

**"Communicating Terror: an Analysis of ISIS Communication Strategy"**

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## COMMUNICATING TERROR

### AN ANALYSIS OF ISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

An interview in December 2015 with the Figaro, Assaël Adary emphasised that:

Daech est passé maître dans l'art de communiquer. Branding, usages des réseaux sociaux, production vidéo, dispositif de référencement sur le Web... Nous avons des experts en face de nous. Derrière des rituels qui font sa signature et son identité de marque, la stratégie de communication de Daech est réfléchie, planifiée et puissante.” (Adary, 2015)

This statement is further echoed by the seeming evidence that “Daesh has demonstrated a high degree of familiarity in dealing with modern communication technology, exploiting the Internet and social media with an unparalleled marketing capability” (Manciulli, 2015: 8). While Daesh<sup>1</sup> is certainly not the first of extremist groups being able to use mass communication technologies (efficiently)<sup>2</sup>, they have however marked a departure with regards to their communication quality, including video production and document publications in multiple languages and dialects, and their sophisticated use and understanding of social media, offering wide range diffusion towards an increasingly international audience (Farwell, 2014: 49). A 2015 study undertaken by the Brookings Institute further showed that roughly 45 000 social media accounts, using the most conservative estimates, were controlled by Daesh supporters at the end of 2014 (Berger, Morgan, 2015: 2), whereof almost one in five tweeted primarily in English. The success of Daesh’s communication strategy is further exemplified, by its success to recruit high numbers of supporters, not only in Iraq and Syria, but also at the global stage. However the will and goal to provide themselves with an articulated and multimedia communication strategy is not a new phenomenon and has existed at diverse levels in all jihadist groups, and also more specifically in the Iraqi context of jihad and territorial insurgence, which has been a main characteristic feature since 2004, evident in the magazines Al-Fursan or Sada al-Rafidayn (Maggioni, Magri, 2015: 70).

This begs the question which characteristics ISIS’s communication strategy features?

Therefore, this essay will (I) first provide a quick overview on the use of (strategic) communication by jihadist groups, before (II) analysing the different media used by ISIS,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms ISIS and Deash are used interchangeably throughout the essay, with their usage being determined with regards to the sources the information stems from.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the use Twitter during the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in September 2013 during which the group twitted hundreds of messages. (cf. Farwell, 2014)

moving on to (III) investigate the goals of ISIS's communication strategy, based on six themes of communication identified in academic literature, finally (IV) examining how they build into meta-narratives of global jihadism.

The essay will argue that ISIS's communication strategy presents a multi-layered, dynamic approach, targeting both a multitude of audiences as much as deploying a multitude of different means and narratives to communicate. It further argues that while ISIS is certainly not the first violent extremist group using mass media and complex communication strategies, in the case of ISIS the latter is more sophisticated and goes beyond the aims of Islamist groups such as Al-Qaida, evident for example in the strategic aim to persuade all Muslims that battling to restore a caliphate is a religious duty.

## I. SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

Content of various forms of publications and communication of Islamist terrorist groups are under scrutiny to be used as a source of intelligence on the groups that publish them (Berger, 2015; Zelin, 2013), specifically with regards to the information they provide both on the aims and strategies of their organisations (Torres Soriano, 2010) as well as on the levels of activity (IntelCenter, 2005; Smith & Walsh, 2013). Islamist terrorist groups are here understood as groups that use fear in a target population to advocate the establishment of some Islamic rulings.

For long terrorism has been understood primarily in terms of political violence, yet gradually introducing and including the importance of communication and propaganda within terrorism, where violence and propaganda are intrinsically linked.

“Violence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism is a combination of the two, using demonstrative public violence as an instrument of psychological warfare, “advertising”, as it were, an armed non-state group’s capabilities to do harm and to destroy.” (Schmid, 2014: 1)

Propaganda is a particular form of manipulative information, often containing both truths, as well as falsehoods with the aim to influence attitudes and impact behaviour of target audiences to engage in certain actions. From a mainly Western perspective propaganda generally has a negative connotation, often opposing “public diplomacy” or “strategic communication” undertaken by democratic regimes to define information-based influence operations aimed at impacting attitudes and behaviours of target audiences, to propaganda undertaken by authoritarian states or terrorist groups. Nevertheless, it remains questionable to

what degree the idioms of “strategic communication” or “public diplomacy” differ from the negatively connoted term of propaganda (Schmid, 2014: 1/2). Thus the definition by Jowett and O’Donnell (2012) of propaganda as “the deliberate, systemic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (7) is somewhat similar to the aims of any strategy of strategic communication.

Existing studies on the strategic communications, or propaganda of Islamist groups have largely examined the content they provide. While little research has been undertaken on the first publications of Islamist groups in the form of videotaped messages and printed magazines in the 1980s, due to a lack of accessibility, the first websites used and run by terrorist groups, from the mid-1990s onwards, were often dismissed for their limited reach (Wilkinson, 1997: 675). Qualitative studies of those websites appeared when in the early 2000s the first videos appeared online, yet generally providing for studies with small samples, somewhat limiting the external validity of their findings (Conway, McInerney, 2008; Salem et al., 2008). The event of social media in the 2010s and the use of the latter by terrorist groups for their own strategic goals, have since been the research subject to numerous studies, analysing both the diffusion and content of those publications (Zelin, 2013), specifically most recently focussing particularly on the use of social media by Daesh (Berger, Morgan, 2015).

With regards to their capacities of communication, Islamist terrorist groups have been for long differentiated into central organisations (such as Al-Qaida), their sub-sequent branches (such as Al-Qaida in Somalia) and further affiliated groups (such as Talibans) (Byman, 2014), where the control over publications and thus communication diminishes from the central towards the affiliated level. ISIS however introduced a somewhat new *modus operandi* compared to other Islamist terrorist groups, visible in the aim to acquire territory, instead of merely enlarging the group of supporters. ISIS thus also changed the structure of its network introducing *Wilayats* (provinces) into which existing terrorist groups were transformed and over which ISIS maintains direct control and command with regards to communication and publications (Azoulay, 2015). A further component of the network exists of those local terrorist groups that have pledged allegiance but are not considered to be provinces, where thus little authority is executed on operations, as those groups govern themselves.

## II. FRAMING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

With the declaration of the caliphate under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS made a dramatic entrance on the international stage and in the minds across the globe, communicating the aim to establish its religious authority across the world. Though expansion has largely relied on brute force and violence it strategically uses communication to provide both credibility as well as legitimacy, proving its capacities with regards to propaganda, using diverse sources of media to recruit, intimidate, communicate, legitimise, defame and glorify. Inter alia ISIS maintains an official radio station, called Al Bayan, disseminating daily news, further publishes a monthly magazine Dabiq as well as maintains variety of production companies to develop videos. Additionally, ISIS controls media offices in each of the Wilayats, maintaining tight control over all publications that have the function of official outlets, fulfilling multiple functions, from recruitment, over dissemination of ideology and tactics to sowing fear and intimidation (Callimachi, 2016). In the following we will take a closer look at different media outlets used by ISIS.

### a. A NEW'S AGENCY TO SERVE THE INTEREST OF ISIS

The professionalism of ISIS communication strategy is reflected in the existence of affiliated News Agencies, such as *Amaq* and the existence of media offices in all provinces of ISIS. The control over News agencies and media offices facilitate mainly three things, the dissemination, volume/magnitude and coordination of communications to best serve the interests of the organisations. This further supports the claim that communication is an integral part of the organisations structure, professionalising the communication process, demonstrating a clear command and control (C2) structure, ISIS allegedly has a Chief of Media Operations in charge of its Al Hayat media division

### b. EFFICIENT USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

ISIS has proven particular efficiency with regards to its use of Twitter. Despite the fact the ISIS's public and official accounts on Twitter have been more or less deleted from the social network, after Twitter took a more forceful approach to ISIS's use of Twitter in summer 2014, ISIS has been efficient developing coping mechanisms to remain in control over information flows on the network. ISIS accordingly established accounts with strong privacy settings, whose content gets disseminated through numerous smaller, un-official, accounts through the use of hashtags (Berger, Morgan, 2015: 23). The app "The Dawn of Glad Tidings", imitating

the functions of an app called *Thunderclap* that has been regularly used for political campaigns in the US, is used as a way to be regularly up-dated on activities and experiences of those affiliated to the organisation. It allows ISIS social-media operators “to post tweets, including links, hashtags and images, to users’ accounts in such a way as to avoid triggering Twitter’s spam-detection algorithms” (Farwell, 2014: 51). This led to the emanation of roughly 44 000 tweets during the March on Mosul. ISIS moreover proved creative in hijacking trending hashtags during the World Cup in 2014 (such as #Brazil2014), aiming to appear on related Twitter searches and thus gain access to a broad mass to disseminate propaganda videos. (Farwell, 2014: 51).

Social media networks such as Twitter nevertheless also present possible pitfalls to achieving the strategic aims of the organisation, being a double-edged sword. Aware of the sensitive information transmitted over social network, ISIS invest great efforts into the protection of the identity and location of ISIS leadership, thus minimising electronic communications, specifically among the highest ranks. Social media is thus mainly focused on fulfilling its role within broader propaganda, as technology moreover leaves the group vulnerable to cyber attacks (Farwell, 2014)

Telegram app

### c. HIGHLY PROFESSIONAL VIDEOS

It has been noted that ISIS’s production of videos has moved towards high-quality and high-production sheen of Hollywood films, where the videos, as tools of propaganda have come to include cinema’s marketing language in addition to visual vocabulary.

ISIS further targets particular audiences, such as with the video released in April 2014, featuring a German rapper and ISIS militant shown in a snowball fight, rapping on the supposedly positive sides of a life in Syria and the Jihad, “Now you see...here in Syria, we also can have fun!...That’s jihad, jihad makes fun...and we have fun here with the children...Come on, we invite you to jihad!” (Anti Diffamation League, 2014).

ISIS has moreover proven its ability to synchronise its social media efforts with its strategic aims. One of the most popular videos “Clanging of the Swords” which was posted a few weeks before the conquest of Mosul, was a stark example of a high-production effort including multiple on-screen murders, and fostering the sectarian divide, calling on Sunnis to

join the movement, underlining the importance of ISIS media strategy for successes at the operational level (Hassan, Weiss, 2015: 170/71).

Nevertheless, the gross violence for which ISIS videos are known present also possible pitfalls. The ubiquity of smartphones has offered individual fighters affiliated to ISIS the possibility to spread messages and images on their own account, one video in particular showing atrocities such as the chopping off a man's hand in Raqqa, able to cause possible severe backlashes, and thus banned by ISIS leaders. The open *bragging* about certain actions may thus provide material for opponents to be used in order to discredit the militants' narrative and help mobilise opposition. The US State department has for example released a video mocking the recruitments processes of ISIS, displaying in highly graphical detail the brutality of ISIS, suggestive of an inglorious death awaiting at the end of a journey to join ISIS (Farwell, 2014).

#### d. DABIQ – BRANDING ISIS

ISIS regularly publishes its own propaganda magazine, named *Dabiq* which has as its main target, reaching audiences in the West for recruiting purposes. It is printed in several languages, most predominantly in English however and appears a professionalised and well-produced publication. *Dabiq* understands itself as “a periodical magazine focusing on the issues of tawhid (unity), manhaj (truth-seeking), hijrah (migration), jihad (holy war) and jama'ah (community)” (see Clarion Project, 2014). Issues contain up to 100 pages, featuring reports, articles and propaganda visual imagery. At heart of the publication lies the representation of ISIS self-conceptualisation, a holy, divine army, fighting for the “glorious” caliphate, presenting its narratives with ferocious and boasting language. The name of the magazine itself, *Dabiq*, indicates the propagation of myth. “Dabiq is a place in Syria that is supposed to be the location for one of the final battles according to certain Muslim myths about a final apocalypse” (The Clarion Project, 2014). Titles of the magazine, of which there are currently 14 issues released, include headlines such as “Just Terror”, “From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions”, “The Laws of All or the Laws of Men”, “They Plot and Allah Plots”, “Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa”, “Remaining and Expanding”, and “The Flood” (see Clarion Project, 2014). The latest issue published goes under the headline of “The Murtadd Brotherhood”. Inter alia its content, can be found appraisals of the Brussels attacks carried out in March 2016, sections on attacking the legitimacy of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (to which the headline alludes). Bernard Francois Huyghe recently argued

“Les focales de leurs vidéos, la composition des images, tout ça est très moderne. Il y a une volonté esthétique et symbolique qui se traduit toujours par des couleurs très franches, des compositions très symétriques et beaucoup de références cinématographiques, y compris à des feuilletons occidentaux” (Huyghe, 2015).

The branding of ISIS as a mark is thus dominantly evident in the way the publication is professionalised, carried out, and disseminated.

#### e. PLAYING WESTERN MEDIA

ISIS media strategy has managed to establish a monopoly on information going out of the territory under ISIS control through the targeting of journalists, evident through prominent cases such as James Foley. The specific targeting of (external) media and journalists limits the access of un-biased information, leaving international media to rely either on information stemming from territories as those under Kurdish control, but also on footage and photo material spread by ISIS affiliated sources. The dense media coverage by the West, at least partly based on information stemming from ISIS affiliated sources, provides not only necessary insights, but further offers news outlet, with increased cognition seemingly reflecting increased action. The role of the media (in the West) is thus caught in an ambiguous and challenging balancing act, characterised by Bassiouni (1981, 14), as “symbiotic – perpetrators of acts of terror-violence rely on the media to serve their terror-inspiring purposes and the media utilize such incidents as rewarding news items”. Laquer supports Bassiouni’s conceptualisation of a symbiotic relationship and argues that terrorism and media interact mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing (Laqueur 2000).

ISIS seemingly understands well that in order for terrorism as a tactic to be effective, it needs to actually terrorise, making “the act of communication that follows the act of violence [...] almost as important as the act of violence itself” (McPhee, Ross, 2014).

### III. CORE THEMES OF COMMUNICATION BY JIHADIST AND ISLAMIST GROUPS

Academic literature suggests six core themes of communication by jihadist and islamist groups. The subsequent section will identify these themes and examine how ISIS uses these themes in order to establish the communication of its propaganda material.



*Recruitment and direct call to jihad*—A central purpose and theme within publications of terrorist groups is recruitment. Berger (2015) found that terrorist groups utilize publications to facilitate recruiting in addition to direct interactions between recruiters and potentially motivated recruits who consider joining respective terrorist groups. Zhou et al. (2005) suggest similar evidence in analysing websites of US terrorist groups. ISIS in particular devotes significant resources to online recruitment from first contact to encouraging actions (Berger, 2015), “which follows targets from their introduction to the organisation’s message, though a careful pruning of their social networks, before culminating in a call to action” (Ibid.). The threat posed by online recruitment has been a major concern for a multitude of governments that are aware of the resources invested and recruits enlisted (Cilluffo, Cardash, & Whitehead, 2006).

*Information on military activity*— Salem et al. (2008) analysed a sample of 60 jihadi videos and found a recurring frequency of violent visual imagery. For Winter (2015) violent content of ISIS propaganda forms a core tenet of its communication strategy in order to gain support and incite intimidation. ISIS in particular has embedded the publication of violent visual content in a broader communication of its military activity. In March 2014, ISIS published a new edition of “Al-Naba” (The Report), reporting on ISIS military campaign in Iraq (see Bilger, 2014, 1). Jessica Lewis, Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of War argues that “the reports provide measures of performance in the way you roll out details for donors”, in turn “[affirming] that the organisation operates like an army and that it has state-building ambitions” (Lewis, 2014). Information on military activity, is thus a dominant theme of ISIS communication, which serves a function that goes beyond mere recruitment and propaganda, it affirms donors’ and further seeks to establish legitimacy by ‘institutionalising’ its military capability through the means of communication (see Stern & Berger, 2015; Zelin, 2015a).

*Religion*—Islamist terrorist groups have repeatedly used references to religion in order to establish a form of legitimacy. Baines and O’Shaughnessy (2014) analysed Al Qaeda publication content and found that many of the publication content aims at emphasising Al Qaeda’s religious devotion. For ISIS religion is a recurring theme in its communication as well. The ISIS magazine Dabiq, which is primarily published for a Western audience, frequently either features symbols or representations of Islam (such as the Kaaba of Mecca) or titles of issues refer directly to religion, such as “The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men”, “They Plot and Allah Plots”. ISIS has been systemically misrepresenting religious doctrines

and manipulating political grievances as tactics to legitimise violence and attract new recruits. Further, violent extremist groups have been demonstrated to emphasise more on religion as a defining value than non-extremist groups (Smith, Suedfeld, Conway, & Winter, 2008), which in turn gives ground to the assumption that religion serves as a vehicle to provide means for identification and narratives.

*Honouring dead fighters (eulogies, martyrdom, and condolences)*—According to Prucha (2014) the praising of martyrs resembles a cult in Jihadist propaganda. Al Qaeda has accordingly, “[used] common media elements to portray individual combatants as well as “martyrdom operatives” (or suicide bombers) who are famed, propagated, and presented as ultimate role models to the audience”, who, “are deemed as having attained shahada “on the path of God” (fi sabil l-llah), are resurrected in the religious connotation of stars online, who have proven themselves as ‘true’ Muslims according to the world view and interpretations of jihadist groups in general” (2014, 83). To an extent martyrdom and the elevation of the martyred individuals thus serves as the ultimate proof of claim persistence and how far jihadist groups are willing to go. Kimmage and Ridolfo (2007) argue along similar lines, indicating that media strategies of terrorist groups has professionalised. Martyrdom with regards to ISIS publication does equally so play a decisive role. Taking Sun Tzu’s idea of *kill one – frighten ten thousand* further, Bourrie (2016) suggests that martyrdom is part of the “lure of ISIS” (Ibid.). Throughout the winter of 2013 and 2014 for example ISIS released a number of posters, one of which read “virtues of seeking martyrdom”. With the so called “Mujatweets”, which is essentially a series of short videos on YouTube, ISIS aims at propagating the ‘good life’ it would bring for those who supported its cause. A fourth “Mujatweet” seeks to attract recruits to “come to the land of honour and search for shahada (martyrdom)” (see Anti-Defamation League 2014).

*Communication to Muslims*— Islamist groups have been shown to publish content in which they portrayed themselves as *true Muslims* (Prucha, 2014) and presented Muslims to be a unified community and group, through emotional content, such as imagery and symbolism (see Baines et al., 2010; Corman and Schiefelbein, 2006). For ISIS this has been a dominant theme in its publications, whereby the jihad proclaimed would be supported by virtually all *true Muslims*. The deliberate use of ‘all Muslims’ as regularly found in *Dabiq* implies that the cause ISIS follows is essentially an all-Muslim mission. A social media campaign called “Warning to the American People” for example suggested inter alia “This is a message for

every American citizen. You are the target of every Muslim in the world wherever you are” (see Anti-Defamation League 2014). For Leuprecht et al. a prominent “storylines” (2010, 42), designate the target audience as all Muslims, including those who do not support the cause (Ibid., 43), yet distinguish *true Muslims* as those who do support ISIS and / or partake in the organisation and / or carry out attacks. It is important to note however that ISIS communication does not only feature a target audience concerned with Muslims; it equally so addresses a variety of actors, Muslims, non-Muslims, other religious groups, the West, atheists and so forth. On this note it is however equally important to point out that ISIS communication to Muslims features the dominant emphasis on inciting the sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims. In “Sectarian Twitter Wars”, Siegel argues that the “Anti-Shia retweet network diagram indicates a sizeable portion of the network is composed of retweets and messages sent by accounts affiliated with or supporting the Islamic State”, further “the viral nature of [ISIS] communication is reflected by the dense yet far-reaching structure of the Islamic State’s anti-Shia retweets, as well as the high rates of retweets enjoyed by its accounts” (2015). Part of ISIS communication strategy thus draws strength from the spur of sectarian divide in the Arab world.

*Defamation*— The out-group/ in-group dynamic is a common theme in terrorist organisations. Creating an evil other is thus a tool of propaganda to justify attacks on this other (Bandura, 1999; Crenshaw, 1988). In extreme cases, which is certainly the case with ISIS defamation thus leads to a denial of rights of existence of the evil other. Defamation is further a means of encouraging violence as Zhou et al. (2005) argue, whereby the denial of rights to exist, stirred up by defamation can increase the willingness to perpetrate an attack in order to harm. For Berger (2015) and Corman and Schiefelbein (2006), defamation is additionally used by Islamist groups to divide the enemy, both the West and locals, whereby defamation itself can be understood as a threat towards the respective enemy group. Considering the example of Anti-Shia tweeting campaigns once again, ISIS has proven to be effectively disseminating defamatory content about Shia Muslims. Defamatory language in most of the videos published is an integral part of the persistence with which ISIS seeks to create and draw the picture of the enemy.

#### IV. META-NARRATIVES OF GLOBAL JIHADISM

The themes of communication examined above, feed into four distinct, yet entangled narratives, which are distinguished by the object of narrative (i.e. towards what is a narrative directed), as drawn from a conceptualisation of Leuprecht et al. (2010). Narratives are a tool to conceptualise and assume order (see Miskimmon et. al). With regards to ISIS the order conceptualised is the placement of ISIS within the world order, pertaining to all levels of that world order and thus seeking to establish ISIS as the ultimate facilitator for a new world order according to its strategic goals. Leuprecht et al. distinguish between “political narrative” (Ibid., p. 43), the “moral narrative” (Ibid.), “religious narrative” (Ibid.), and the “social-psychological narrative” (Ibid.). Although distinct in the object, as mentioned above, it is important to maintain that the themes of communications inspected in the previous paragraph feed into all meta levels of narratives, and thus create an entangled, multi-complex, multi-dynamic communication strategy.

##### POLITICAL NARRATIVE

The political narrative focusses on the exploitative and evil nature of the West, “including a neo-Marxist take on global inequities and distributive effects” (Ibid.) arising from the characterisation of the West. Leuprecht et al. argue this to be the case for a more generic set of jihadist terrorism. In the case of ISIS however this political narrative departs or goes further, as it ties its communication into the wider political narrative of a new and just political world order, namely that of an expansive and ultimately global caliphate. In turn this implies the broaden of focus scope towards not only the West but virtually all people who are *non-believers* in that particular world order or caliphate including all Muslims who do not support ISIS and its cause.

##### MORAL NARRATIVE

For Leuprecht et al. the “moral narrative focuses on the internal contradictions of liberal democracies” (Ibid.), which in turn argues that core values of liberal democracies such as justice, freedom, and equality are values that are “unrealisable ideals”, and “drivers of a society’s moral decay” (Ibid.). For the communication strategy of ISIS this results in the communication of the hypocrisy of the West, as underlying the themes of communication identified. Terrorist attacks in the West perpetrated by ISIS have essentially targeted places that sought to symbolise these core values, yet equally the moral decay ISIS emphasises on

(bars, concert halls), or places that were representative of a broader liberal democratic system (means of transportations, airports). The moral narrative ISIS propagates is thus ultimately communicated through a distorted moral worldview, in which ISIS is promulgated as the saver of mankind, restoring morals through the extinction of everyone- and everything ISIS deems immoral.

#### RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE

The religious narrative ties in neatly with the previous one but is taken further, in that it aims at establishing a divine authority and legitimacy for violent struggle “to defend Islam against the crusader West” (Ibid.). For ISIS this does not only imply the West, but as stated all people and or countries that do not support the establishment of the caliphate. As propagated in Dafiq: “contrary to popular misconception, riddah (apostasy) does not exclusively mean to go from calling oneself a Muslim to calling oneself a Jew, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or otherwise. In reality, there are only two religions. There is the religion of Allah, which is Islam, and then the religion of anything else, which is kufr. Allah c said, “Verily, the religion according to Allah is Islam” [Āl ‘Imrān: 19], and He said, “And whoever seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will never be accepted of him, and he will be among the losers in the end” [Āl ‘Imrān: 85]. The religious narrative thus contends not only that Islam is the only religion, it simultaneously argues that the only way in which Islam should and can be interpreted and practices is according to what ISIS understand as the practices and interpretations of Islam. The legitimacy is for this violent struggle is thus communicated by means of ISIS adherence to its self-defined and self-propagated piousness.

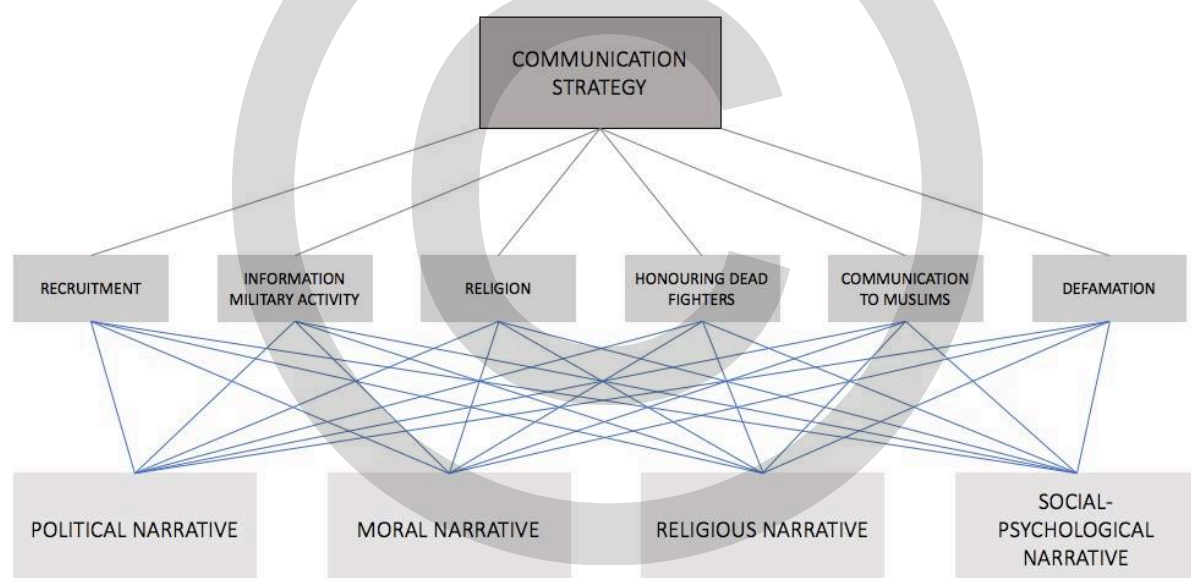
#### SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL

The socio-psychological narratives as argued by Leuprecht et. al., “employs a classic in-group/ out-group strategy to brand as in fields those who do not buy into this syllogism, while promoting of arms as a means of countering social exclusion and of fulfilling a yearning for adventure” (Ibid.). As argued earlier, with the publication of its military ‘activity’, ISIS promotes the idea of an army, which in turn seeks to gain strength from levels of cohesion. The communication strategy is thus a facilitating tool to intensify and underline the socio-psychological narrative. Resembling of rites in traditional armies to aim at increasing levels of group cohesion, ISIS promotes a positive in-group identification. This is particularly evident, in the “Mujatweet” videos that are “designed to depict ISIS as a charitable organisation, beloved by civilians and establishing a better society” (Anti-Defamation League, 2014). ISIS

release of pictures showing its charity work in Bin Jawad or on its provision of social services in Raqqa further fuels into the socio-psychological narrative (Terrormonitor, May 2016).

This in-group identification is further pushed by the socio-psychological narrative of promotion of sectarianism, which seeks to identify the in-group as an exclusive and thus appealing support system for all believers in the caliphate. Cohesion is facilitated through new means of participation, whereby multiple different campaigns, such the Twitter campaign with the Hashtag “the Friday of Supporting ISIS”, call for participation by uploading photos with ISIS flags. This participation aims particularly at those individuals that feel excluded from their respective community or society or those individuals that already demonstrate a proneness to radicalisation. The promotion of in-group and out-group dynamics serves as a strong driver for movement, and or recruitment.

Visualisation of interdependence and dynamic of meta-narratives and core themes in ISIS Communication Strategy



## V. CONCLUSION

Taking together the analyses of the core communication themes and the meta narratives ISIS deploys, it can be argued that ISIS communication strategy, as depicted in Figure 1, can be characterised as multi-layered, dynamic communication strategy that both targets a multitude of audiences as much as deploys a multitude of different means and narratives to communicate. What can be discerned further, is that ISIS follows a professionalised, sophisticated web communication strategy, or communication strategy 2.0, which features core aspects of a successful and modern communication strategy, such as campaigns,

interaction, propagation and different usages of media outlets, and levels, as described in the media landscape. This echoes the understanding of the War on Terror as a war on ideas. As suggested by narrative researchers, primarily in the domain of strategic narratives, in order to respond to and counter the sophistication of ISIS communication strategies, it needs a more comprehensive counter communication strategy. This comprehensive approach will have to deploy counter narratives that address the level of professionalised media communication, as much as tailored responses to different target audiences. Counter-narratives can thus only be successful, if equally sophisticated, multi-layered and dynamic. Although attempts to limit dissemination of material or the closing down of social media accounts forms part of counterterrorism, a narrative and strategy as deployed by ISIS can arguably only be countered, if met equally with proactive communication strategies, demonstrating the stark contrast between lure and reality, romanticism and brutality, as much as an emphasis on the misuse of religion, despair and supposed morality. It is the argument then that understanding ISIS communication strategy is the first step towards countering it.

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