. It laid its foundations under critical circumstances as a result of a civil war which broke out in the 1990s, rising from the establishment of Sharī'a courts in an attempt to bring back stability; these courts quickly gained power and a few of them came together to form in 2004 the "Islāmic Courts Union" (ICU).<sup>49</sup> However, some of these factions were imposing a far too strict Sharī'a law, for instance punishing people over watching football on Television.<sup>50</sup> One of these groups *al-Shabāb*, formed by jihādi militants, seemed particularly violent to the Ethiopian population. In order to prevent further empowerment, the Ethiopian Government first and later the Ugandan and Burundian, decided to intervene by creating the AMISOM (African United Mission to Somalia) and invaded the country in December 2006.<sup>51</sup> Al-Shabāb detached itself from the ICU, and while its members fled the country, al-Shabāb gained control of most of the city of Mogadishu. The threat rose as the Ethiopian troops started invading parts of the country, in an attempt to demolish radicalization while actually stirring up the hornet's nest. The occupation turned al-Shabāb into an Islāmist-Nationalist terrorist group, claiming to fight in order to give Somalia back to its people. Their

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<sup>48</sup> حركة الشباب

<sup>49</sup> Wise, R. (2011, July). *AQAM Futures Project: Al-Shabāb*. Center for Strategic & International Studies, Washington D.C. Retrieved from [http://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/110715\\_Wise\\_AlShabāb\\_AQAM%20Futures%20Case%20Study\\_WEB.pdf](http://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110715_Wise_AlShabāb_AQAM%20Futures%20Case%20Study_WEB.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Pflanz, M. (2015, April 3). Al-Shabāb profile: A history of Somalia's insurgent movement. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/somalia/11513886/Al-Shabāb-profile-A-history-of-Somalias-insurgent-movement.html>

<sup>51</sup> Harnisch, C., & Zimmerman, K. (2010). *The Terror Threat from Somalia: The Internationalization of al-Shabāb*. American Enterprise Institute. Critical Threats Project. Retrieved from [https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CTP\\_Terror\\_Threat\\_From\\_Somalia\\_Shabāb\\_Internationalization-1.pdf](https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CTP_Terror_Threat_From_Somalia_Shabāb_Internationalization-1.pdf)

propaganda was effective in recruiting thousands of Somalis to fight the invasion and claim their land back, which motivated not only local residents, but also motivated Somalis living abroad to repatriate.<sup>52</sup>

In the space of just over a year, this recruitment boom had propelled al-Shabāb from a small militia to the single most powerful resistance force in all of Somalia<sup>53</sup>

Much like Da'ish in Syria, al-Shabāb gained the people's trust due to the seriously hostile conditions many areas were living in; Al-Shabāb furnished "goods and services that would normally be the domain of governments, including policy, judicial decision making, and welfare"<sup>54</sup> while providing military training.

From 2008, the group enlarged its relations with al-Qā'ida, its fundamentalist motives grew increasing its violence and resorting to methods such as suicide bombings. It officially joined the group in 2009<sup>55</sup> by releasing a video "At Your Service Osama" pledging its loyalty to the AQ leader while the Ethiopian troops were leaving the country, and in 2010 it launched its first terrorist attack in Kampala, killing 74 civilians.<sup>56</sup>

Al-Shabāb has started to lose ground, as seen by the conquest on behalf of AMISOM forces who continued their fight against the jihādists, liberating the capital Mogadishu in August 2011. However, besides international support such as U.S. drone attacks, the jihādi movement

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<sup>52</sup> Wise, 2011, p. 4

<sup>53</sup> Wise, 2011, p. 5

<sup>54</sup> Wise, 2011, p. 6

<sup>55</sup> Houreld, K. (2012, February 9). Somali militant group al-Shabāb formally joins al-Qaida. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/09/somali-al-Shabāb-join-al-qaida>

<sup>56</sup> Rice, X. (2010, July 12). Uganda bomb blasts kill at least 74. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/12/uganda-kampala-bombs-explosions-attacks>

“is still there, and still powerful. Keen to show Islāmic State that it is still to be included in global jihād”.<sup>57</sup>

## 1.4 Terror.net 2.0

When al-Qā'ida started its own recruitment, the internet and social platforms were still a “work in progress” but the organization still managed to exploit what that era was offering them. It founded its Center for Islāmic Studies and Research and during the nineties, it cleverly registered its first website “Al Neda” in Singapore and mirrored it in Malaysia and in Texas.<sup>58</sup>

*We are in a media  
battle in a race for the  
hearts and minds of  
our Umma*

- Ayman al-  
Zawāhiri

Soon after, the group grew in its organization and split its work between different bodies, being: *Al-Sahab*, in charge of multimedia production, the *Global Islāmic Media Front* (GIMF), translating and packaging information, and *Al-Fajr Media Center* in charge of distribution and networking.<sup>59</sup> Between 2007-2008 Al-Sahab reached its peak activity, uploading in general

one video every three days. In addition to that, it “collaborated” with Al-Jazeera in providing the terrorists’ official press releases. It was up to date regarding the variety of formats it adopted as well. It posted its content on the very first social network at the time, *Myspace*,<sup>60</sup> and e-mails were the easiest internet-based means of communication which the organization used at their advantage by saving their encrypted messages as drafts “to avoid being intercepted”<sup>61</sup>; these messages were then read by other members by logging into the same e-mail account, leaving no trace of the conversation.

ISIS, on its part, has evolved into an ever more tech guru organization.

<sup>58</sup> Ballardini, B. (2015). *ISIS®. Il marketing dell'apocalisse*. Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, p. 75

<sup>59</sup> Greaver, B. S. (2016). *TERRORIST GROUP BRANDS: UNDERSTANDING TERRORIST GROUP*. Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, p. 52

<sup>60</sup> Debat, A. (2006). *Al Qaeda Uses MySpace.com To Plan Terror... Information Liberation*. Originally from ABC News. Retrieved from <http://www.informationliberation.com/?id=7729>

<sup>61</sup> Debat, 2006

While al-Qā'ida used for recruitment and communication the "old" Internet, based on static websites and forums, ISIS makes an orchestrated use of the social web, even showing off its successes in recruiting with launches on Twitter and Facebook pages.<sup>62</sup>

ISIS has evolved into an extremely dexterous structure since the beginning of 2006 when it founded *Al-Furqan*. Al-Furqan Media Foundation was in charge of producing all the material meant for distribution, ranging from paper media, such as pamphlets and magazines, to visual media like news, tv series and the videos the western audience is so used to watch. The Islāmic State is equipped with advanced technologies no less serious than most modern media production companies use in the old continent. As a matter of fact, in June 2007, the coalition forces have discovered a fully furnished production studio just outside of Samarra containing 65 hard drives, 18 USB flash drives, over 500 CDs and 12 desktop computers.<sup>63</sup>

Between July and October of the same year, 24 media operators were either killed or captured by the coalition forces and over 24 terabytes worth of propaganda was confiscated, resulting in a phase of rest for the terrorist organization. Soon after, new small cells appeared in support of the damaged al-Furqan, all under the umbrella of al-Fajr which, according to Ballardini, remains an invisible hand operating and supporting extremist media production companies in Maghreb as well as the entire Mashreq region.<sup>64</sup> Its job is to connect and distribute the material over safe and secure channels on the internet.

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<sup>62</sup> Translated quotation from: Ballardini, 2015, p. 98

<sup>63</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 84

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

With its vitality regained, in 2014 al-Furqan boosted its output by adding a new wing to its enterprise: Al Ḥayāt Media. It was allegedly founded by the German singer Abu Talha al-Almani, who went by his stage name Deso Dogg.

“He was a popular German rapper, known to al-Qaeda for his nashīd (Islāmic inspired chants). He was considered one of the most influential figures in the promotion of the violent jihād and a supporter of the strategy to attack Western interests through the Web and YouTube”.<sup>65</sup>

After becoming an active foreign fighter on the battlegrounds, he decided to apply his expertise into renovating IS’s media content. Al-Ḥayāt specialized in producing content for its audience overseas; visually captivating, content rich, recognizable (the value of “branding” is strengthening) and generally more easily appealing to their taste. This new approach made it possible for the organization to take an even better turn for their visibility by giving birth to remarkable materials such as the magazine Dābiq.

The Islāmic State made wide and efficient use of all the countless tools and techniques available on the internet and has been successful in distributing its propaganda. Tired of being associated with al-Qā’ida, it went through a phase of re-branding, detaching itself from its former roots by changing its name five times, from al-Qā’ida in Iraq until the decisive cut in June 2014 with the self-declared Islāmic Caliphate.

The franchise al-Qā’ida had hoped to create, turned out to be a double-edged sword, and it was too late now to stop it; Dā’ish was in fact operating in a way far too cruel for them:

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<sup>65</sup> ISPI. (2015). *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). Novi Ligure: Edizioni Epoké, p. 87.

In a letter to Ayman Al Z̤awāhirī, Osama bin Laden voiced “his concern that attacks that had left Muslims dead ... especially in Iraq ... had harmed Al Qaeda’s image.”<sup>66</sup>

This is the main difference, and what caused the two groups to part ways: while al-Qā‘ida was mainly fighting against the western colonial power, ISIS was interested in gaining power to establish its Caliphate by any means possible, this way establishing its own brand.

Much like al-Qā‘ida and ISIS, al-Shabāb uses its own media production center to spread its propaganda. In 2009 they officially inaugurated their production office *al-Katāi’b Foundation*, in charge of producing and publishing videos, brochures, reports, as well as news about the group.<sup>67</sup> Their aim was to describe their double Islamist-Nationalist narrative by portraying Somalia as an optimal land to carry out jihād and live a simpler and humbler lifestyle while fighting for the noble cause of jihād.

It is a critique of modernity that resembles the kind of primitive reaction of Sayyid Qutb to the Western culture he found in America.<sup>68</sup>

As seen in the previous chapter, al-Shabāb’s ties with al-Qā‘ida resulted in a progressive increase in violence not only in its tactics and executions, but also in its media productions.

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<sup>66</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 35

<sup>67</sup> Harnisch & Zimmerman, 2010, p. 16

<sup>68</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, A., Maher, S., & Sheehan, J. (2012). *Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab’s Western Media Strategy*. ICSR International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. London: ICSR, p. 23

What is worth noticing is that within a context of war, these organizations still manage to upload propaganda almost every day. Modern media production companies are equipped with dozens of gadgets destined to production, editing and distribution. It seems natural to question how terrorist organizations can perform these processes in hostile conditions such as the ones found in war zones, with no internet connection or even an office to edit the content. Al-Shabāb's video "At Your Service Osama", weighed almost 1 gigabyte,<sup>69</sup> and it seems hard to imagine how a file this big, which originally must have been even twice the size, was uploaded this easily. The process sees at least two bodies operating: a mobile cell on the battleground and a stable one located in the headquarters. There a possibility that, due to internet connections being rather unstable, the final upload may be carried out outside the country by external collaborators. Ballardini hypothesizes a (minimum) three step operation scheme for this process:

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1. On site video footage is brought by hand to a mobile unit (probably van)
2. The videos are then selected and pre-edited
3. Finalization and distribution are then taken care of by the production company.<sup>70</sup>

It is difficult to prove this process, however, the efficiency by which it is carried out must come from a highly structured and deeply rooted system.

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<sup>69</sup> Wise, 2011, p. 9

<sup>70</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 81

## Section 2: Towards the brand of terror

### 2.1 Recruitment

An important part of terrorist organizations' marketing campaigns is to focus on boosting their exposure to subsequently enlarge their fan base. From there, the next step is to locate supporters who could one day be an active gear of the mechanism. Terrorist groups put forward various well-studied and subject-specific approaches regarding the identification of potential members and their techniques. As stated in *Al Qaeda Messaging and Evolution Positioning*: "No one is born a terrorist; rather, a terrorist is - at least partly - created as a response to a process of persuasion".<sup>71</sup> Persuasion is an art, even al-Qā'ida agrees and tested this by writing a manual titled *A Course in the Art of Recruiting*<sup>72</sup>, offering a substantial guide concerning recruitment, proudly considered by the group "A graded, practical program for recruiting via individual da'wa (preaching)".<sup>73</sup>

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Messages are tailored and all circle around three major aspects: religious,<sup>74</sup> moral and social. All of the three must always be taken in consideration since some of the potential recruits

*Your content marketing strategy must establish a target audience*  
- Arnie & Brad Kuenn

could be attracted by a type of content, some may be attracted by other kinds of messages; each potential recruit's background will vary and hence their interests consequently. The target audience will usually be people with a certain inclination to Islām (but not necessarily Muslims) who may have expressed anti-western opinions and can thus become part of an in-group,

possible candidates for a chair in the extremist inner-group. There is then the out-group, the menace to be fought against, and who should be fearing the terrorist organization.

<sup>71</sup> Baines, P., & O'Shaughnessy, N. (2014). An aberration of political marketing: An analysis of Al Qaeda positioning from 1999-2008. *Public Relations Inquiry: SAGE Journals*, 163-191.

<sup>72</sup> Al-Qa'idy, A. A. (2010). *A Course in the Art of Recruiting*. (A. Mujahid, & A. Khalid, Trans.), p. 1. Retrieved from [www.onemagazine.es/pdf/al-qaeda-manual.pdf](http://www.onemagazine.es/pdf/al-qaeda-manual.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Even though it is technically Political Islām

A good propaganda will have to be able to convince the audience about their mission and the value the possible candidate could be bringing into the organization. According to our previously mentioned aspects (religious, moral and social) the organization will make the messages according to a set of values defined by Berger as the “Ladder of Identity Construction”.<sup>75</sup> It is key for the sake of efficacy to set differences between the in-group and the out-group. These differences will be delineated by three main categories: *beliefs*, *traits* and *behavior*. They are all on the surface fairly straightforward since the message needs to reach anyone but has an intricate, interwoven structure beneath. In simple terms, by *beliefs* is intended the differences within the belief system identifying the in-group and the out-group. By *traits*, Berger indicates the aspects which make the in-group and not the out-group. *Behavior* indicates practices and actions, and is divided into three sections: past, current and expected future.

When analyzing followers, Berger completes a list of characteristics extrapolated from Abu Muhammad al Adnani’s speech:<sup>76</sup>

1. Beliefs:
  - a. Correct Sunni religious sources (legitimate hadith).
  - b. Disillusioned with and disavows secular government.
2. Practices:
  - a. Works to promote and publicly support Sharī’a forms of government, specifically the goal of restoring the caliphate.
  - b. Correct fasting and pilgrimage
3. Traits:
  - a. Lacking in dignity
  - b. Living in mixed society

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<sup>75</sup> Berger, J. (2017). *Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda*. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), The Hague, p. 7

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

This is just some general criteria underlined by Adnani, however, as underlined in the al-Qā'ida manual, not all of it must be present, especially at the beginning of the process since candidates will be indoctrinated through a tailored process.<sup>77</sup>

### 2.1.1 The potential candidate

I have outlined a brief description of what terrorist organizations may want to include in their recruitment propaganda. Who then are the types of people willing to join a terrorist organization? This is the next step in defining a potential candidate.

There is a long history of academic research in this field and, unfortunately, very little has been discovered.<sup>78</sup> What is sure is that there is no such thing as a “typical” terrorist. Each person has different motives guiding them to join a terrorist group, and most importantly, they gradually approach such mentality. As outlined by Al Qaeda’s guide for recruiters “don't rush anything because there will be a proper time for everything”<sup>79</sup>.

Most of the time, a mixture of factors combined with psychological and physiological stimuli from the terrorist group result in final recruitment, as outlined in the Reversal Theory (Apter, 1984, 2007). Simply put, with the right psychological and circumstantial settings, the thesis states that a prospective extremist will seek arousal, obtained from switching basic human feelings of relaxation and boredom into anxiety and excitement. Popular belief holds that terrorists must be psychopaths, that such acts are unthinkable by the average person. It has been established, nonetheless, that having psychological disorders is a deterrent for most terrorist organizations. In fact, Clack Mc Cauley states that “terrorists are neither crazy, nor suicidal. The vast majority, more than 90 percent, of all terrorists are perfectly normal, psychologically

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<sup>77</sup> Al-Qa'idy, 2010, p. 6

<sup>78</sup> O'Connor, 2004, as appears in: Cruickshank, P. (2015). *Volume 8, Issue 10*. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. West Point: CTC Sentinel.

<sup>79</sup> Al-Qa'idy, 2010, p. 6

speaking”.<sup>80</sup> This is because terrorist groups seek obedience, reliability and professionalism, something which a person who is mentally ill may not provide. There are indeed cases of mentally unstable terrorists but they mainly acted individually and were not part of an organization.

Emotions largely influence one’s perception of reality. Feeling frustration, anger, and subsequently a thirst for revenge could push people to consider taking action and joining a terrorist group. This is particularly relevant for those living in harsh political climates which claim freedoms and more generally, a better treatment in society. All they need is a motive and someone to guide them towards fulfilling it.

Apart from personality traits, which only indicate the presence of an inclination towards violent acts, some circumstantial factors regarding social status do seem to be common among these subjects. Economic conditions, education and social relations are all key factors in determining a prospective member. One that occurs quite often is the idea of belonging to a group sharing the same beliefs and values since, often, the interested subjects feel to some extent a lack of belongingness to their surrounding groups and hence seek people with mutual interests.

Education and economic conditions are highly interlinked. It is generally thought that the average terrorist acts out of ignorance derived from a poor economic condition. Contrary to popular belief, the trend seems to be going the opposite direction, especially for terrorists with western backgrounds. With regards to education, one might think that poorly educated subjects are more likely to fall for terrorist propaganda. However, according to some data, “among the terrorists born or raised in the West, nearly 60 percent had engineering backgrounds”<sup>81</sup> and a 2006 study conducted by Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey reported that “54% of the perpetrators

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<sup>80</sup> It must be noted that the research has been done on few individuals since terrorists generally do not undergo such experiments

<sup>81</sup> Popper, B. (2009, December 29). Build-a-Bomber: *Why do so many terrorists have engineering degrees?* Salte.

either attended university or had obtained a university degree”<sup>82</sup>. A lack of education may, in fact seldom also mean a lack of information regarding the political situation and the terrorist group itself. However, it is also arguable that academic education does not necessarily infer wisdom.

The financial situation is generally tied to education, as people from comfortable economic backgrounds tend to have more possibilities regarding education. Though it has been argued that a few militants were in fact motivated by the economic incentive in joining the group, it was noticed that money was not a decisive factor;<sup>83</sup> the data available is, however, not sufficient to come to a definite conclusion.

Therefore, if the propaganda is convincing enough and the above factors allow a potential target to show interest towards the value and belief system of a terrorist organization, the actual tailoring work starts being prepared around the person.

### 2.1.2 Tailored recruitment

Just like there is no specific terrorist type of individual, there is no specific recruitment method; it varies from case to case and it depends on numerous factors like age, gender, location et cetera. Although one source, namely the Al Qaeda's guide, does outline a very detailed, step by step process, it also suggests a flexible approach as long as the candidate seems cooperative and generally interested. One element that does appear to be relevant at the beginning for all recruits, before even communicating with the target, is a subject-specific study phase. The terrorist organization will launch a proper “targeted consumer research” in order to analyze their current social status, their past, their interests and anything that could augment the efficacy of their first approach. They will thus gather as much information as they can, available to them

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<sup>82</sup> Hoffman, B. (2010 , September 15). Today's Highly Educated Terrorists. *The National Interest*.

<sup>83</sup> Hudson, R. A. (1999). *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why*. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Washington D.C.: Marilyn Majeska, p. 54

through various databases both digital such as social media, blogs and email accounts, but also physical “in all stages on their lives, including the schools, workplaces, districts, unions, political parties, villages, etc.”.<sup>84</sup> Social connections, such as friends and relatives, will be exploited not only to obtain information about a specific target, but as a sort of chain reaction to get in contact with as many potential recruits as possible, using the connections they know to act as baits.

Showing interest, however, not always means being on your side. As much as there are scams, phishing and frauds of the sort one should be on the lookout for, terrorist organizations need to be aware, for example, of undercover agents. As a sort of background check, they will make sure that recruits will not constitute a threat to the organization. Furthermore, interest does not necessarily mean willingness to take action. This is where the analytical and psychological parts start to be used. By analyzing the collected information, they are able to draw conclusions regarding the potential value the person could bring to the organization. This process may be done before and/or during contact, depending on the case and the information available to them before engaging conversation. Therefore, once the potential recruit has been identified, analyzed and approved, communications will start.

The “Shari’a4” and the “Muhajirun” radical Islāmist groups are a great example of these tactics as they primarily work at recruiting foreign fighters and use both the physical and cyber methods.<sup>85</sup> The contact will be made directly, and depending on the circumstances, either via social media messages or by assigning someone in their vicinity to engage with them.

Through the first half of 2014, it was possible to  
encounter Islāmīc State propaganda online without

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<sup>84</sup> Alkan, N., & Özdemir, Y. (2008). Recruitment Methods of Terrorist Organizations. In C. o. Terrorism (Ed.), *Organizational and psychological aspects of terrorism* (Vol. 43, pp. 37-50). Ankara: IOS Press. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/k77CdD>

<sup>85</sup> (ISPI, 2015)

seeking it, thanks to the group's aggressive use of broadcasting techniques such as bots (automated, high-volume tweeting of content) and hashtag spamming (tweeting content at high volume on unrelated hashtags).<sup>86</sup>

In any type of approach, the tactics will be to slowly make the target feel comfortable by sympathizing with them and showing support. The idea here is to create a system where a few members will join with the purpose of isolating the potential recruit from non-Muslims (kuffar) and western ideologies.

Social media offer probably one of the easiest means to approach a prospective recruit.

33 With intensively active accounts operating 24/7, it is easy for terrorists to identify and contact potential candidates anywhere in the world. An article published by the New York Times describes a case of an American girl who was contacted and almost convinced to join the Islāmic State, a process to which the organization had dedicated over half a year.<sup>87</sup>

Friendly conversations, availability, and support are all things people in need of attention seek, and that is what terrorist do in these cases: "They look for weaknesses [in our natural firewall], and then they attack".<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, this is not the only subject they look for. Any kind of weakness can be exploited. In case a face to face interaction can happen, terrorists will try and slowly surround the potential recruits with people to persuade them by organizing social events:

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<sup>86</sup> Cruickshank, 2015, p. 20

<sup>87</sup> Callimachi, R. (2015, June 27). *ISIS and the Lonely Young American*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html?mcubz=1>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

“there is often the use of bookstores, foundations, associations, cultural centers, and political party premises belonging to organizations, all of which are functioning legally”.<sup>89</sup>

They create natural, optimal conditions for people to feel comfortable and initiate their recruitment, distributing marketing material such as leaflets, books and being open to questions (not too specific) about Islām. The key here is, as usual, to create a warm and supporting environment by working on a romanticized picture of the group: “People around me were talking about these individuals as if they were heroes. I envied this situation. Thus, I also later decided to join the organization”<sup>90</sup>. Some terrorist organizations have even succeeded in establishing recruitment inside schools. For instance, al-Shabāb “conducts much of its recruiting out of madrassas, schools, and mosques”.<sup>91</sup>

Once contact has been made and recruitment has started, it is only a matter of time to decide whether the recruit has potential to become a mujāhid. This is the most important, long and delicate part of the process, being totally dependent on the work of the recruiter, their dedication and their ability to isolate the subject and “continue with the Blessing of Allah”.

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<sup>89</sup> Alkan & Özdemir, 2008, p. 42

<sup>90</sup> Ozeren, S., Server, M., Yilmaz, K. & Sozer, A. (2014). Whom do they recruit? Profiling and recruitment in the PKK/KCK. *Studies of Conflict and Terrorism*, 37, 322-347. doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2014.879381

<sup>91</sup> (Harnisch & Zimmerman, 2010, p. 16)

## 2.2 Branding

The fact that each terrorist organization has its own media production center, such as al-Ḥayāt Media Center for IS, al-Fajr for AQ or al-Katāi’b Foundation for al-Shabāb, with its format and structure, shows how much their identity means for the legitimacy and uniqueness of their group. What is more important is that, especially in the context of Dā’ish and al-Qā’ida, the rivalry between the organizations highlights the need of differentiation and hence the need to create their own unique *brand*.

In the same way commercial brands stand out and distinguish themselves from their opponents, so do terrorist organizations as they all deem to differ either on how they *position*<sup>92</sup> themselves. Therefore, a simple question arises:

*Customers must recognize that you stand for something*

- Howard Schultz

35

*What makes a terrorist brand?*

Brands are recognized by “labels” (for identification) and “meaning” (for understanding).<sup>93</sup> They can be attached to products and/or companies, people and/or ideas. An example that could suit all four elements is Apple. Their brand (a bitten apple) identifies simultaneously all these elements (and more) namely their product, e.g. the iPhone, their company, high-end technological devices, its inventor Steve Jobs and his famous phrase “stay hungry, stay foolish”; the chances of not being able to recognize the brand Apple by naming just one of these items is very low. The same goes for terrorist organizations who have managed, through a system of symbols and meanings,<sup>94</sup> to have their names, logos and media products be associated with a whole region, while simultaneously distorting an entire religion (with a great help by western media).

<sup>92</sup> “The place a brand occupies in the mind of its target audience”. (Maggard, 1976)

<sup>93</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 22

<sup>94</sup> O’Shaughnessy, N. J., & Baines, P. R. (2009, June). Selling Terror: The Symbolisation and Positioning of Jihad. *SAGE Journals*. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1470593109103069>

Customers must be eased in their recognition of a brand. Pullig identifies six different criteria companies must consider when creating a brand: memorability, meaning, likability, transferability, adaptability, and protection.<sup>95</sup> Terrorist groups will not be focusing excessively on trademark infringement and making sure it is likeable by the general public, but rather, they would concentrate on its meaning and ability to stick to the minds of the masses and gain trust from their supporters. It is important, nevertheless, to differentiate from the rest of the market. Placing your brand as a copy, as a “spin-off” version, affects your credibility and subsequently your trust.

The creation of a brand does not guarantee its success. Without *exposure* and a proper marketing campaign, it would be impossible for it to be known and recognized. *Brand exposure*<sup>96</sup> does not confine itself solely to commercial advertising:

extending to those who discuss a brand in the media  
through forums such as newscasts or reviews of a product  
in a magazine<sup>97</sup>

Successful exposure, in the case of terrorist organizations, is achieved by news coverage and translates into *awareness*. Exposure and awareness are key in creating support, which could be ideological, meaning strictly based on agreement, but also (and more dangerously) physical. Recruitment works precisely in these terms, as analyzed in the previous section, by transforming agreement into action.

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<sup>95</sup> Pullig, C. (2008). *What is Brand Equity and What Does The Branding Concept Mean To You?* Baylor University: Keller Center Research Report, Waco.

<sup>96</sup> “Any opportunity for a reader, viewer, or listener to see and/or hear an advertising message in a particular media vehicle” as found in <http://www.marketing-dictionary.org/Exposure>

<sup>97</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 26

“If propaganda is to encircle an individual and dismantle their ability to discern truth from falsehood, regularity and consistency are imperative”.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, a general rule of thumb is the higher the exposure, the higher the awareness: what is to be achieved is a “domino effect” where the content will be spread by anyone, everywhere. However, exposure needs to be dealt with extremely carefully, since it is the main element influencing positioning and what customers associate your brand with. Volume must be high, but it also needs to follow a plan, never ceasing to surprise the audience with its messages. Words and actions will be the main component of a terrorist brand’s positioning, and as analyzed by O’Shaughnessy and Baines, this is achieved by communication, based on three different components under the “Positioning Triad”:<sup>99</sup>

We can perceive this triadic relationship as a three-way interaction between what we call the **Item** -that which we are communicating something about- the **Symbol** -what we intend to communicate about the Item- and the **Meaning** -the interpretation of the symbol within a cultural context-

A terrorist group will focus on a “deliberate use of symbolic violence or threat of violence against non-combatants for political purposes” in order to legitimize their narrative and spread its propaganda. This use of symbols, spread across different means of communication, will determine its positioning.

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<sup>98</sup> Winter, C. (2015). *The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy*. London: Quilliam, p. 17

<sup>99</sup> O’Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009, p. 5

### 2.2.1 Branding Symbols

Terrorist organizations communicate various brand-specific meanings through the usage of symbols and items. I have previously mentioned “label” as an element of effective brand recognition. One example of labels used by terrorist groups are *flags*.

In the Middle Ages, armies identified friend from foe by banners decorated with dragons, lions, bulls and other forms. What designer Steven Heller calls “charged badges of loyalty.”<sup>100</sup>

This tradition was similarly used in the Arabic Peninsula as well. An article published by “The Muslim Issue” entitled *Know Your Terror Flags*,<sup>101</sup> analyzed the meanings behind colors and writings found on terrorist groups’ flags. The figures below show what the western audience is used to when associating flags with terrorist groups: al-Qā’ida, the Islāmic State and al-Shabāb, all flags containing a black-white dichotomy.



Figure 1 Al-Qā'ida



Figure 2 Islāmic State



Figure 3 Al-Shabāb

This dichotomy comes from Islāmic tradition and was apparently used by the prophet Muhammad and has since then been carried through the centuries. The white-background flag

<sup>100</sup> Hanlon, P. (2015, February 11). ISIS As Brand Movement. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@hanlonpatrick/isis-as-brand-movement-e1637c7e3f62>

<sup>101</sup> *Know Your Terror Flags*. (2013, September 28). Retrieved from The Muslim Issue: <https://themuslimissue.wordpress.com/2013/09/28/lesson-know-your-terror-flags/>

is named as *al-liwaa'*, translated as the “flag of the Caliphate” and is tied to the amīr of the army and its headquarters; *al-rāya* (literally meaning *banner*) instead was usually carried along in the battlefield and is dubbed “flag of Jihād”.<sup>102</sup> What is seen written in contrast is the *Shahada*,<sup>103</sup> the Muslim profession of faith and first pillar of Islām.

Visual representations pertaining to the different groups go beyond flag recognition. As we have previously discussed, each organization has a media production center and, in turn, a logo on its behalf. If we look closely at, for example, al-Ḥayāt and al-Katāi'b we will notice quite a few similarities between the logos.



Figure 4 Al-Ḥayāt



Figure 5 Al-Katāi'b

What captures the eye at first is the use of Arabic calligraphy, giving the logos a more classic feeling, a call to the glorious past and to Islām. The color gold is not a casualty either, since it is present various times in the Qur'ān as a symbol of paradise, but also as a financial means “to promote Islām (whether that is through jihād of the sword or jihād of the word)”.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> *Know Your Terror Flags*, 2013

<sup>103</sup> لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ. There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.

<sup>104</sup> The author is referring to the previously mentioned “Lesser Jihad” and “Greater Jihad”. (Rippin, 2013)



Figure 6 Al-Hayat (left) al-Kataib (right) logo entrance

The logos also both resemble a water droplet in the way they are designed, carrying along a religious meaning. Paraphrasing a Qur'ānic verse, humans access only a small droplet from the vast

oceans of Allah's knowledge.<sup>105</sup> As seen in Figures 6 and 7, when making their entrance at the beginning of the videos, they are both introduced by a graphic effect simulating water: blue background with waves which reveal al-Katāi'b brand logo, and black background with a water dropping and turning into the brand logo for al-Ḥayāt. Combined with the visual aspect, we can also "hear" the similarities between al-Ḥayāt and al-Katāi'b as each video begins with an *audio logo* mimicking water splashing (ISIS) or dropping (al-Shabāb), enriching brand recognition.

Strangely enough, it seems as if we have already been exposed to all this before; that it because al-Jazeera, the famous Qatari news agency, adopted the same "teardrop-shaped glyph" back in 1996.<sup>106</sup> While al-Shabāb uses a slightly less elaborate calligraphic style, both al-Jazeera and al-Ḥayāt opt for, to my inexpert eye, one similar to *Tuluth*, "large and elegant, cursive script, used in medieval times on mosque decorations".<sup>107</sup> It may as well be a coincidence, but the decision to bring something visually similar to an image already present in consumers' mentality is part of a brand's recognition.<sup>108</sup>



Figure 7 Al-Jazeera.  
Source: aljazeera.com

<sup>105</sup> Al-Kahf: 109. Retrieved from: Islam Quest, 2013, <http://www.islamquest.net/en/archive/question/en16690#>

<sup>106</sup> Park, C. (n.d.). *Isolated glyph: deciphering Al Jazeera's logo*. Retrieved from Carson Park Design: <https://carsonparkdesign.com/al-jazeera-logo/>

<sup>107</sup> Baba, O. (n.d.). *Thuluth*. Retrieved from Arabic calligraphy: <http://www.arabiccalligraphy.com/#!/home/thuluth>

<sup>108</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 28

### 2.2.2 Becoming the Brand of Terror

Bradley Greaver has analyzed how these meanings, through media exposure, affect a brand's successful positioning and hence their support. Through a data-rich analytical and methodological investigation, he hypothesizes that brand positioning is influenced by media coverage, and news agencies look for actions and words connected either by affiliation to the terrorist group and/or to western symbols.<sup>109</sup> It is hence easy for the groups to identify what will increase their brand's exposure just by monitoring its success over the media.

media-wise terrorists plan their actions with the media as a major consideration. They select targets, location, and timing according to media preferences, trying to satisfy the media criteria for newsworthiness, media timetables and deadlines, and media access. They prepare visual aids for the media, such as video clips of their actions, taped interviews and declarations of the perpetrators, films, press releases, and video news releases<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> It is important to mention that the coverage analyzed in Greaver's investigations was based solely on North American news agencies

<sup>110</sup> Weimann, G. (2008). The Psychology of Mass-Mediated Terrorism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, p. 74.

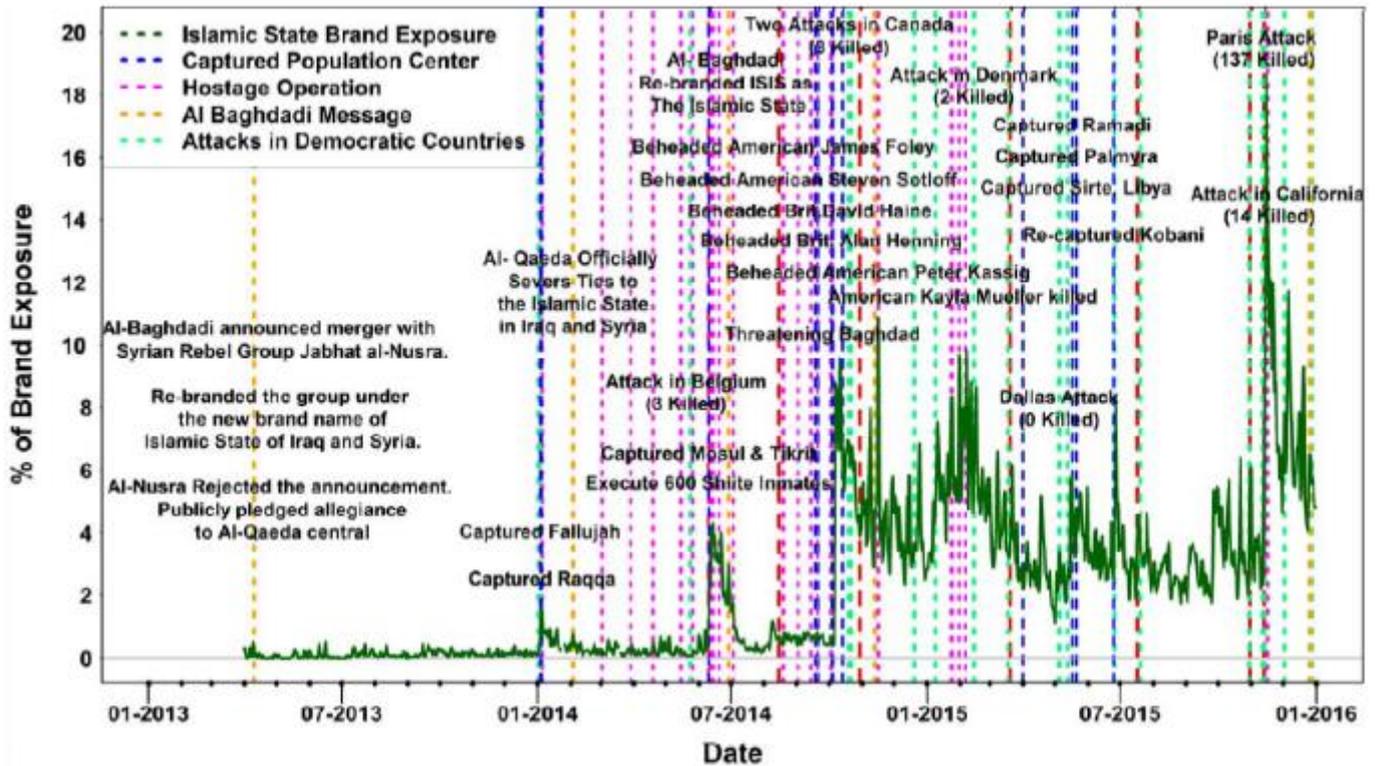


Figure 8 The Islāmic State Brand Exposure

Figure 7 above,<sup>111</sup> as appears on Greaver’s thesis, shows the Islāmic State’s brand exposure as a result of media coverage. According to the figure above, Dā’ish’s brand exposure increases over time as soon as it branches off from al-Qā’ida and having founded its own organization with a proprietary identity, narrative and position clearly plays a positive role in its brand awareness. As indicated in the graph, the peaks are reached by violent terrorist attacks against western cities, such as the attacks in Paris, Denmark and Canada. Terrorist attacks of which the death toll was greater than 100 were also high predictor of brand exposure. This explains why the Islāmic State’s Paris attacks in November 2015 generated almost 18 percent of all new coverage.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> The author created this figure using the following data sources: Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), Global Knowledge Graph (GKG): Political Instability Task Force. “Worldwide Atrocities Dataset.”: Held Hostage: Analyses of Kidnapping Across Time and Jihadist Organizations. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point.

<sup>112</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 61

The Islāmic State has also differentiated from al-Qā'ida in the way it focused on expanding its territory. The threat of the Caliphate gaining more power over the region was also part of Greaver's investigation, who noticed that brand exposure rose when "conquering territory by defeating the military forces of Syria and Iraq".<sup>113</sup>

It is important to add that news agencies often mistake the perpetrator of the attack. For example, before ISIS officially announced its Caliphate, a few of the attacks were mistakenly attributed to al-Qā'ida since Dā'ish's former name was al-Qā'ida in Iraq, which caused much confusion for the media.<sup>114</sup>

Greaver's investigation considerably backs up the thesis that terrorist organizations do count on their brands to be recognized. ISIS has by far been the most explicit in showing that differentiation is a vital element in determining successful brand exposure and awareness, considering the consistent support it gained from its positioning.

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<sup>113</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 61

<sup>114</sup> Greaver, 2016, p. 62

### 2.3 Propaganda: advertising for recruitment?

Politics has been using marketing tools widely and efficiently for centuries by means of political propaganda and positioning.<sup>115</sup> Propaganda and advertising are in fact almost undistinguishable in their meaning:

information, ideas, opinions, or images [...] spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions<sup>116</sup>

messages paid for by those who send them intended to inform or influence people who receive them<sup>117</sup>

44

The only difference between these two definitions is the commercial aspect.

Terrorist organizations are after all politically biased and need, in their propagandist messages, to convey their point of view to gain support for their cause. Their positioning, as seen in the previous section, will be exposed in order to make their audience aware of their brand. Marketing is used to plan what, when and where to publish the materials.

Propaganda has been around human existence since people began collaborating:

for as long as human beings have formed hierarchical collectives [...] and fought other similarly organised people, persuasive communication has been used to boost

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<sup>115</sup> Baines & O'Shaughnessy, 2014, p. 3

<sup>116</sup> Definition of "propaganda" from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press

<sup>117</sup> As defined by the Advertising Association of the UK

the morale and fighting spirit of friends, convince neutrals of one's cause and dishearten foes<sup>118</sup>

The closest to contemporary usage could be the one associated with the period surrounding the World Wars. An example from recruitment propaganda is the US army's famous "I Want You" poster depicting *Uncle Sam* inviting citizens to join the military for the first World War.



Figure 9 "I Want You" by James Montgomery Flagg

45

Hitler, in his *Mein Kampf* describes and admires his enemy's

efficient use of propaganda among his soldiers, highlighting how his soldiers slowly "began to think just in the way the enemy wished them to think".<sup>119</sup> He then began to use propaganda at his own advantage with a narrative focused on themes such as "solidarity, need for racial purity, hatred of enemies, and Führerprinzip",<sup>120</sup> which bear a close resemblance to much of Islāmic extremism ideology.

The Vietnam war plays a fundamental step towards media involvement in conflict. Television broadcasting blossomed during the late 1960s and early 1970s which was a perfectly coincided with the Vietnam war (1955-1975). The simplistic approach the US had undertaken to justify its involvement in the war, i.e. the fatal spread of communism, was shown to the people by the numerous reportages and images, leading to massive war protests.

<sup>118</sup> Ingram, Haroro J. *A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications*. ICCT Research Paper. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). The Hague, 2014, p. 10

<sup>119</sup> Hitler, A. *Mein Kampf*, 1933, p.162

<sup>120</sup> Ingram, 2014, p. 17

Vietnam is not only an example of the role television played in the relationship between the political elite and the people. It is also a testimony to the politico-military and communications missteps that can follow when a single paradigm, in this case the bi-polar East versus West construct of the Cold War, is used blindly to understand and respond to events in an increasingly complex world.<sup>121</sup>

Today, after the media has evolved into an “information theatre”, it is even easier to spread points of view and shape the reality of things. In the war against terror, on one side we have western media, showing the horrors of “Allāhu Akbar”,<sup>122</sup> and narratives advocating for the “application of democracy” and “respect of human freedoms”; on the other, we have mujāhidīn blaming the west for the destruction of their culture, while spreading the propaganda of the deed.

In order for the propaganda to result effective, exposure must be well-timed; the research and calculation of publishing content are part of a method termed *Strategic Communication*. It takes the broader sense of a marketing process named “Integrated Marketing Communication” (IMC) defined as “a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences”.<sup>123</sup> Messages and actions are carefully planned to obtain a specific goal. For

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<sup>121</sup> Ingram, 2014, p. 21

<sup>122</sup> Meaning “Allāh is the greatest”. Pronounced during prayers, it has become the blood-chilling ritual phrase used by jihādi suicide bombers

<sup>123</sup> Schultz, D., & Schultz, H. (2003). *IMC the next generation: Five steps for delivering value and measuring returns using marketing communication*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill, p. 21

example, taking the case of the self-declared Khilāfah by al-Baghdadi and its name change into ISIS, it was planned to achieve global recognition of their new brand, inaugurated by the material produced for the event (Dābiq Issue 1 and the video *The End of Sykes-Picot* later analyzed) shows how much the Islāmic State cared about this move.

Exposure is, as mentioned earlier, a key determinant of a successful branding strategy. Along with exposure, brands need to position themselves in the minds of people, which is carried out by propaganda. In 1958, Jacques Ellul argued that “propaganda was not a way to implant new ideas, but a means of compounding and crystallizing them”.<sup>124</sup> He claimed that for propaganda to be efficient, propagandists needed to rely on a few elements in order to shape their follower’s minds:<sup>125</sup>

- political/vertical: referring to the specifically designed political narrative
- sociological/horizontal: the perceived positioning and parallel agreement among followers
- agitation/integration: aiming at transforming passivism into activism
- rational/irrational: rationally demonstrating the validity of your propaganda

We can imagine to combine Ellul’s element into a “propaganda train” structured by a rail, keeping it stable on a line and deciding its cruise direction (political/vertical, rational/irrational) and by individual wagons (external media and followers) steering away or joining the direction (horizontal/sociological, agitation/integration).

### 2.3.1 Themes

Ellul’s tools are and have been used not only by terrorist organizations but from any politically-oriented body to build an effective propaganda machine. In turn, the themes imbued in this machine are varied and based on what the organization wants to achieve at a specific

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<sup>124</sup> Winter, 2015, p. 16

<sup>125</sup> Winter, 2015, p. 22

time. It is a misconception that terrorist organizations only focus on positioning their brand as brutal and evil, which is a message that often saturates western media. The themes messages are shaped around are much more varied as Winter analyzed,

Even though the data collected only 30 days' worth of propaganda material, the results still show messages belonging to 6 different categories:<sup>126</sup>

- Utopianism
- Belongingness
- Military
- Victimhood
- Mercy
- Brutality

Winter's results, even if tied to a specific time window, are still relevant in determining the various marketing strategies used by the jihādīst organizations, which show to plan their positioning accordingly. According to the results recorded by Winter and shown in Figure 10

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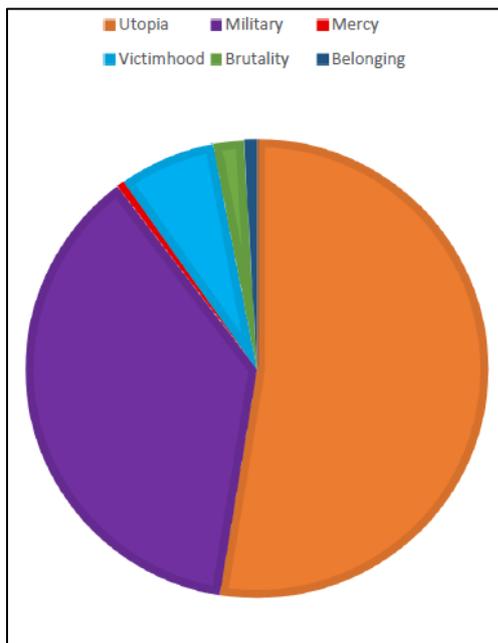


Figure 10 Events by Narrative, Source: Winter

Events by Narrative, in a period of 30 days after the proclamation of the Khilāfah, “Utopianism” along with “Military” were the top positioning themes used in their narrative, followed in a smaller proportion by Victimhood. This makes perfect sense since their objective was to try and legitimize the establishment of the Islāmic State and come across as a fully functioning authority over the region.

<sup>126</sup> Winter, 2015, p. 23

### Section 3: Marketing

Now that we have understood how the recruitment process works and terrorist organizations' attention to branding, we can examine how terrorist organizations' marketing focuses on propaganda for recruiting its fighters. There are, as explained in the recruitment section, various types of people with different interests. The marketing activity must thus be able to reach the largest audience possible. The difference, however, between conventional and terrorist marketing is that extremist organizations are not trying to make their product appealing to everyone but to those who already show interest in their mission. Exposure is key not only for recruitment but more importantly for global legitimacy.

As proper marketing campaigns, the messages must reach a wide audience and its content be as eye-catching and convincing as possible. Regarding reachability, terrorist groups use multiple kinds of media, ranging from what may be considered more "veteran" ones such as Radio and Television channels, for instance al-Bayān radio station for IS and al-'Aqṣā TV for Ḥamās, magazines like Dābiq for IS and Inspire for AQ, social networks such as Twitter, web video platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, and various other tools, sometimes more scattered like blogs and journals.

The variety of the material produced makes it so that the organizations must differentiate between the various channels and select what goes where and in accordance to whom. The "whom" element is what is referred commonly as the "target audience", customers being a basic determinant of a marketing plan.<sup>127</sup> Considering that most terrorist organizations deal with a global audience, the need to communicate in different languages brings them to often opt for a bilingualism of English plus the local language with the addition of captions/subtitles.

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<sup>127</sup> FDIC Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. (n.d.). *Developing a Marketing Plan*. Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, p. 3

By first advertising its content through various platforms such as social media, blogs and forums, direct links were provided to file sharing websites such as Archive.org or Google Drive, ready to be downloaded without any further ado.<sup>128</sup> Due to its content, Da'esh was forced to switch or even stop using certain apps: for example, Google and Twitter actively banned users and content belonging to the group due to policy violations. However, considering YouTube's importance, the media experts at IS continued to use YouTube with «suicide accounts», meaning they were intended to be canceled immediately but were used as “agency launch” in order to gain immediate visibility, while at the same time being uploaded on other channels such as Vid.me or Vimeo.com as a more enduring source.<sup>129</sup>

Professor Marco Lombardi analyzes in depth Dā'ish's media usage, and how each medium is studied to fit a certain type of content and target a specific audience, as reported in Figure 1 below.<sup>130</sup> The Islamic State is at the center of many studies not only because of its influence in the region, but also because of the magnitude of material it produces.

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<sup>128</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 122

<sup>129</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 99

<sup>130</sup> ISPI, 2015, p. 116

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

Figure 1

### 3.1 Social Media: Twitter and Facebook

Social media work as a showcase to legitimize their narrative by uploading propaganda-filled texts, advertising their products (videos, articles, events), responding to competitors' messages and actions but also, and more importantly, as a "sales pipeline"<sup>131</sup> engaging in recruitment. Both Facebook and Twitter are used interchangeably, with a slight preference over the latter, being efficient tools allowing for a fast and direct contact to a high traffic of online users. Social media offer the perfect platform, due to its wide and extensive usage, to make Ellul's "propaganda train" work at its full potential.

*The primary application for Twitter is to keep your followers informed about the cool products and services that your business can provide*

Kuenn & Kuenn

Twitter is a great example of how this activity is carried out where many terrorist organizations such as Dā'ish, al-Qā'ida and al-Shabāb make a great use of it both for marketing and recruitment activities. The media savvy IS militants are the most active Twitter users among the different terrorist organizations. In a 2015 study by JM Berger and Jonathon Morgan entitled *The ISIS Twitter Census*, it is claimed that around 46.000 (thousand) were

the active accounts affiliated with ISIS between October and November 2014. With such a robust network, they assure 24/7 coverage, and in addition to the help of various state of the art technologies such as bots<sup>132</sup>, applications and spam messages, the accounts manage to tweet "7.3 [messages] per day per user".<sup>133</sup> Messages and hashtags<sup>134</sup> circle around a few important themes. Berger and Morgan have analyzed over 5 million tweets, concluding that most of its focus is, unsurprisingly, on IS related content:

<sup>131</sup> A Sales Pipeline "describes the individual steps salespeople take from initial contact with a potential customer, or prospect, [...] followed through the different stages until closed"

<sup>132</sup> Computer automated messages; a special kind, for this purpose, is a Twitterbot

<sup>133</sup> Berger & Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, 2015, p. 9

<sup>134</sup> A theme specific virtual link to phrases or words preceded by the hash sign #

Within the top 100 hashtags, we categorized all general references to ISIS or the caliphate,<sup>135</sup> all references to Syria and all references to Dā'ish, as well as all hashtags pertaining to the suspension of ISIS supporting accounts and the announcement of replacement accounts.

Bots and apps deserve a few words for their strong contribution to spreading propaganda, but also religious content strictly related to the terrorist groups' mission. Fast paced, efficient and capable of "reaching an all-time high of almost 40'000 tweets in one day",<sup>136</sup> *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* was an extremely successful app launched in April 2014 for the sole purpose of marketing IS content and was terminated in June of the same year by Twitter.<sup>137</sup> The app's functionality was rather simple, nonetheless hiding a complex backbone engineered by IS tech experts to "avoid triggering Twitter's spam-detection algorithms".<sup>138</sup> It would automatically prompt IS related content from its Twitter network and from all of those who downloaded the app, directly to the user's smartphones, fueling horizontal propaganda. In just a few weeks, the app was downloaded thousands of times showing how popularity and efficient advertising have a big effect even in a short period of time.

Furthermore, the way Twitter is built works in favor of "trending" tweets and/or hashtags and thus contributes to boosting them and consequently gain even more visibility. @ActiveHashtags, for instance, is an automated twitter functionality which promotes top trending tags. It was noticed that "it results in an average of 72 retweets per tweet, [meaning

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<sup>135</sup> Which accounted for 40%

<sup>136</sup> Berger, J. (2014, June 16). *How ISIS Games Twitter*. The Atlantic.

<sup>137</sup> Berger, *How ISIS Games Twitter*, 2014

<sup>138</sup> Berger, *How ISIS Games Twitter*, 2014

that] more users are exposed to ISIS’s messaging”<sup>139</sup>; furthermore, it helps them gain even more visibility than its rivals, whose social media activity is, comparably, not as technologically advanced.

An additional aspect related to the volume of messages is the issue of multiple accounts. There is no Twitter policy limiting the number of accounts users (or rather an IP address) can administer which enables them to repost the same content through their many accounts, often times doubling or even tripling its visibility. These are usually the most active accounts and who, as often happens due to Twitter’s control and account deletion, are in a way “forced” to continually create new accounts and manage them simultaneously until one of them gets banned.

Dā’ish has personalized also the way it announces and features its products. When launching a marketing campaign, companies will often release a “Teaser”, a banner/video-clip which advertises the content of the product by, as the term suggests, “teasing” the audience, kindling their curiosity while waiting for it to be commercialized. Isis calls them *Mujatweets*,<sup>140</sup> managing to brand even a technical term.



Figure 11 Twitter Teaser Posters: (from left) ISIS and Star Wars

<sup>139</sup> Berger, *How ISIS Games Twitter*, 2014

<sup>140</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 89

Figure 11 Twitter Teaser Posters: (from left) ISIS and Star Wars shows banners posted by Dā'ish (one the left) announcing their new video *What Are You Waiting For?* and Star Wars announcing their upcoming movie *Solo*, as an example of a cinematographic teaser.<sup>141</sup> As we can see, in addition to the link the IS sympathizer provides to redirect to the video, he/she also includes extremely unrelated hashtags, another technique used to boost their exposure. For instance, by spamming #isis right next to #bbc they enormously increase their exposure since those who will look for the renowned “British Broadcasting Corporation” will also see the tag connected to the terrorist group, even though the correlation may be irrelevant. The volume of such tweets and hashtags is often so high that a quick search on the web of related keywords will have their content come up at the top of the list.

The last quarter of 2014 was an especially busy period for IS-sympathizing Twitter accounts, considering the numerous beheadings of western hostages, for example James Foley, Steven Sotloff and David Cawthome Haines.<sup>142</sup> This, together with increased conquests in Iraq and Syria, had an enormously positive impact in favor of IS support on Twitter:

Twitter's user base grew by approximately 30 percent in 2013, while ISIS's user base nearly doubled.<sup>143</sup>

Al-Shabāb has shown to use twitter quite extensively too. A study published by *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence* (ICSR) dedicated a chapter to al-Shabāb's twitter traffic. Its network, composed of over 15'000 (thousand) accounts, devotes a great deal of time to promote their narrative, making sure to post transparency about the activities they carry out and responding to defamatory content from

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<sup>141</sup> Both are screenshots taken from their public Twitter accounts

<sup>142</sup> Information retrieved on various articles posted by CNN news

<sup>143</sup> Berger & Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, 2015, p. 17

western media damaging their “reputation”. According to the aforementioned study, “Al-Shabāb tweeted to promote this narrative 181 times, approximately 33.5 per cent of its Twitter based messaging”.<sup>144</sup>

Facebook has a long history as a social medium, having made its debut in 2004, “no matter how old it gets, everybody seems to like it”.<sup>145</sup> It only makes sense for companies, and terrorist organizations for the matter, to exploit its enduring marketing potential. Its function slightly differs from Twitter’s, due to its characters limitation, offering it more room for groups and fans to reunite and discuss, comment and share their opinions. Content is usually equally distributed on both Twitter and Facebook by means of linking, sharing and redirecting.

### 3.2 Print media: *Inspiring Dābiq*

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*Dābiq* is the official magazine edited by Al-Ḥayāt Media Center, made of 15 issues spread throughout the years between 2014 and 2016, published in English and a few other languages, but not in Arabic, which already hints at the audience they are trying to reach. It is a direct descendant of *Inspire Magazine*, the revolutionary propaganda magazine launched by al-Qā‘ida almost exactly 4 years before *Dābiq*’s debut in July 2014. The name comes from an “area named *Dābiq* in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Shām”.<sup>146</sup> As described in the magazine itself, it carries a particularly relevant religious symbolism since it “was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English)”.<sup>147</sup> What *Dā‘ish* wants to portray through its magazine is “transparency”: they show an all-round Islamic State which is managing to substitute modern institutions with the Caliphate.

While launching a new product, strategic marketing suggests the messaging to be:

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<sup>144</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Maher, & Sheehan, 2012, p. 34

<sup>145</sup> Kuenn, A., & Kuenn, B. (2015). *CONTENT MARKETING WORKS*. Phoenix: VM Press, p. 91

<sup>146</sup> Al-Ḥayāt Media Center. (2014). The Return of the Khilafah. *Dābiq*, Issue 1, p. 3

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

persuasive, simple and unique. It needs to communicate what your product actually does and communicate its high-level value.<sup>148</sup>

Al-Ḥayāt Media Center has (wisely) done its research and prepared a marketing plan for launching its new magazine, placing its strongest and more captivating propaganda at the beginning of the series. Thus, out of the fifteen issues published since its debut, I decided it was best to confine the analysis to the first four, the first two falling under the month of Ramaḍān while the latter between Dhu'l-Hijjah and Shawwāl.<sup>149</sup> The four issues chosen are thence the following: Issue 1 “The Return of the Khilāfah”, Issue 2 “The Flood”, Issue 3 “A Call to Hijrah” and Issue 4 “The Failed Crusade”. With regards to Inspire, I will take in analysis mostly Issue 1 and a few excerpts from more recent releases.

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By simply looking at the cover, we are presented with a highly studied, sophisticated and detail rich design, comparable to any famous western magazine. The idea, in fact, is to mimic what the general public is used to, in order to visually captivate the attention of any reader. There is no doubt about the fact that the editing team of Dābiq had some sort of professional editing, design and/or marketing background, since this kind of details could only be achieved by someone who had previous experience in the field. By analyzing a few of these elements we can notice the professional touch in, for example:

- the position of the different elements on the front page, namely the title of the magazine;

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<sup>148</sup> Andrews, M. (2017, December 17). *18 Tips for Planning a Flawless New Product Launch*. Hubspot. Retrieved from <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/elements-flawless-product-launch-li>

<sup>149</sup> They correspond indicatively to the time frame between July and October

- the issue number and the picture focused right in the middle of the page;
- the inclusion of “featured articles”
- the highly detailed rendering of the picture, fonts and colors matching with the background graphics

All these features lead to an overall result that could easily be compared to the front cover of the Time magazine. We can notice that there is a number right next to *Dābiq* indicating the year of the Hijrah, in case of the first four issues it is 1435 Ramadan (between June and July). There is no Gregorian date on the front cover, nonetheless, in the rest of the magazine we can notice a very common “Americanized” way of sorting dates (month/day) prevailing over the Islāmic calendar. The reason behind this could be of common habit, both for readers and editors, who may be more used to seeing/writing dates in this form.

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The magazine always follows a set structure for all the issues released, divided into different parts, somewhat similar depending on the specific issue. Besides the cover which offers a stylized thematic representation of the title, it is then followed by a table of content and Part 1, being an introduction, usually praising IS mission with a few targeted Hadith and/or Qur’ānic quotes. What follows is the actual content of the magazine. Part two includes a few articles regarding accomplished missions, conquered territories who were stolen by the hands of apostates, photo reports of Kuffar defeated in the name of Allah and communities saved from their Jahl.<sup>150</sup> Their disposition may change but they will always be included at least in the first half of the magazine.

The second half of the magazine hosts a more religious and comparatively less exciting spiritual focus, intentionally put there for the “aficionados” and more religiously competent subjects, for instance in Issue two, part 5 “Understanding The Hikmah in Allah’s Actions” and

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<sup>150</sup> “Kuffār” are the apostates and “jahil” means literally “ignorance” but it refers to the term “jahiliyya”, the time before the arrival of Islam

Issue 3, part 3 “Inspirational Words from a Shahid”. When the reader has now gotten a full panorama of the current happenings and future goals of the group, the magazine ends with a bitter note, updating the reader about the western media’s side of the story, using “the words of the enemy” as they define it; a sort of comparison to show what the apostates actually say about them. Each issue finally ends with a “news” section, brief highlights of the week.

### 3.2.1 Analysys of the issues

#### Covers

A widespread saying goes “never judge a book by its cover”. As far as Dābiq is concerned, they have made sure each cover not only reflects the title of each issue, but that the graphic representation incorporates the core points of their mission, being Hijrah, Jihād and finally the establishment of the Khilāfah. In point of fact, the first issue probably has, in my

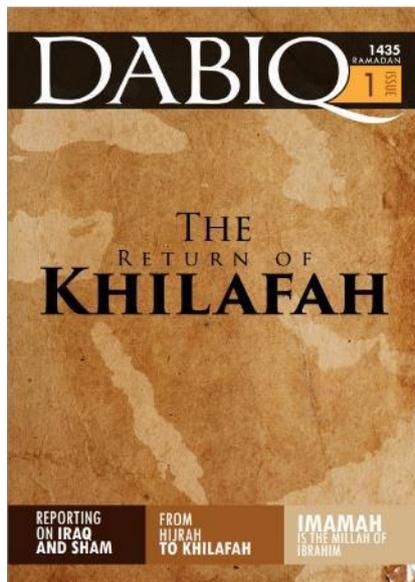


Figure 12 Dabiq Cover, Issue 1

opinion, one of the strongest symbolism of the four. It was released in concomitance with IS self-proclaimed state and the birth of its new Brand. Extremely well timed in exploiting a political situation that would favor its exposure and gain support. The cover looks like an old, blank papyrus page, as if it wanted to represent the front cover of IS’ personal history book. A symbol representing the beginning of their contribution to world history, taking up from where the prophet left off.

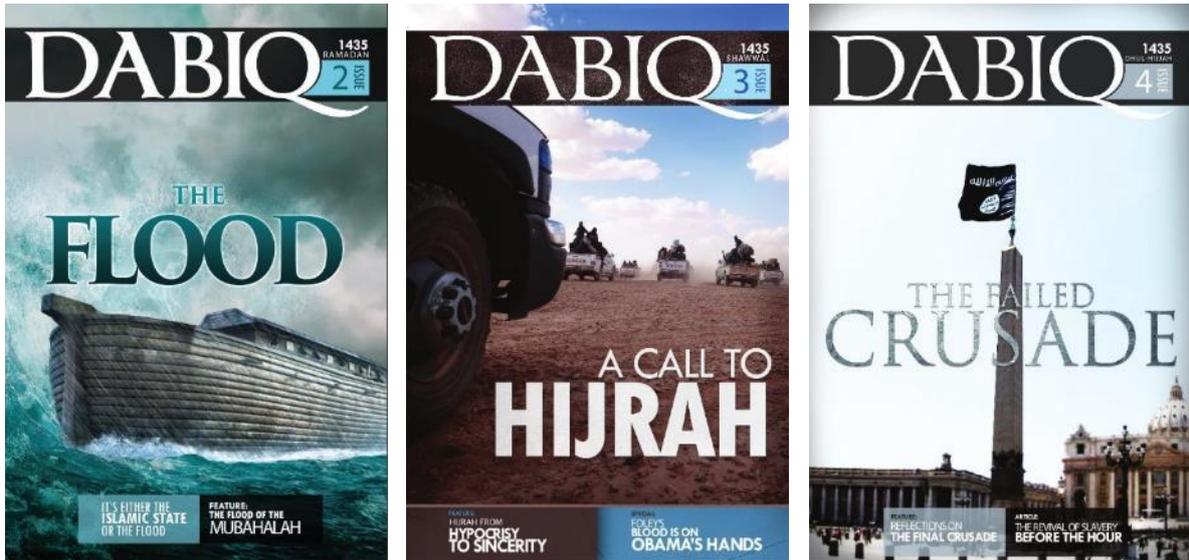


Figure 13 Front Covers: (from left) Issue 2, Issue 3, Issue 4

Issue 2 and Issue 4 both show a strong relation to western culture: Noah's arch and Saint Peter square in Rome. The Qur'an mentions Nūh (Arabic for Noah) the same way the Bible does; he is in fact a Qur'ānic prophet. The point made here is quite straightforward, as expressed by the magazine itself: "It's Either the Islāmic State or the Flood". Looking closely at the image, we can see that the arch is about to be hit by a wave, perhaps a metaphor resembling the Islāmic State or simply that the only ones safe from the apocalypse are the true Muslims. "The Failed Crusade" does not leave much room for imagination either. A simple graphic editing trick made an IS flag appear on top of the Christian capital, Rome; a clear symbolic threat to the western apostates. Issue 3 instead, shows a convoy of Toyota pick-up trucks leaving a wheel of a GMC behind, gazing at them as if it was about to join their trip. It is interesting to notice how the Toyota flock is united and the only non-Toyota truck is standing there, as if it were to tell the reader "be like me and join the Toyotas". It could easily be an advertisement for Toyota to use in their marketing campaign (or maybe it was directly inspired by an already existing car advertisement).

Any reader, even the most occasional, would not just stop at the eye-catching covers of Dābiq, but they would probably glance inside to read what the organization has to say. At this point it is important to understand who the editors of this magazine are addressing. The average

westerner<sup>151</sup> who will have basic knowledge about Islām and more importantly about the Islāmic State, will most probably not be affected by their propaganda (unless they are trying to actively seek information for personal interests). This is not their primary concern. Bringing back the concept of *brand positioning*, ISIS' focus is to, in any way feasible, impact people with its content and stimulate horizontal propaganda spreading; a simple comment to a friend about a terrorist organization making a propaganda magazine can mean a lot in terms of exposure. This is a strategy which was working for Inspire as well, for instance when it published in its first Issue a manual on how to build a bomb. Mainstream media was shocked, talked about it and spread the news which was positive exposure for the organization either way, waiting to reach the right ears. Support is important, and thus Dābiq also concentrates on people who have been exposed to this content before and who share an interest towards learning more about the Islāmic State and its objective,<sup>152</sup> and possibly but not necessarily, with an ulterior motive of joining the organization. Even though the magazine makes use of technical doctrinal terms, it often offers an explanation for them, making the reader at ease with the terminology in use. The first page starts off by exhorting the reader to “perform Hijrah”, being the migration towards the sacred lands:

The first priority is to perform hijrah from wherever you are to the Islāmic State, from dārul-kufr to dārul-Islām. Rush to perform it as Mūsā (‘alayhis-salām) rushed to his Lord, saying, { And I hastened to You, my Lord, that You be pleased} [Tāhā: 84]. Rush to the shade of the Islāmic State with your parents, siblings, spouses, and children.

<sup>151</sup> Pew Research Center. (2010). *Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam*. Washington DC. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/08/24/public-remains-conflicted-over-islam/>

<sup>152</sup> Otterbacher, 2014, p. 9

There are homes here for you and your families. You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Madīnah, and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds in your scales.

Hijrah is one of the 5 pillars of Islām. As such, it is considered a deed that shall be accomplished before the Judgement Day comes. A quick search of the incidence of this term in Issue 2 gives a total of forty-three results, compared to seventeen in Issue 1, six in Issue 3 and only two in Issue 4. Same goes for other terms, such as Khilāfah where it occurred more frequently in Issue 1 (the title gave it away). This means that the work done in the background is extremely well-planned, each Issue being theme based and focused on attracting their readers and guiding them towards a very specific, recruitment related path.

### The Sections

As briefly explained during the introduction to Dābiq, each Issue is subdivided into various thematic sections which range from political to more religious motives, all of course aiming at IS' objectives. Since the magazine includes a whole lot of content, not all of it may be interesting to the average reader and thus the editors have made sure to keep key information at the beginning and the end of its magazine, including a compact and propaganda rich content together with remarkable graphics. Of worthy consideration is the fact that Dā'ish takes much inspiration from al-Qā'ida's magazine, especially in the way it chooses its themes and sections, as we will later see.

Issue 1 is by far my favorite content wise. It has the strongest and most western appealing propaganda, with an accurate attention to details, especially focused on eye pleasing and stunning graphics. As already claimed before, this is a marketing strategy in order to attract

more followers into continuing reading the magazine. It is strongly based on layouts of current newspapers and magazines:

Keep in mind what people see. Pages 2 and 3 are an open spread set side by side. 4 and 5 are too in a newspaper larger than 4 pages and so forth. Whatever content is on page 2 will be seen right next to the content on page 3.<sup>153</sup>

As stated in this excerpt, brief and straightforward, page 2 and 3 will be shown side-by-side and will thus have to include related content; Issue 1 seems to have perfectly adhered to these guidelines throughout the entire magazine. It clearly shows selected and differentiated research into various fields, including content placement and psychology (of marketing and advertising), emphasizing al-Ḥayāt's dedication to understanding what triggers the readers'

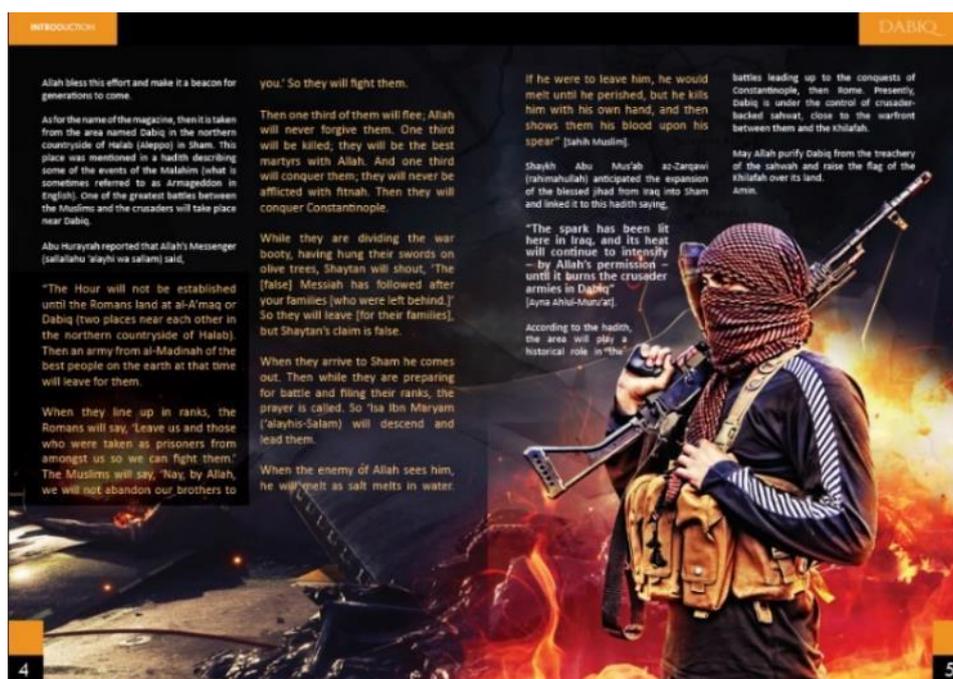


Figure 14 Dabiq Issue 1

<sup>153</sup> MakeMyNewspaper. (n.d.). *Starting a Profitable Newspaper*. Retrieved 12 01, 2017, from MakeMyNewspaper: <http://www.makemynewspaper.com/starting-a-profitable-newspaper#designing>

attention.<sup>154</sup> An example of a commercial magazine adhering to this layout is shown in, both portraying a subject surrounded by highlighted paragraphs, quotes and statements.



Figure 15 Double-Spread Sample; Source: [lexylovesred.weebly.com](http://lexylovesred.weebly.com)

Each Issue begins with the same phrase,<sup>155</sup> highlighting the religious connotation of the magazine. Just as the most iconic Hollywood action movie, *Dābiq* starts off with a staggering explosive entrance portraying a victorious militant holding an AK-47 on his shoulder, staring straight into the distance and standing in front of a burning battlefield, as shown in Figure 14 *Dabiq* Issue 1. By far the most scenic introduction out of the four Issues. It is interesting to notice how Issue 1 and Issue 3 are related just as Issue 2 and 4 are in their “Foreword”. The latter two Issues show in its Foreword a group stacking their hands on top of each other (which, on a side note, is the same recycled shot taken at different angles), a picture we usually associate with unity, effort and teamwork. The first Issues instead, show a more menacing, serious face

<sup>154</sup> Various studies have shown that the human brain processes images faster than words and it thus makes more sense to attribute meaning to images rather than text

<sup>155</sup> “All praise is due to Allah, Lord of the worlds. May blessings and peace be upon His Messenger Muhammad, and his family and companions”.

of IS, that which fights the western crusader to “ultimately bring about the complete collapse of the modern American empire”.<sup>156</sup>

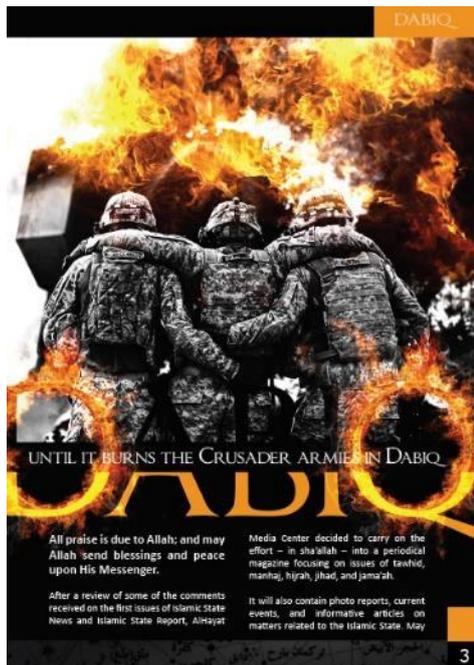


Figure 17 Dabiq Issue 1 and Issue 3



Figure 16 Dabiq Issue 2 and Issue 4

65 Opposed to Issue 2 and 4, the soldiers shown on Issue 1 are united as well, but carrying a wounded teammate while turning their back and walking away from the eyes of the readers



Figure 16 Dabiq Issue 2 and Issue 4



<sup>156</sup> Issue 2, *Dābiq*, p. 4

(and from the menacing looking mujāhidīn on the next page). There is no sign of unity shown in the introduction of Issue 3, however, president Obama seems to be have a particularly worried facial expression while the editors describe the misdoings of U.S. military operations over the region.

As first Issue of the magazine, the Khilāfah has just been declared and it thus needs to be advertised. After the announcement of the “new era has arrived of might and dignity for the Muslims”, full of joyous pictures celebrating liberation and freedom, from page 10 until page 15, Dābiq invites all Muslims, from “all different specializations and fields”<sup>157</sup> to join this magnificent state, full of prosperity and hope for the future. These pages are directed potentially to anyone, disregarding the apparent focus to Muslims or people with a certain inclination towards Islām. As a matter of fact, Issue 1 is a perfect introduction to all the basics about the Islāmic State, their dogmas and their doings, their political and religious views.

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From Issue 2 onward, the hateful anti-Western political discourse starts getting stronger, raising its apocalyptic voice “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted”<sup>158</sup> and it is true for any section. It is interesting to notice how such tone is raised after the first issue where it is kept calmer and generally more positive. It is a strategy which works both ways: on the one hand it scares the less courageous and determined, those incapable of rebellion and subjugated to “the modern-day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc”.<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, it encourages with its power the more audacious reader to find out more about the apostate’s misdoings and incites him/her to seek revenge. This concerns mainly the muslim reader, but what about the possible reaction of a western one? According to Harleen K. Gambhir in her *Dābiq: The Strategic Messaging of the*

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<sup>157</sup> Issue 1, *Dābiq*, p. 10

<sup>158</sup> Issue 4, *Dābiq*, p. 8

<sup>159</sup> Issue 3, *Dābiq*, p. 29

*Islāmic State* this angry voice is meant also to “intimidate Western scholars, and to demonstrate to ISIS’s followers that their achievements are garnering international attention”.<sup>160</sup>

I will not concentrate too much on the central “leading” sections, apart from a few interesting points regarding promotion and recruitment. Structurally speaking, the magazine is a more compact version of *al-Malāhim*’s, placing around 5 sections in no more than 30 pages, while *Inspire* seldom settles for under 40 pages. Right after the “Foreword”, usually an “Article” and a “Report” (occasionally also a “Statement”) will show content strongly focused on political and religious propaganda, justifying the cause of their mission. This illustrates that there is indeed an editing team, month by month thoroughly typing each paragraph and selecting the right photographs, maybe with demanding and tough directors and young and adventurous reporters striving to get that perfect story. What is interesting however, is the depiction of the organization and its enemies. Being a propaganda magazine, we do not expect to see any kind of self-criticism but, in its place, an extensive explanation of how IS is contributing in maintaining local communities out of danger and, most importantly, keeping their wellbeing untouched by the war, overall counting on utopian, military and victimhood narratives, confirming Ellul’s thesis. One of the best examples is probably the report entitled “The Liberation of Dābiq” in Issue 3.<sup>161</sup> Smiling faces, cheering people, sunny landscapes; this is the picture the Islāmic State wants to place side by side to the menacing and revengeful one. It is a warm-hearted army fighting for its noble cause:

It is for this reason that the Islāmic State has long maintained an initiative that sees it waging its jihād alongside a da’wah campaign that actively tends to the

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<sup>160</sup> (Gambhir, *Dabiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State*, 2014)

<sup>161</sup> There could be a whole discussion about the meaning of the term “liberation”, which I am going to refrain from doing

needs of its people. It fights to defend the Muslims, liberate their lands, and bring an end to the tawāghīt, while simultaneously seeking to guide and nurture those under its authority and ensure that both their religious and social needs are met.<sup>162</sup>

Issue 3, much like Issue 1, is structured to show exactly this kind of propaganda – the salvation from “slavery” by hijrah and jihād, the only possible ways to initiate and maintain a true Khilāfah.

The editors leave a section approximately in the middle of the magazine for the readers to take a “commercial-break”, and quickly remind them about the romantic side of Dā’ish, their religious and humanitarian mission. They entitle this section “Wisdom”.

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<sup>162</sup> Issue 3, *Dābiq*, p. 16-17

This section strongly reminds me of religious magazines, much like the one Jehovah’s Witness releases, because of their “inspiring” aura with soothing colors and relaxing images

gently placing the reader into the utopian life under the Khilāfah. More specifically, the inspiring aura comes from an unquestionable affinity to Inspire. I have omitted Issue 2 due to its slightly more graphic look, but it

shows the picture of the Canadian born mujāhid Abu Muslim, who also features in *The Chosen Few* video (analyzed later), glorified for his death. The format is similar to Issue 13 from Inspire also in their article entitled

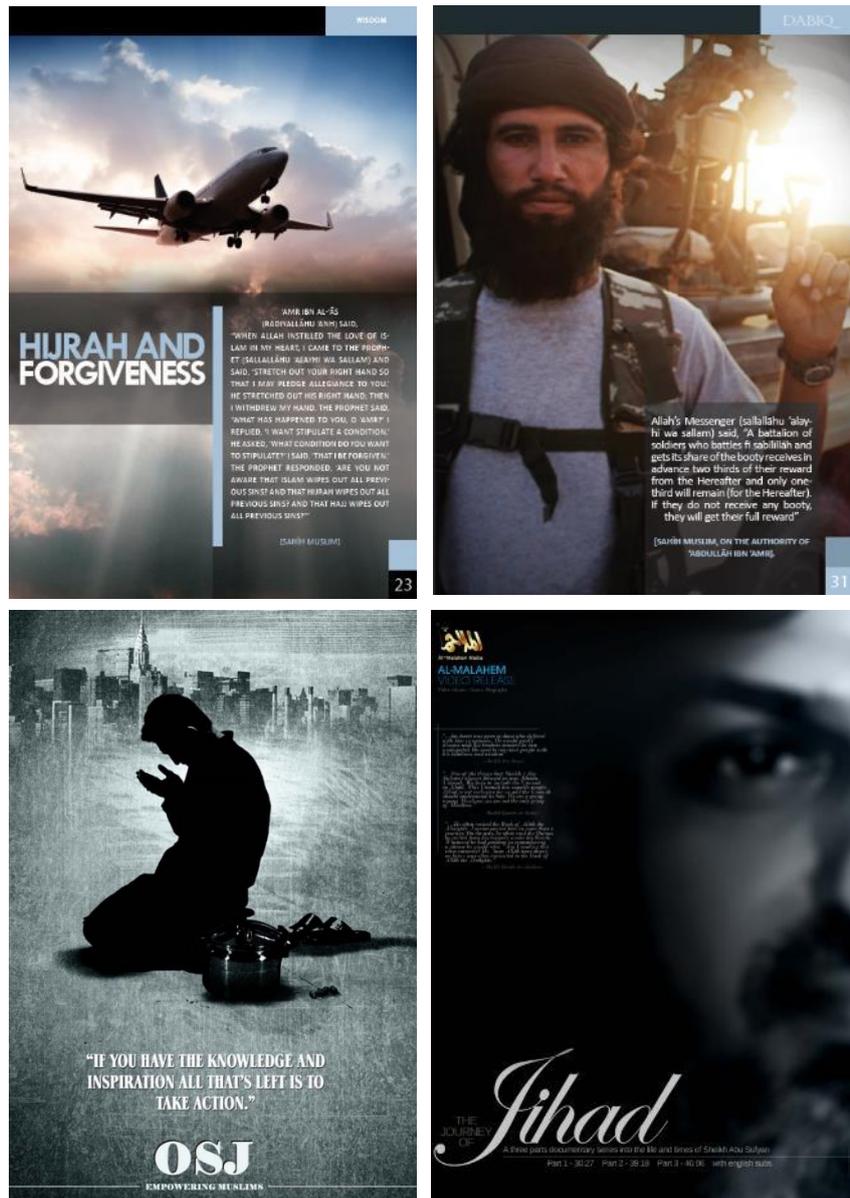


Figure 18 Wisdom:(starting from top) Dabiq Issue 3 and Issue 4, Inspire Issue 13

“Remember Me” where they praise Ramzi Yusuf, the “first mujāhid to aatack the US Homeland”<sup>163</sup> showing a silhouette of the martyr on top of the New York city skyline and a record of his successes, together with his qualifications which make the entire package seem a Curriculum Vitae.

<sup>163</sup> Al-Malāhim Media. (2014, December). Issue 13. *Inspire*, p. 40

In this section there are also more examples of said utopianism, showing children happily playing and making a “victory” gesture with their hands, militants cleaning the streets of the city, even showing “cancer treatment for children”. An excellent example of this kind of Utopian narrative is found in a report on Issue 4 named “A Window into the Islāmic State” as shown in Figure 19 Issue 4: A Window into the Islamic State



Figure 19 Issue 4: A Window into the Islamic State

The message this report, like other kinds of messages based on utopian narrative, is to show the reader the Islāmic State is no different than any other, and normal life can be carried out just as regularly as anywhere else (maybe with a slightly lower life expectancy). Recruitment is at the center of this narrative, and as clearly pointed out in many other issues, Dā'ish is in need of specialists from various fields.

Regarding the last pages, al-Ḥayāt always considers including a section entitled “In The Words of The Enemy” where they report what western crusaders, such as former US President Obama in Issue 3 or Arizona State Senator John McCain in Issue 2, have said about the Islāmic State and their actions, and their positioning regarding the conflict. Inspire Magazine uses a similar approach in their section entitled “Hear the World...A collection of quotes from friends

and foes”. Where al-Qā’ida places this section at the beginning of the magazine and uses multiple sources to quote, counting more on the victimhood narrative, Dā’ish places it towards the end and uses mostly accounts from one single source, which reconnects to not only Ellul’s propaganda train, regarding both the Rational and Social elements, but also the narrative regarding utopianism. The only purpose of reinforcing their propaganda is highlighted, with no surprise, by the fact that they only report the words which may be convenient to them and their



Figure 20 Hear the World - Issue 1 (left) In the Words of the Enemy - Issue 3 (right)

positioning: “it is now a real, if nascent and unrecognized, state actor—more akin in organization and power to the Taliban of the late 1990s than Al Qaeda”<sup>164</sup> unlike Inspire which also ranged in topics like the use of the *Burqa*, US political decisions in the Middle East and criticism of the Islāmic religion compared to the “more tolerant” Christian; which, as mentioned earlier, all reinforce victimhood.

Both Dā’ish and al-Qā’ida produce these magazines, beyond the glossy covers and propaganda-filled narratives, to firstly increase their exposure. There does not seem to be any filter applied to the kind of content published as long as it shocks the reader. The fact that they

<sup>164</sup> Issue 1, *Dābiq*, p. 17

are published in languages other than Arabic, is a key element highlighting their aim of making it accessible to the entire globe and thus increase their brand exposure. The horizontal/sociological axes mentioned by Ellul perfectly matches Greaver's thesis of increased exposure, which has been true for centuries according to a man named Oscar Wilde:

| There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about,  
| and that is not being talked about

### 3.3 Videos

It is widely agreed that the eye is the most important sensory organ, and thence vision will play an essential part in our gathering of information. Marketing campaigns for commercial products rely heavily on advertisements, which are after all short video clips. Along the same line work modern terrorist organizations. A lot of effort is being put into making

*By creating original video content you can support your thought leadership and build trust with a large audience*

- Arnie & Bradd

visual representations of the many aspects concerning their mission, their principles and the activities carried out in order to reinforce the organization's narrative. Al-Qā'ida was the first to launch this kind of propaganda tool, nevertheless, Dā'ish is again leader in this field, making state of the art products, full of rhetoric meanings, well planned, and focused on legitimizing their brand. Other organizations like Al-Shabāb and Ḥamās publish their own unique content as well, which touches key aspects of underestimated importance, adding their own brand recognition.

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From a marketing point of view, the benefits of creating video content are: <sup>165</sup>

- Boosts Conversions and Sales
- Shows Great ROI (Return On Investment)
- Builds Trust
- Engages Even the Laziest Buyers
- Encourages Social Shares

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<sup>165</sup> List Retrieved from: (Hanila, 2017)

### 3.3.1 A Nightmare on Sesame Street

Ḥamās, a radical Islāmist organization from the Palestinian territories, has seldom adopted extremist behaviors in the well-known Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, just as Dā'ish or al-Qā'ida, they rely on propaganda to spread their narrative.<sup>166</sup> In this regard, Ḥamās has an interestingly shocking history regarding videos - their audience being primarily youths - up until now the only ones focusing their propaganda specifically on that age group as a sort of distinct trademark. Children have the (unfortunate) ability to be mentally and morally flexible, and deem what surrounds them and what is taught to them, if consistently guided to think that way, as natural and just. Ḥamās is the holder of a TV channel called Al Aqsa TV where it broadcasts “ideologically tinged children's shows, strident news talk, and religiously inspired entertainment propaganda”<sup>167</sup>. It is widely known how amused children are when watching cartoons and kids’ programs, therefore Ḥamās has thought of exploiting this weakness of theirs and realized it was a reasonable idea to try and brainwash children into thinking hatred, conflict and self-detonation are after all a legitimate thing to do. YouTube has a vast archive of these videos, a few of them mirrored from the websites such as MEMRI TV (Middle East Media Research Institute) and PMW Watch (Palestinian Media Watch). The videos accessed were “Ḥamās to kids: Shoot all the Jews”<sup>168</sup> and “Young relatives of deceased Ḥamās MP Umm Nidal, mother of four killed terrorists, wish to follow in her footsteps”<sup>169</sup>.

The program follows a regular western talk show format with a host, a young girl, who professionally interviews her guests on religious, social and political topics, all under a very

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<sup>166</sup> Hendawi, H. (2014, August 14). Subtle voices of dissent surface in war-torn Gaza. *Washington Examiner*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/subtle-voices-of-dissent-surface-in-war-torn-gaza/article/2157042>

<sup>167</sup> Sharawi, H. (2006, February 3). Hamas Launches Television Network. (E. Westervelt, Interviewer) NPR News. Gaza. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5186883>

<sup>168</sup> PMW Watch. (2014, May 2). *Hamas to kids: Shoot all the Jews*. Ghaza, Palestine. Retrieved from [http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=472&fld\\_id=473&doc\\_id=11385](http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=472&fld_id=473&doc_id=11385)

<sup>169</sup> MEMRI TV. (2013, March 29). Umm Nidal Farhat. *YOUNG RELATIVES OF DECEASED HAMAS MP UMM NIDAL, MOTHER OF FOUR KILLED TERRORISTS, WISH TO FOLLOW IN HER FOOTSTEPS*. Gaza, Palestine: Al-Aqsa TV. Retrieved from <https://www.memri.org/tv/young-relatives-deceased-hamas-mp-umm-nidal-mother-four-killed-terrorists-wish-follow-her>

light and tranquil atmosphere. The particularity is that all the videos show children, not older than 13/14 years, ramming against Jews and Israel, justifying kamikazes' actions, praising them and hoping to one day be destined to the same glorious future. Scaringly horrifying to see a few of these toddlers, who have yet to learn how to read, think this way. Starting from the most recent video aired in 2014, there is some background information to be clarified regarding the woman named in the video, her name being Umm Nidal.<sup>170</sup> She was part of the Palestinian Legislative Council and became known for indoctrinating her children into martyrdom and for praising her 17-year-old son's death "after he stormed an Israeli settlement with an automatic rifle and explosives, killing five students".<sup>171</sup> In the video, her nieces are being interviewed and seem to take much pride for their grandmother and her family members who have justifiably sacrificed their life for the sake of their homeland. While singing in unison, they pronounce the words:

Jihād bestows pride and glory upon you when you become a martyrdom-seeker. Oh explosive device of glory -- with her blood she created freedom. Ask [suicide bomber] Fatima Al-Najjar how one should live a life of pride.<sup>172</sup>

The second video is presented with a more childish approach to the topics, the fact that the host is dressed up as a bee surely makes the atmosphere more playful; however, the topics

<sup>170</sup> "The mother of Nidal" her eldest son. She was known as the Mother of Martyrs and her full name is Maryam Mohammad Yousif Farhat

<sup>171</sup> Yardly, W. (2013, March 20). *Mariam Farhat, Known as 'Mother of Martyrs,' Dies at 64*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/20/world/middleeast/mariam-farhat-palestinian-mother-of-martyrs-dies-at-64.html>

<sup>172</sup> MEMRI TV, 2013. Text in Arabic (personally transcribed):

"الجهاد يمنح الفخر والمجد عليك حينما تصبح طالبا استشهاديا. يا عبوة ناسفة المجد - من دمها الذي صنعتها الحرية. اسأل فاطمة النجار كيف تعيش حياة فخورة.".

covered make the content belong to the R-rated category. The hosts approach the topics with their nonchalant attitude, encouraging violence against their Jewish neighbors. While talking to one of her guests, she asks if she wants to become a police officer like her uncle Ahmed:

Child host: OK, so what does a policeman do?"

Nahul (adult in giant bee costume): "He catches thieves,  
and people who make trouble

Child host: And shoots Jews. Right?"

Girl: "Yes."

Child host: "You want to be like him?"

[Girl nods]

Child host: "Allah willing, when you grow up."

Girl: "So that I can shoot Jews."<sup>173</sup>

ISIS is not new to instilling propaganda to children. A joint report by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) named *The Children of ISIS*<sup>174</sup> explains various recruiting techniques among which teaching the alphabet not using regular examples like *E* for *Elephant* but rather *D* for *Dabāba* (meaning “tank”).<sup>175</sup> Videos showing children being trained, wearing uniforms and handling weapons are also produced and disseminated as a way to say:

<sup>173</sup> PMW Watch, 2014. Text in Arabic, slightly changed due to personal incomprehension of dialect: "ماذا يفعل شرطي؟" "انه أدرك اللصوص، والناس الذين تثير المشاكل." "واختر اليهود، نعم؟" "بلى" "أنت تريد أن تكون مثله؟" [عقدة الفتاة] "إن شاء الله، عندما تكبر." "إذن أختار اليهود".

<sup>174</sup> Joint NCTV/AIVD publication. (2017). *The Children of ISIS: The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory*. National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) and the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), The Hague.

<sup>175</sup> *The Children of ISIS*, 2017, p. 9

for ISIS, it is a matter of ‘an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’: ‘The West kills our children, so our cubs are coming to kill you’.<sup>176</sup>

Dā'ish is always a step forward when regarding innovation. Children are not only trained to act like mujahidin, but also to be them. One of the most gruesome and disturbing videos al-Ḥayāt has ever produced in my opinion is *He Made Me Alive With His Blood*.<sup>177</sup> The short video begins with a teenager stepping on a merry-go-round while being handed a knife. The last thing we would expect to see is this same kid beheading another human being. Two seconds later, a toddler (not older than 4) is handed a loaded gun and shoots a prisoner tied to a fence. The daily traumas these children are exposed to would probably take years of psychoanalysis to help them overcome them.

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This kind of propaganda is highly effective for children especially at that stage of mental and behavioral development. That is because, as noted by Otterbacher in her study “radicalization typically takes place when young people are making big lifestyle transitions and their cognition and emotional responses are still in the process of developing”.<sup>178</sup> Indoctrination at such a young age is a recipe for success, taking in consideration a 17-year-old boy took his life after being convinced by his own mother to perform Allah’s wish to liberate their land by the Zionist occupiers, and a toddler triumphantly screamed *Allāh Akbar* after shooting another human in the head.

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<sup>176</sup> *The Children of ISIS*, 2017, p. 10

<sup>177</sup> Al-Ḥayāt Media Center. (2017). *He Made Me Alive With His Blood*. Retrieved from <https://clarionproject.org/warning-graphic-video-isis-children-4/>

<sup>178</sup> As appears in Otterbacher, 2014. Taken from: Ghosh, P., Warfa, N., McGilloway, A., Ali, I., Jones, E., & Bhui, K. (2013). Violent radicalization and recruitment to terrorism: Perspectives of wellbeing and social cohesion of citizens of Muslim heritage. *Sociology Mind*, 290-297.

What is important here is this last paragraph: the reaction of horror and abhorrence which pervades people and consequently global media, helps to spread the brutal narrative they carefully plan to position themselves in.

### 3.3.2 The Imitation Game:<sup>179</sup> Al-Shabāb's Call to Hijrah

Most of Al-Katāi'b Media videos, like any extremist organization, portray biased propaganda, inviting those who are watching to essentially “pick a side”, as United States' former President George W. Bush once stated: “You are either with us, or against us”. Their first productions could have inspired the directors at al-Ḥayāt Media Center to produce a fairly similar recruiting approach in their videos; as a matter of fact, the latter *What are you waiting for?* is comparably of analogous form to *Message to the Ummah and Inspire the believers*<sup>180</sup> with regards to its content. On their behalf, al-Qā'ida has *inspired* the creative minds of al-Shabāb's believers to mold their content from al-Malāhim's blueprint, sometimes even too faithfully as in the case of *Inspire the believers*, the tagline appearing on al-Qā'ida's homonymous magazine.

Even though it came out 4 years before IS version, we can notice the quality is still professionally made, with eye-catching graphics and, as expected, the company brand appearing from the beginning of the video. Foreign fighters from numerous parts of the world, in addition to Somalian neighboring countries, contribute to the message to perform hijrah, inviting all brothers to join the fight and “if anyone of you dies in this course, then he is a šahīd [witness] and for him there is jannah [paradise]”<sup>181</sup>. His spokesperson Omar Hammami (also

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<sup>179</sup> Title of the Oscar winning 2014 film *The Imitation Game*.

<sup>180</sup> Al-Katāi'b Media (Director). (2010). *Message to the Ummah and Inspire The Believers* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from <http://jihadology.net/2010/11/22/new-video-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-media-outlet-al-kataib-message-to-the-ummah-and-inspire-the-believers/>

<sup>181</sup> *Inspire the believers*, 2010. Original message in Arabic (personally transcribed):

حيث يموت أي شخص منكم في هذه الدورة، ثم هو شاهد و إن له الجنة

known as Abu Mansur al-Amriki)<sup>182</sup> conveys a message which follows approximately the same narrative encountered in the magazine Dābiq “a civilizational conflict between the forces of Islām and non-Islām, truth and falsehood, good and evil”<sup>183</sup>.

*Inspire the Believers* is a recruitment video in its purest form. As we are often used to see in movies’ openings, the “starring” section appears right before we are exposed to the plot. Here too, we are introduced to the characters present further into the video. The first half shows on-site training narrated by Hammami’s voice in Arabic (with captions both in English and in Swahili) introducing “The Art of War” as the title names it; all of this accompanied by a nashīd<sup>184</sup> in the background. The second half of the video alternates with scenic *split-screens* (similar to news agencies’ reporting) Arab, Somali and English speaking mujāhidīn explaining the purpose of their mission in fighting evil apostates:

A chance for us to fight for our beliefs is the best thing  
that can happen to us in this world, and the fact that we  
might be killed in this path is nothing but a glad tidings<sup>185</sup>

Hijrah is of course an important step to take in order to join their righteous jihād:

I’d like to take this opportunity to invite all the Muslims  
that are living in the land of disbelief, the lands of

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<sup>182</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Maher, & Sheehan, 2012, p. 1

<sup>183</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Maher, & Sheehan, 2012, p. 14

<sup>184</sup> On the topic about nashīd there could be more to mention. Numerous scholars have analyzed their role in society and how modern times should not influence them, being solely religious tunes. For further information read مسائل فقهية مختارة (Selected Fiqh Issues) by الشيخ أبو إياس محمود عبد اللطيف العويضة (Sheikh Abu Iyas Mahmoud Abdul Latif Al-Uweida).

A very interesting post I found on *IslāmQA* summarizes a few fatwās regarding this topic, entitled *Warnings of modern songs and the conditions to permissible ones* محاذير الأناشيد الحديثة وشروط الجائز منها found at <https://islamqa.info/ar/91142>

<sup>185</sup> Al-Katāi'b Media, 2010

oppression, to make hijrah to the land of glory, to the land of izzat [honour], to the land of jihād.<sup>186</sup>

As technology evolved, so did the quality and stylistic choices of their videos. For instance, much like commercial media production companies have added an “HD” caption to signal viewers they have now the possibility to enjoy content at Higher Definition, so does al-Katāi’b as seen in Figure 21 High Definition logos, with the Music Television (MTV) HD logo put in comparison.



Figure 21 High Definition logos

They have also gradually started to emulate al-Ḥayāt media experts in all fields, regarding both visual and narrative choices. For instance, a recent video released in November 2017 titled *And Be Harsh Upon Them*<sup>187</sup> recalls the style used previously by IS editors in *Flames of War* as seen in Figure 22 Similarities between "And Be Harsh Upon Them" (left), "Flames of War" (right); we are not able to hear it but both logos are introduced by a Nashīd and, as



Figure 22 Similarities between "And Be Harsh Upon Them" (left), "Flames of War" (right), and "The Hunger Games" (bottom)

<sup>186</sup> Al-Katāi’b Media, 2010

<sup>187</sup> Al-Katāi’b Media. (2017). *And Be Harsh Upon Them* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from <http://jihadology.net/category/al-qa%E2%80%99idah/affiliates/al-shabab/>

soon as the title makes its appearance, by a blasting sound. The overall package is an exemplary re-adaptation of many Hollywood productions of this kind; an instance could be the novel-based movie saga *The Hunger Games*, which features both visual and audio effects used by the terrorist groups.

Since their increased influence from al-Ḥayāt, their narrative has also become more explicit. Al-Shabāb was not showing images that could have been too heavy on the eyes of the public, at least from earlier videos I had the chance to access. *And Be Harsh Upon Them* brings in close shots of executed soldiers, photos of well-equipped artillery and generally a more menacing narrative, this time all Arabic-spoken and with Arabic subtitles. The language used is a symbol per se: no more foreign speaking mujāhidīn because they too have abandoned their roots. The global message focuses not so much on recruitment but on the threat their power now poses.

### 3.3.3 Recruiting for the Caliphate: Reservoir mujāhidīn

Dā'ish's contribution with regards to video propaganda has probably revealed to be the most successful to their recruitment campaign. Even though not all of it shows brutality and gruesomeness, IS has been famous for its singularly explicit content. It is not by chance I have decided to name this section after a movie from the American director Quentin Tarantino, his content often criticized for being exceedingly graphic. Unfortunately, what is shown in some of the most gruesome videos of the Islāmic State is a chilling reality.

One of the very first videos released by the Islāmic State is *The End of the Sykes-Picot*,<sup>188</sup> Sykes-Picot being the agreement signed by the United Kingdom and France (i.e. Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot) to split the territories belonging to each colonial power

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<sup>188</sup> Al-Ḥayāt Media Center. (2014, June 29). *The end of Sykes-Picot*. Retrieved from <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/video-news/video-islamic-state-media-branch-releases-the-end-of-sykespicot-30397575.html>

brought by the end of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Its conquest and destruction by Dā'ish are a strong symbol representing the defeat of yet another pillar of western impositions. This unusually long reportage (15 minutes) was released for a global audience shortly after the declaration of the Khilāfah and it signs the official launch of their marketing campaign and rebranding. The content of the video is about, as the title suggests, IS self-proclaimed state dominating apostate forces and eliminating borders to establish one united Ummah and to erase the shame and destroy the conspiracy of Sykes-Picot.<sup>189</sup> It is commented in English by someone named "Abu Safiyya from Chile"<sup>190</sup> highlighting in higher case letters his country of provenance. The logo of Al-Ḥayāt Media Center is visible on the right-hand corner throughout the whole video, standing for their well-earned supremacy and legitimacy of the new Caliphate. One of the key moments of the video is Abu Safiyya showing the taken-down signpost indicating border control, before stepping over it, stressing the incompatibility between western

society and them. He then proceeds to show badges and uniforms belonging to Iraqi soldiers, who fled the scene fearing to be captured. In one of the final scenes, he is shown blowing up one of the border patrol stations, mockingly thanking the U.S. government for having provided the explosives. This is a frequent method of obtaining weapons called



Figure 23 Abu Safiyya with border sign

*ghanā'im*, historically meaning war booty. The US army has greatly contributed to this phenomenon due to its involvement with the provision of weapons to the Iraqi military,

<sup>189</sup> As declared by al-Baghdadi according to this article (original version in Arabic):

" Open Staff Writers. " Open 23 April, هل نشهد نهاية سايكس بيكو وتشكل شرق أوسط جديد أكثر هدوءاً؟ 2015. <https://goo.gl/xveFm4>

<sup>190</sup> Bastián Vásquez is a Norwegian citizen of Chilean origins. ISPI, 2015, p. 54

however, a significant part of them came as a result of US efforts to support some "moderate" armed groups in Syria,<sup>191</sup> which revealed to be not quite as moderate as anticipated.

The primary objective of this video is making irony, teasing and provoking not only western governments but also those Muslim traitors who had previously sold their and their people's souls to the apostates; more importantly, *The End of Sykes-Pycot* makes the clear statement that the "Utopian" Khilāfah has become a solid reality.

A second video *What are you waiting for?*<sup>192</sup> is interesting both in terms of its intended target audience and for the symbolic mixture it contains. We are shown an entire group of foreign fighters and three "reporters" speaking an impeccable French, equipped with Kalashnikovs and a typical curved sword. The propaganda has now spread to a French speaking audience who exhorts "local dissatisfied youngsters living in the banlieues to act locally as 'lone wolves'".<sup>193</sup> One of them particularly catches our eyes as he looks somewhat familiar; the resemblance to Jesus Christ is, as a matter of fact, uncanny. His presence could perhaps be scenic, but a statement to the west does come through, something on the lines of "even your savior has surrendered to the caliphate".

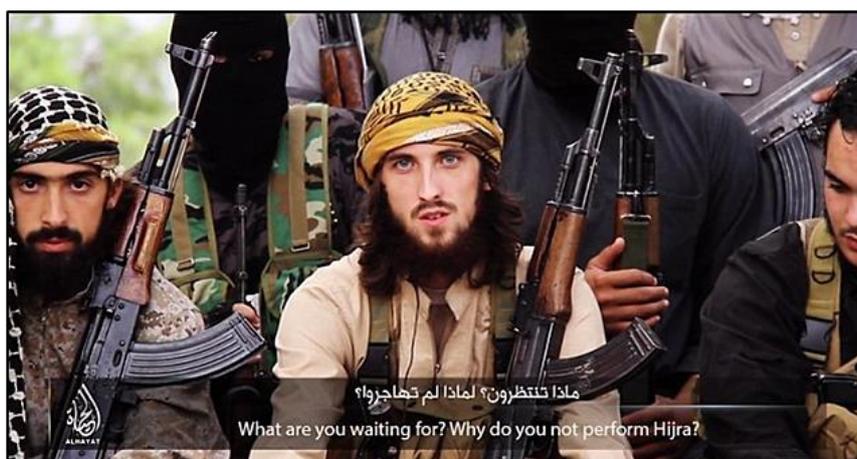


Figure 24 Abu Osama

<sup>191</sup> Translated from:

روبرت إيفانز. (24 November, 2015) 7 أشياء تعلمتها من قراءتي لكل أعداد مجلة دابق التابعة لداعش. نون بوست. تم الاسترداد من <https://goo.gl/xhgukW>

<sup>192</sup> Al-Hayāt Media Center. (2014, November 20). *What are you waiting for?* Retrieved from [https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=0e0\\_1416489951](https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=0e0_1416489951)

<sup>193</sup> ISPI, 2015, p. 92

The subject in question is named Abu Osama al-Faranci, a French born jihādīst who has completed his first step towards the establishment of the Khilāfah, and is inviting all those interested in joining the mission to emulate him and his brothers Abu Maryam al-Faranci and Abu Salman al-Faranci to perform hijrah, and if unable to do so, to at least act locally with whatever means possible, without letting them sleep.<sup>194</sup> The video is full of strong symbolic gestures such as the burning of passports, a ritual all mujahidin



Figure 25 Burning Passports

undertake upon their arrival, signifying the refusal of western identity constructs while pledging full allegiance to Dā'ish (belongingness theme). This also inherently means that there is no coming back, their destiny now belonging to the Islamic State.

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The French military reacted with a firm-hand to this threat. It had already launched in 2014 an operation called “Opération Chammal” in Iraq; with the rising danger ISIS represented, France soon expanded the mission to Syria.<sup>195</sup>

Almost precisely a year after this video was released, and after the heavy involvement of France in Syria, Paris suffered a Dā'ish-claimed lone wolf attack, showing the world they can also “walk the walk”.

<sup>194</sup> Original words in French “Si vous n’avez pas les moyens de faire « hijra » sur cette terre, travaillez en France. Laissez-les ne pas dormir [sic]”. Al-Ḥayāt Media Center, 2014

<sup>195</sup> Original article in Arabic:

“ هولاند : المقاتلات الفرنسية استهدفت مواقع لتنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في دير الزور .France 24, 29 September, 2015. <https://goo.gl/9OtVXa>

### 3.3.4 The blood path from al-Qā'ida to ISIS

Just a few months after the Caliphate promotion video, we are exposed to the very meaning of terrorism. A new figure rebaptized “Jihādi John”, due to his strong British accent, appears on the scene of a series of macabre videos, a “trend” initially launched by al-Qā'ida: in May 2004, an American

*The series of  
beheadings show  
continuity with the  
project of al-Zarqāwī*

- Marco Lombardi

prisoner named Nick Berg was shown wearing a classic orange Guantanamo outfit, a few moments before being beheaded with a *knife*.<sup>196</sup> It is not an accident the fact that IS prisoners (disregarding their ethnicity) are all wearing the iconic orange prisoner jumpsuit. It is something we are all accustomed to thanks to Hollywood, and can thus easily recognize it. Through a vendetta filled motive, Dā'ish is telling the world that the abductions are an eye for an eye solution to western actions, particularly the United States. As a sort of mockery, the Guantanamo shirt symbolizes how the west has been made prisoner of its own Hollywoodian culture. The use of the knife was not a casualty either, but it had a specific purpose:

When you saw the head off with a small knife, you're not trying to make it quick or easy. You're doing several things at once, aimed at several different audiences (...) For the audience of IS supporters worldwide, you're offering revenge porn (...) For the American/Western audience, you're hoping to provoke disgust and horror intense enough to weaken support for any more intervention in Iraq.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>196</sup> ISPI, 2015, p. 58

<sup>197</sup> Brecher, G. (2014, September 3). *The War Nerd: The long, twisted history of beheadings as propaganda*. Pando. Retrieved from <https://pando.com/2014/09/03/the-war-nerd-the-long-twisted-history-of-beheadings-as-propaganda/>

This gruesome ritual is meant to strengthen the organization's narrative and its intended positioning, boldly standing to determine who holds the "knife" hand. ISIS thought it was a good idea to remake this its trend, adding its own signature to it. The beheadings starring Jihādi John all seem to follow the same script, as outlined by Ballardini:<sup>198</sup>

- **Prisoner's message** - testimonials talk about their personal case and the fact that they have not found a solution to their problem
- **Comment of the executioner** - he, who represents the voice of the brand, proposes a solution for the future
- **Execution** - left to imagination. The video jumps directly to the final scene giving, narratively, also the sense of the passage of time
- **Final frame** - where there should be a *pack-shot*,<sup>199</sup> there is a severed head instead. The "supporting evidence" of the promised performance

Why has Dā'ish decided to spare its audience the horror of the beheading? Could it have been a way to test western media's reaction?

One explanation is to "keep it short" and have just the final shot be shown to the public.<sup>200</sup> Another is to avoid unwanted twitches or movements that would impact the fluidity of the act. I personally find this second explanation less plausible since Ballardini himself states a few of the prisoners were drugged and were not able react anyway.<sup>201</sup> It is worth noticing that, for instance, some experts assert that the beheading of Nicholas Berg was a hoax, which does leave the possibility that some of these videos may have been edited, or may even be fake all

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<sup>198</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 141

<sup>199</sup> In advertising this refers to a close-up of the product being advertised

<sup>200</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 138

<sup>201</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 216

together. What is important is, besides the fact that they may be real or not, the narrative of brutality Dā'ish is trying to convey.

Stupidly enough, western media reacted to these and previous videos, accusing the organization of having “faked” the beheadings. Dā'ish did not leave its critics wondering and it produced another video, this time showing the entire scene; among a group of Syrian soldiers, Peter Kassig is present without the usual Guantanamo outfit. The 15-minute video response is proof that western media is always in the center of their search for legitimization and never miss a chance to prove them wrong:

Jihādi John's ruthless eyes looking mockingly at the camera seem to say: "Did you want to see blood? Here you are!".<sup>202</sup>

Going back to my previous question, if it really was a test, it worked. This proves what point the brutality of ISIS' narrative can come to in order to justify their mission and show their enemies (and supporters) what they are really capable of.

### 3.4 Opening Pandora's Box: Other Media

The channels and the materials produced analyzed in the previous sections were mainly directed at a global audience, however, terrorist organizations do not seem to forget about radicalization of locals. They use, as a matter of fact, means intended for repetition and constant reminder such as radio stations, television channels and brochures.

Radio stations are the easiest and most preferred method for distributing propaganda among local populations. Their main objective is to circulate news bulletins of their military

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<sup>202</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 217

operations across the globe, programmed daily by means of regular broadcasts predominantly in Arabic but also in various other languages like Turkish, Kurdish, English, French and Russian.<sup>203</sup> They also circulate passages from the Qur'ān or hadith of the prophet, as well as the previously mentioned nashīd,<sup>204</sup> the same branded chants used throughout their videos as well. A strategy both Dā'ish and al-Shabāb seem to have adopted is to go “full-monopoly”, meaning eliminating competitive radio stations when possible. For instance, al-Shabāb's bombings over two radio stations in Mogadishu and seizure of a few radio station in the capital. Dā'ish has had the same impact over local broadcasting agencies, focusing on highly sophisticated technologies such as “joint electromagnetic spectrum” which:

scramble the signal of private radio stations in the surrounding areas and prevent messages of hope from reaching the city's residents [...and] to prevent the spread of allegedly “baseless and false” information.<sup>205</sup>

This is not the only way ISIS achieves its monopoly. With regards to its TV news channel *Khilāfah Live* broadcasting 24/7 videos and reportages anywhere in the city, which is shown and described in Cantlie's video *Inside Aleppo*), Dā'ish makes sure locals have access only to this type of content as a result of a mass operation which aimed at destroying TVs and satellite disks from all households in the territories controlled by the caliphate.<sup>206</sup>

They do not only count to spread their narratives in the territories under their direct control, but also through affiliates like al-Qā'ida whose partner in Libya Anṣār al-Sharī'a began

<sup>203</sup> Winter, 2015, p. 15

<sup>204</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 101

<sup>205</sup> Gambhir, H. K. (2016). *The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS's Information Warfare*. Institute for the Study of War. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, p. 15

<sup>206</sup> Ibid

sharing its radio broadcasts in 2016 “on the social live audio platform Mixlr [...] three days after ISIS launched a website allowing users to stream its al-Bayān radio broadcasts”.<sup>207</sup>

Local populations are therefore under great propagandistic exposure. Some measures have been taken by the US to target the diffusion of such content, such as bombing one of al-Bayān’s stations, which are still being carried out.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 29

### 3.5 Western Testimonials

What could be a convincingly efficient way to promote your product in foreign markets if not by having real people advertise it and review it positively? Testimonials in marketing and advertisement are people who, by adding their “honest” opinion, are in charge of shaping the consumer’s perception to convince them about the uniqueness of a product. Terrorist organizations, being on the lookout for new marketing tools, made use of such technique with the help of western hostages and foreign fighters.

A part of current jihādist groups is made of foreign fighters. Unfortunately, the data available regarding the percentages for each organization are an approximation, but what the propaganda allegedly shows is that the interest towards their mission has reached the west. We can see that by the way they “showcase” their foreign-speaking fighters, focusing, for example, on having a mother tongue English speaker with an impeccable “cockney accent”,<sup>208</sup> or having “Abu Zaid from Sweden”.<sup>209</sup> The aim is to convince people that they are fighting a global Jihād, calling upon Muslims all over the world by proving them their compatriots have already joined the battle, highlighting Winter’s utopianism narrative. Another way they achieve this is by praising those who gave up their lives for the sake of the Khilāfah, as shown in the video *Al-Ghurabā’: The Chosen Few*:<sup>210</sup>

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Chosen by the production company to do this, in other words, to play their own death in a movie<sup>211</sup>

<sup>208</sup> ISPI, 2015, p. 65

<sup>209</sup> Al-Katāi’b Media (Director). (2010). *Message to the Ummah and Inspire The Believers* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from <http://jihadology.net/2010/11/22/new-video-from-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidins-media-outlet-al-kataib-message-to-the-ummah-and-inspire-the-believers/>

<sup>210</sup> (Al-Ghurabā’: The Chosen Few of Different Lands: Abū Muslim from Canada, 2014)

<sup>211</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 166

As much as we can criticize their way of dealing with martyrdom, Dā'ish has managed to bring yet another novelty into the world of terrorist propaganda. It is important to note that the “chosen few” were very much aware of their future, as a matter of fact all mujāhidīn are. There is a reason why they call themselves *'abīd Allah* (slaves of Allah),<sup>212</sup> and do not fear their destiny, but rather commemorate their pious death in the name of Islām. In order to highlight their achievement of the final mission, a recurrent dark ritual sees these martyrs being photographed after their death, smiling towards the sky while still covered in blood, as is the case of Shaykh Abu 'Umar al-Husayni in Dābiq Issue 1.

The western testimonials present on Issue 3 and Issue 4 of the Dābiq Magazine are hostages, namely the British John Cantlie and the Americans James Foley and Steven Sotloff. They have made their appearance on various kinds of IS' products in order to (apparently) sustain their propaganda. Sotloff and Foley were present twice on IS' media: the featured articles on Issue 3 and 4 and the gruesome video of their beheadings. Cantlie, however, has made multiple appearances and has increasingly been a key figure in marketing their propaganda and adding value to their narrative.

Sotloff is firstly introduced in Issue 3 together with James Foley as part of the condemnation of Obama's administration's political decisions:

[Obama] showing his “people” that the number one interest of the American government is the sanctity of Israel and its allies [which] are more important than the lives of his citizenry”.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Original text إيفانز، 2015 عبيد الله

<sup>213</sup> Issue 3, *Dābiq*, p. 4

Both hostages are given the chance to write a letter before their assassination, nonetheless, it is not certain if those are actually their own words or to what extent they truly reflect the original message. The texts are similar in content to the aforementioned quote. Using Foley's words, just like "the prisoners of the US government [...], we, the American people, are victims of our government's foreign policy".<sup>214</sup> Sotloff expresses the same concepts in his letter to his mother: "at the rate that Obama's administration is going, this could very well be the last you hear from me".<sup>215</sup> The point is clear and Dā'ish states it using the best tools at its disposal. On the one hand, the testimonials are there to make exactly this point: the Islāmic State is a fact, it exists, and is establishing its own path; western governments are "interfering yet again in the affairs of the Islāmic State".<sup>216</sup> On the other hand, being the West (and especially the US) Islāmic State's arch enemy, it is not surprising their testimonials agreed with their line of thought and "recited" their narrative. Nonetheless, this is a strong message aimed at the western audience reading the magazine in order to make them understand that the real enemy is not IS, but their own government who, for the sake of their selfish imperialistic ideals, put the life of their own people at stake.

John can't lie<sup>217</sup>

The last testimonial, the one who has contributed the most to Dā'ish's propaganda, is John Cantlie. Cantlie was kidnapped and released a first time in June 2012 and, during a second trip to Syria, was abducted again, becoming Foley's cellmate. His current situation is unfortunately unknown; after releasing the last propaganda video in December 2016 he was

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<sup>214</sup> Issue 3, *Dābiq*, p. 40

<sup>215</sup> Issue 3, *Dābiq*, p. 38

<sup>216</sup> Issue 4, *Dābiq*, p. 48

<sup>217</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 108

allegedly declared dead by an Iraqi news agency.<sup>218</sup> During his imprisonment, as he reports in Dābiq's "Special" *Hard Talk, the real story behind my videos*,<sup>219</sup> he explains how taken aback he was at the lack of effort shown by his and other hostages' governments, adding that "even the mujāhidīn were genuinely surprised at how easily our countries left us for dead".<sup>220</sup> An interesting point stressed by both Cantlie and Foley is the denigration of their governments, the United Kingdom and the United States, saying how disillusioned they were to think that "two of the most influential countries in the world" could care about the life of a few of their citizens "when all the European leaders engaged in discussions that ensured the safe return home of their people".<sup>221</sup>

Even when describing the flaws of the Khilāfah, meaning the fact that it is located in a rather politically and socially dangerous area, IS does not refrain from blaming the west for what is happening:

There was a heavy airstrike some time ago in the dead of night and I promise that you don't sit there thinking, 'Hurray, it's the United States Air Force.' [...] For 20 minutes afterwards there are the sounds of babies crying in fear, mothers trying to soothe their children, and sirens as casualties are taken to hospital. It's a side to 'precision' bombing that you never see back in the West."

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<sup>218</sup> British journalist held hostage by ISIL reported dead in Mosul: Iraqi media. (2017, July 28). *Al Masdar News*. Retrieved from Al Masdar News: <https://mobile.almasdarnews.com/article/british-journalist-held-hostage-isil-reported-dead-mosul-iraqi-media/>

<sup>219</sup> Issue 4, *Dābiq*, p. 52

<sup>220</sup> Issue 4, *Dābiq*, p. 54

<sup>221</sup> Issue 4, *Dābiq*, p. 55

His cooperation with the Islāmic State did not end with Dābiq, instead al-Ḥayāt saw in his expertise and reporting skills a great potential to boost their exposure, making him star in 3 different series with a total fourteen videos over the course of two years, as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**

Series	Episode	Date
<b>Lend me your ears</b>	Introduction	18 September 2014
	Ep. 1	18 September 2014
	Ep. 2	30 September 2014
	Ep. 3	12 October 2014
	Ep. 4	16 October 2014
	Ep. 5	12 November 2014
	Ep. 6	24 November 2014
<b>Inside</b>	'Ayn al-Arab (Kobani)	28 October 2014
	Mosul	3 January 2015
	Aleppo	9 February 2015
<b>John Cantlie About</b>	The American Airstrikes on Media Kiosks in Mosul City	19 March 2016
	The US Bombing in Mosul University and other popular areas in the City	12 July 2016
	Bombing the Bridges, Cutting Water and Electricity from Mosul City	7 December 2016
	Tank Warfare in Mosul in a new video titled (Tank Hunters)	13 December 2016

Table 1 Cantlie's video appearances

He gives the Islāmic State a new face by reporting, with his *Inside* series, how “normal” life in the Caliphate can be. He walks around the streets, dodges the cars in traffic, shows the local vendors in the market as a sort of travel documentary. He does not just show that life under the Islāmic State is all peaches and cream; more frighteningly, he defends Sharī’ah law,

stands against western governments and sustains the terrorist organization, all the while heavily contributing to their utopian narrative:

He disputes the data, disassembles the journalist's theses, argues and even manages to put a subtle ironic nuance between the lines.<sup>222</sup>

Throughout the videos we are able to notice an important change in his appearance, similar to the “character development” directors and novelists are used to portray throughout movies or TV shows. From wearing orange, symbol of his imprisonment, he adopts black, sign of the apparent “freedom” of having been allowed to wear the color normally worn by IS militants. This underlines how Dā'ish managed to show mercy and inclusion towards an apostate who has publicly disowned his own homeland. It may as well all be an act by Cantlie to make the audience think he has actually joined the enemy; even so, it is a strategy that worked tremendously well.

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Figure 26 Cantlie's change

<sup>222</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 108



Figure 27 Cantlie videos: Arabic-language comments. Source: Youtube

His success flooded social media with incredibly mixed feelings. Glancing through some of the comments to the videos, a few ISIS sympathizers exclaimed their excitement about the unexpected support from a western journalist, like *Maha Senan* who even calls him “John Islām” (even though the typo reads “Islm”) followed by (paraphrasing) “God expands despite you poking your nose around”. But some commenters also sympathize with the reporter like *Fāris Sālah* who, paraphrasing, says “He had no other option than to collaborate. You would have done the same”. Some English-speaking posters were shocked at Cantlie’s contribution to IS propaganda, like *Jeffrey Mortberg*. Some hypothesized his situation to be of basic survival, as *ralph43237*.

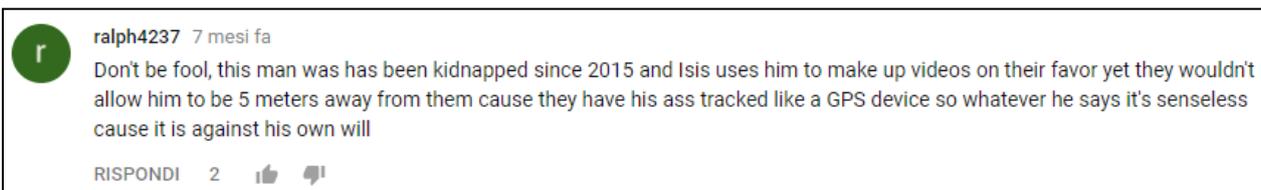


Figure 28 Cantlie videos: English-language comments. Source: Youtube

Beyond opinions, criticism and praise, Cantlie's contribution still remains a symbol of ISIS' ability to exploit various types of resources at its own advantage for the sole purpose of exposing its brand. His reporting of the utopian reality brought under the Khilāfah is a strong statement to legitimize IS' strategic propaganda.

Still unsure of his status, what we are left with is probably one of Cantlie's last messages:

Death holds no fear over me; I have lived beneath its wings for a long time. But if that is to be my final destination, I would rather look it in the face knowing this was a fair fight and not a hollow capitulation.

## Section 4: Counter-measures

### 4.1 The “dos and don’ts”

The previous section analyzed how spreading recruitment material and generally mentioning terrorist organizations by the media only reinforces their brand exposure and subsequently their fan base. Certainly, stopping news coverage altogether is not an option, but there are effective ways to prevent legitimization and over-exposure.

The Department of State of the United States of America, however, started off with the wrong foot in achieving this goal. It launched a campaign in December 2013 to combat terrorist propaganda which was considered, to say the least, embarrassing.<sup>223</sup> Their campaign was

*Ironic propaganda  
is a dangerous  
game for a  
Government to be  
playing*

- John Oliver

ineffective and often made fun of by Islāmic State supporters who never missed a chance to respond to @ThinkAgain\_DOS (their Twitter’s account name) with sarcastic and provocative comments. *Think Again*’s response was often ridiculed, boosting IS supporters’ confidence and

leading to moments of glory in their belittlement of the United States which “frequently backfire by providing jihādists legitimacy and a stage on which to project their messages”.<sup>224</sup>

What is probably worse, as noted by Rita Katz, was the direct (almost suicidal) engagement in discussions with jihādi supporters in the attempt of beating the organizations at their own game. *Think Again* often provided links to IS’ videos and images intended for recruitment but with the addition of supposedly “provocative” comments. For instance, while showing a gruesome picture of a crucified soldier surrounded by children, the Think Again twitter account commented with “This is what children see under #ISIS rule, this brand of honor

<sup>223</sup> Katz, R. (2014, September 13). *The State Department’s Twitter War With ISIS Is Embarassing*. Time. Retrieved from <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>

<sup>224</sup> Ibid

and respect”,<sup>225</sup> to which an IS supporter mockingly replied “i rather my children see this so they know whats their fate when they aganst Sharī’ah of ALLAH, than democazy [sic]”.<sup>226</sup> This type of interaction only increments their brand exposure and, in simple terms, does IS a favor while giving them the attention they were craving for. Instead of using Twitter to efficiently fight their enemy, they fell right into their trap, forced to engage in a lousy “flyting”<sup>227</sup> contest for the best insult. The author of the article, Rita Katz, is on-point in describing how many other intellectuals felt about the undertaken strategy:

I would much rather see the State Department’s online ventures involved in projects that explain the great things American policies have achieved - not arguing with jihādi fighters on who killed more innocent Muslims.<sup>228</sup>

Not only is it a poor decision to advertise and publish their material as it boosts their exposure, but this kind of engagement also legitimizes their brand name and narrative. Laurent Fabius, French Minister for Foreign Affairs, urged the media and the general public to avoid using the term ISIS, since “it blurs the lines between Islām, Muslims and Islāmists”, but to call them by their derogatory acronym Dā’ish instead.<sup>229</sup> Even this statement was discredited by IS itself in an article in Issue 4 of Dābiq as pointed out by Robert Evans “On Page 38 of Issue 4, they note that some Westerners call them Daesh matter-of-factly, without seeming to care much about it either way”.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Katz, 2014

<sup>226</sup> The content is faithful to the originally posted tweet. Ibid

<sup>227</sup> A medieval quarrel consisting of individuals making the best insult

<sup>228</sup> Katz, 2014

<sup>229</sup> The term is considered to have a negative connotation since, other than the Arab equivalent acronym, it is very similar to the word “to trample”. Retrieved from: Brekke, Kira. "The Islamic State Is Upset With The French Government's New Name For Them." *Huffington Post* 19 September 2014. Online article.

<sup>230</sup> Version in Arabic:

Limiting their exposure means, firstly, finding the spring from where the propaganda flows. Social media is one of these channels which, as previously examined, acts as an advertising platform. Berger and Perez analyzed Twitter usage by different Dā'ish-sympathizing accounts by looking at their follower and following base and their posts' volume.<sup>231</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, and to some counterterrorism professionals, account suspension seemed to have had an impact over those users, not only in their follower/following volume, but also in the quantity of tweets produced:

We found suspensions typically had a very significant detrimental effect on these repeat offenders, shrinking both the size of their networks and the pace of their activity. Each user had a different trajectory, with some recovering more robustly than others, but all showed consistent declines over the monitored period.<sup>232</sup>

The monitored accounts tried different ways to find a remedy to their suspension, although they were found to be only temporarily effective. One of them was to switch to other social media “a Twitter user announced that the list<sup>233</sup> would now be maintained on an alternate platform, Telegram, but the new channel was suspended within hours”.<sup>234</sup> Media started to

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ففي الصفحة 38 من العدد 4 من مجلة دابق، أشارت مقالة إلى أن الواقع يقول بأن بعض الغربيين يدعون الدولة الإسلامية باسم "داعش"، دون أن يكتثرت المقال كثيراً لهذه التسمية

<sup>231</sup> Berger, J.M. and Heather Perez. *The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters*. George Washington University. Washington D.C., 2016. Document,

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>233</sup> The list refers to “accounts supportive of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) maintained by a user identifying himself or herself as “Baqiya Shoutout.” Baqiya is Arabic for “remaining,” and it is a common slogan used by ISIS supporters online; “shoutout” refers to the process of publicizing new accounts or users who have returned from suspension”. Berger & Perez, 2016, p. 7

<sup>234</sup> Ibid

cover the news that this new platform Telegram was being used by ISIS supporters to engage in recruitment and start their propaganda. Their strategy of changing platform revealed to be quite unsuccessful, and as a result:

Telegram administrators released a statement advising that they were reviewing all reports regarding public Telegram broadcast channels being used by the Islāmic State. Within the first few days of its review, Telegram blocked 78 Islāmic State-related channels across 12 languages, followed by additional suspensions<sup>235</sup>

The other strategy was to go back to using Twitter, however, the fear of being suspended and the discouragement of having to rebuild their network after each time was a deterrent. Suspension, therefore, proved effective in the long-run, as noticed by their research “returning accounts rarely reached their previous heights, even when the pressure of suspension was removed”.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> An official message sent by one of the account holders stated the following: “Telegram is not a media platform for dawa [proselytizing] to all Muslims and the West. No one will enter your channel except the Ansar [ISIS supporters] who already know the truth. Or your enemies to report you. Rarely would you find someone from general public following you. That’s why our main platform is [w]here the General Public is found. Like on Twitter and Facebook. We are here for Dawa. Not to entertain each other and talk to each other...Let Telegram be like an archive” Berger & Perez, 2016, p. 19

<sup>236</sup> Berger, J.M. and Heather Perez, 2016, p. 10

The figures below were retrieved directly from Berger and Perez’s work. They show how suspension influenced the activity of the monitored accounts over the observed time window.

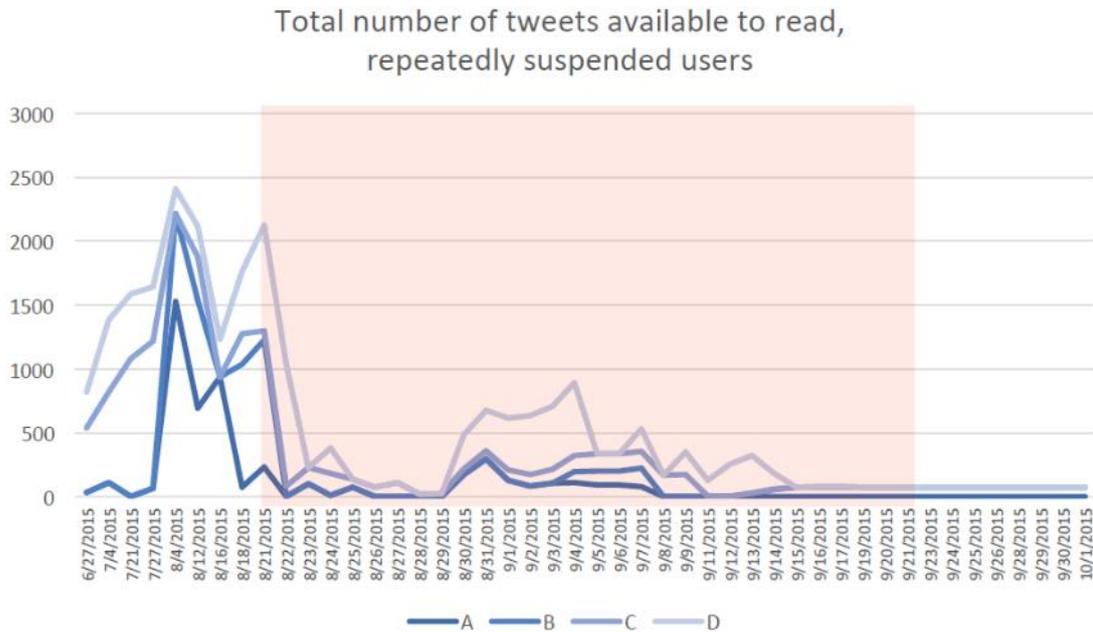


Figure 29 Total number of tweets available for four repeatedly suspended users using multiple accounts

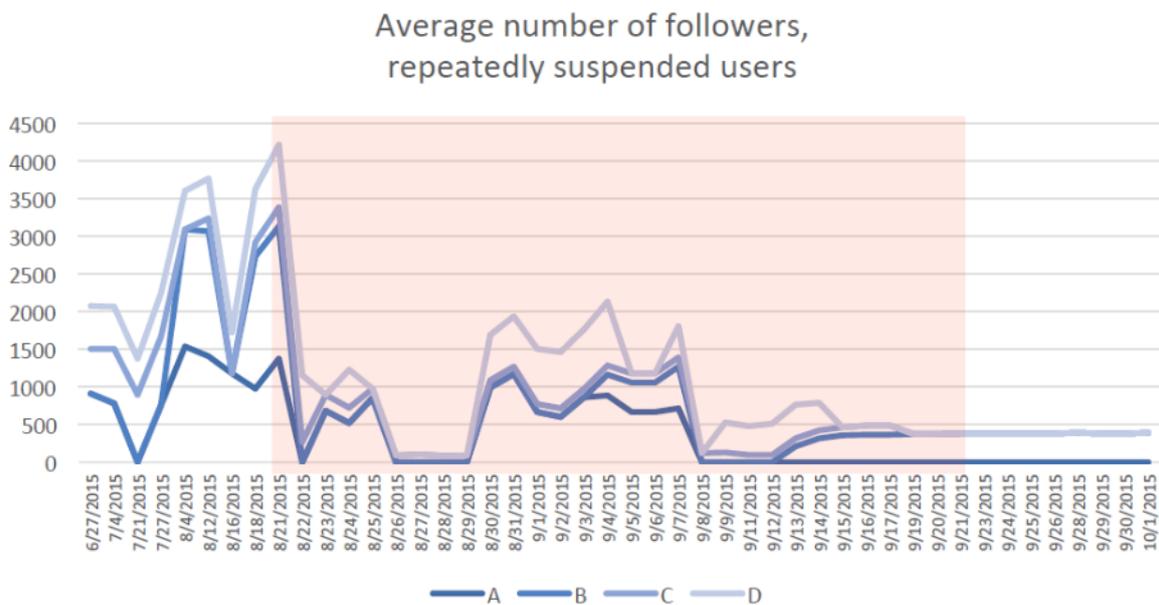


Figure 30 Average number of followers for four repeatedly suspended users (A, B, C, and D) using the sum of all followers for multiple accounts by the same users

The results gathered are undoubtedly clear. They show that even a simple measure like account suspension can lead to significant results in combating exposure of terrorist propaganda, despite their active pursue of different strategies and social media tools.

#### 4.2 Cyberhacking

Hacking<sup>237</sup> has lately been a threat not only to the commercial sector, but also to national security. With increasing information available to anyone willing to find out the tricks of “cracking codes”, institutions are becoming gradually alert about hacking techniques and system vulnerabilities. Over the past few years, cyber-attacks have been on the rise and started to become a concern for government institutions. Only in the year of 2016 “ISIS-affiliated hackers using a tool named Caliphate Cannon launched their first volley of DDoS<sup>238</sup> attacks against government targets in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Iraq”<sup>239</sup> but also “Kosovo hacker linked to ISIS named Ardit Ferizi was sentenced to 20 years prison for hacking the networks of a U.S. company and stealing personally identifiable information of some 1,300 U.S. military members and government personnel”.<sup>240</sup> Therefore the threat is not limited to Middle Eastern governments only but it concerns the entire world.

Hacking, however, is not necessarily used solely for immoral purposes but can serve to fight hostile bodies as well. A famous group of worldwide “hacktivists” called *Anonymous* has had a long history of hacking into governmental and corporate bodies to “bring the people of the world important, modern daily news regarding topics from around the globe”.<sup>241</sup> With the

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<sup>237</sup> For those who are not familiar with the term, it refers to the act of penetrating into electronic devices by (illegally) connecting to a network. The term “illegally” was put in parenthesis since there are companies specialized in finding “hackable” breaches in networks, hence providing a legal service.

<sup>238</sup> Distributed Denial of Service: “an attack which makes an information or data unavailable to its intended hosts” Retrieved from: Rao, Subramani. “Denial of Service attacks and mitigation techniques: Real Time implementation with detailed analysis.” PhD Thesis. The SANS Institute: University of Essex, 2011. Document

<sup>239</sup> Maxey, Levi. “When Terrorists Learn How to Hack.” *The Cipher Brief* 3 December 2017. Online article

<sup>240</sup> Ibid

<sup>241</sup> Anonymous. *About Us: Anonymous*. n.d. 08 January 2018

advent of the terrorist menace, hacktivists all over the world have decided to step in this cyber war. Following the Paris attacks in 2015, the group has released a video declaring war on the caliphate, and has since then been targeting its social media affiliated accounts.<sup>242</sup>

Anonymous started to get organized, along with other independent hackers. A group of Muslim activists called *Di5s3nSi0N* got hold of an ISIS propaganda network and “published a list of almost 2,000 subscribers’ email addresses”.<sup>243</sup> After the shootings in a LGBT club in Orlando,



Figure 31 One of the hacked accounts under the control of the cybervigilante. Source:Twitter

an Anonymous-belonging hacker named *WauchulaGhost* hacked “more than 200 accounts belonging to Isis supporters (...) rather than simply lock the users out of the accounts or report them to Twitter, the cybervigilante has given the accounts a gay-friendly makeover”.<sup>244</sup>

Hacking social media, websites and e-mail lists was just the tip of the iceberg. After founding a closed chat room called “Internet Relay Chat (ICT) - where members of Anonymous

<sup>242</sup> Burman, Jake. "Hacking group Anonymous declares WAR on ISIS after horrific Paris terror attacks." *Express* 16 November 2015. Online article

<sup>243</sup> Dearden, Lizzie. "Muslim activists 'hack Isis mailing list hours after terrorists claimed it was unhackable'." *The Independent* 11 November 2017. Online article

<sup>244</sup> Hern, Alex. "Islamic State Twitter accounts get a rainbow makeover from Anonymous hackers." *The Guardian* 17 June 2016. Online article

(...) collated details of pro-Daesh Twitter accounts, then reported them to the social media company in batches”.<sup>245</sup> Anonymous was also able to locate a few of the militants using their IP addresses by getting hold of their accounts; this data was then passed on to law enforcement agencies, among them the FBI, leading to important results, such as 17 arrests and the disruption of a terror cell.<sup>246</sup>

*It was enough  
to prove that  
hacktivists  
could have an  
effect; that their  
efforts could  
save lives.*

#### 4.3 Playing Sherlock

A further approach to counter-terrorist strategies would be to read between the lines of their propaganda, examining frame-by-frame each of their videos, going beyond the symbolism of their narrative. By questioning, for instance, what kind of items they are using during their videos, the brands and their provenance, a variety of vital information unfolds. As analyzed by Ballardini in his book, the knife used by Jihādi John is branded “Columbia USA Saber”,<sup>247</sup> of Chinese manufacturing. There are a few wholesale distributors online selling this specific product and by analyzing the buyers’ history, a Muslim P.E. teacher from Malaysia comes up, owner of dubiously large villa considering his public-school teacher salary.<sup>248</sup> His Twitter account showed no signs of affiliation to the Islāmic State nor any sympathy for radical Islām, yet, his browser history showed continues searches regarding Chinese measures to regulate the export of security and espionage equipment.<sup>249</sup> Regarding his cover as a regular Muslim, it comes from an ancient tradition of, in simple terms, lying for a higher good, defined as *taqīa*. There are many instances where deception is considered self-defense. For example, the Qur’ān mentions in [16:106] disbelief of Allah only in the case where “him who is forced thereto and

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<sup>245</sup> Parkin, Simon. "Operation Troll ISIS: inside Anonymous' war to take down Daesh." *Wired* 6 October 2016. Online article

<sup>246</sup> Ibid

<sup>247</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 168

<sup>248</sup> Ballardini, 2015, p. 179

<sup>249</sup> Ibid

whose heart is at rest with Faith”<sup>250</sup>, just like al-Bukhari in book 49 Hadith 857 says "He who makes peace between the people by inventing good information or saying good things, is not a liar."<sup>251</sup>

Another example is cell phone tracking. Terrorists use what is called a *burn phone* “They buy a cheap phone. Call a few people, throw it away and buy a new one”.<sup>252</sup> This process

People are patterns. Those patterns become your fingerprint.

is repeated by a number of people who make a call, pass the message onto other people who pass it on to the final recipient. Mr. X, the name he was given to mask his true identity, analyzed over “one billion phone calls a day”<sup>253</sup> and realized that it is structured like a tree: even though the leaves keep falling, they are always attached to a branch who eventually leads to the same trunk.

It may not always be easy to get in touch with mujāhidīn and certainly talking to them is an endeavor. However, a French journalist who goes by the pseudonym Anna Erelle used a fake social media account to get in touch with jihādi fighters. She made sure to sympathize with terrorist related content and was soon approached by a recruiter. After weeks of chatting with “Bilel”, she was invited to go to Syria to join him but refrained from doing so minutes before her departure to Istanbul. She later found out by the police that “they have a thick file on him. He’d committed a number of crimes in France before leaving for Syria, from theft to armed robbery. In 2003, he became an active jihadi, in the battle against the US invasion of Iraq”<sup>254</sup>

<sup>250</sup> Original text in Arabic:

مَنْ كَفَرَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِيمَانِهِ إِلَّا مَنْ أَكْرَهَ وَقَلْبُهُ مُطْمَئِنٌّ بِالْإِيمَانِ

<sup>251</sup> تم الاسترداد من 857. كتاب 49 الحديث صحيح الجوربين. (2014). Muflihun: <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/49/857>  
Original text in Arabic:

لَيْسَ الْكُذَّابُ الَّذِي يُصْلِحُ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ، فَيَنْمِي خَيْرًا، أَوْ يَقُولُ خَيْرًا

<sup>252</sup> Altucher, James. "I Interview An Anonymous Guest on Hacking, Government, Bitcoin and Terrorism." *Medium* 19 October 2017. Online article

<sup>253</sup> Ibid

<sup>254</sup> Erelle, A. (2015, May 26). Skyping with the enemy: I went undercover as a jihadi girlfriend. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/26/french-journalist-poses-muslim-convert-isis-anna-erelle>

The work undertaken to study and find out this kind of information is extremely difficult, risky and time-consuming, and it certainly is not carried out by single champions of justice. Governments must work together and coordinate their intelligence agencies and security bodies in order to bring together all the pieces to solve an otherwise unsolvable puzzle.

## Conclusion

Throughout this investigation I analyzed how Salafism came to life at first and its meaning was changed, through the centuries, by human gluttony and thirst for power. With jihād as a weapon, it came to found extremist ideas centered on removing the western presence who had been oppressing it, resulting in the creation of violent terrorist groups such as al-Qā'ida and in the last decade the Islamic State. Terrorist groups started seeking a proprietary identity by using branding techniques centered on positioning and exposure, two of the main determinants of a successful brand as shown in Section 2. Human history has witnessed numerous cases of effective manipulation coming from advertising precise points of view, which in politics simply adopts the term propaganda, tailored for recruitment and positioning. Throughout section 2, I analyzed that branding techniques, such as personalized flags, logos and spokespeople for identification, were applied to specific propaganda narratives, mainly centered on a utopian image of the organization in favor of a godly mission against the seed of their conflict: western crusaders.

By examining not only how their media production companies came to exist, throughout Section 3, I showed how the narratives were produced and spread using various mediatic tools, divided in different categories, including online magazines, videos channeled through social media for global exposure, and TV and radio news broadcasts for the local populations. The material taken in examination showed a predominant adoption of themes like military cohesion, social and political justice, and victimhood, all under the umbrella of a utopian Islāmic State. What is more important is that the material produced, besides being heavily focused on recruitment, aimed at gaining global exposure with the help of western media, which showed by Greaver's investigation to be extremely fruitful.

To conclude, as highlighted in section 4 of this thesis, counter measures have the aim of identifying and stopping the spread of terrorist propaganda, and as a consequence, the aim of this thesis was to expose readers about salafi-jihādi terrorist brands and the numerous ways they produce and market their propaganda, and suggest that stopping or decreasing exposure of their products is important in determining their success.

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