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EXPLOITING SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ISLAMIC STATE NARRATIVE

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have a faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them.

- Steve Jobs, 1994 *Rolling Stones Interview*

The proliferation of social media has intimately linked all corners of the global commons resulting in transnational borders becoming progressively more obsolete. This accessible and prolific communication tool is used by a plethora of individuals, organizations, states, and international actors – including terrorists. Conflicts are increasingly being fought, and won, within the information battle space by influencing the hearts and minds of populations globally. Recent antagonistic world events by the Islamic State¹ (IS), from its proclamation of a Caliphate to its expansion throughout the Middle East, have effectively leveraged social media to spread its narrative, enhance its legitimacy, and achieve its aims.

How is the IS using social media to target Western audiences? Why is it doing so and how successful is it? What components must an effective Western counter-narrative contain to offset the IS' propaganda? This paper contends that the IS, through its capacity to articulate and project its message, has become the current, decisive terrorist brand that engages a wide audience through apocalyptic narrative, social media, and calls to violence. This examination of the nature of the IS will begin with a brief literature review focusing on the *Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States* and Islamic ideology to better understand the IS' brand through its goals. Subsequently, the IS' relationship with its Western target audience will be explored to ascertain how this bond is exploited to further corresponding narratives and aims. Amid this background, the IS' messaging and overall information strategies will be assessed to determine

¹ The Islamic State (IS) is also referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Da'esh, its Arabic acronym. For consistency, the Islamic State (IS) will be used throughout this paper.

themes, capacities, and vulnerabilities. This paper will conclude with a synopsis of the key social media strategies used in an effort to facilitate future, effective Western counter-narratives.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISLAMIC STATE

What type of global actor is the IS? Does it matter? The IS is an ambiguous state at best and a terrorist organisation masquerading as a state at worst. An examination of the literature and current world opinion of the IS helps categorize this entity in so far as any recognition of its nature assists to better understand its main objectives, particularly “its paramount goal: to secure and expand the Islamic State” and the desired legitimacy surrounding this aim.² The IS does not recognise the legitimacy of the traditional Westphalian boundaries of the current world order, which it seeks to challenge and, instead, model the world in its own ideological image. Yet, it uses Westphalian ideology to legitimize its claim of a Caliphate in much of its messaging.

In light of this, does the IS, the self-proclaimed Caliphate, currently meet the four main, traditional criteria for statehood contained in the *Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States*, that is, of possessing: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states?³ With respect to the first two criteria, arguments are made that the IS does constitute a state in that it has a defined territory, albeit one forcibly under its control, with a resultant, permanent population contained therein.⁴ Moreover, the IS continues to push its geographic boundaries outwards as it pursues one of its main goals of

² Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2014, Middle East, <http://nyti.ms/1qQ8tQD>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

³ Department of International Law, OAS, “Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States,” *Multilateral Treaties*, <http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-40.html>.

⁴ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State. The Digital Caliphate* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 11-12.

becoming a global Islamic State. Whether its population is content to be under the IS' control is irrelevant in this rationale of statehood.⁵

The next statehood criterion is that of possessing a government, which the IS does: it is comprised of multiple departments alongside a strong governance structure backed by Sha'ria law. The IS is ruled by the self-declared Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a highly educated, prophetic man born in 1971 to a distinguished family.⁶ Many of the key leaders in the IS are battle-hardened veterans of Al-Qaeda whom the IS broke out of prison in an impressive demonstration of power and planning designed to win admiration and support.⁷ These experienced warriors celebrate a culture of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in the name of jihad, colouring the pursuits of the IS' objectives with brutal efficiency and terror.⁸ Despite the methods pursued to achieve its end, the IS has instituted local government and governance structures in each area it has commandeered, which has brought a measure of order and services to these areas. These local governments quickly establish law and order by: instituting additional policing forces, including moral police, and equipping them with the IS' uniforms; enforcing, often harsh, Sha'ria law; establishing courts to hear private grievances; and offering Qu'ranic education and a variety of basic services including sanitation, infrastructure, and electricity.⁹ Under its "quasi-state" authority, the IS taxes its population, controls critical sources of state revenue, and appears to provide more basic civil services than the legitimate Syrian or Iraqi

⁵ Indeed, many Syrians and Iraqis in the conquered territories have fled, generating a considerable mass of internally displaced persons in Northern Syria and a large influx of refugees throughout the Middle East and Europe.

⁶ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 110-111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56 & 124.

⁸ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015), x.

⁹ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 137-143.

governments have been able to supply.¹⁰ Yet, ostensibly providing for citizens and improving governance structures does not alone make a non-state actor a legal state entity in the global commons.

The last criterion in the *Montevideo Convention* speaks to a state's capacity to enter into relations with other states. This condition is certainly not being met as the global community refused to acknowledge the IS as a legitimate state and, therefore, will not negotiate or engage in relations directly with it. In fact, the only recognition the IS has received from international actors and states is unanimous condemnation of it as a terrorist body, echoed through multiple United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs). It is the IS' failure to satisfy this final aspect of statehood that underscores how clearly it operates outside of internationally recognized state status.

International condemnation arises from the IS' continued use of force and threat of violence to achieve its aims in the Middle East and globally. Despite masquerading as a state, the IS does not legally possess the "monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force," often associated with the purview of statehood.¹¹ It is resoundingly clear in international law that the IS' use of force is illegitimate, despite its claims to the contrary, a conviction which has been upheld by repeated, unanimous UNSCRs condemning "gross, systematic, and widespread abuses

¹⁰ It is hard to ascertain the truth of this statement. There are many accounts of citizens stating the benefits of living under the IS, but since media and all messaging are so heavily controlled, it is difficult to assess if these messages are truthful or merely propaganda. See: Atwan, *Islamic State*, 143-146.; Brian Katulis, "Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign After the First Year," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 37 (October 2015). <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2015/09/16/121257/assessing-the-anti-isis-campaign-after-the-first-year/>, Assessed May 8, 2016.

¹¹ As expressed by Max Weber in his essay *Politics as a Vocation* in 1919.

of human rights by ISIL” and calling on the group to “cease all violence and terrorist acts, and immediately disarm and disband.”¹²

Even within Islamic teachings the legitimacy of the “self-declared caliphate of ISIS is dubious,” as “only the umma can create and sanctify a caliphate.”¹³ It can be seen, therefore, that while the IS endeavours to become a global Islamic state, it is currently a non-state actor. It is an armed extremist group operating in portions of the recognized states of Syria and Iraq in both the eyes of the international world as well as the Muslim community.¹⁴

What are the IS’ Objectives?

Despite the IS’ position as a non-state actor, it does not need to be a state to achieve its aims. The IS’ militant approach and extremist views incite it to endeavour to shape the world, through violence, into its vision of an ideal, prophesised image for Islam. The proclamation of a Caliphate that rejects traditional Westphalian borders, is only the first step in the IS’ vision of a new world order. It is also driven to unite Muslims worldwide and “restor[e] idealized eras of earlier Islamic history in a way that resonates with many.”¹⁵ The IS’ role is to bring about

¹² United Nations (UN), General Assembly Security Council (SC), 7565th Meeting, Resolution 2249 (2015) (Adopted), Official Record, New York, November 20, 2015, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2249\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2249(2015)).; UN, General Assembly SC, 7587th Meeting, Resolution 2253 (2015) (Adopted), Official Record, New York, December 17, 2015, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2253\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2253(2015)).; UN, General Assembly SC, 7588th Meeting, Resolution 2254 (2015) (Adopted), Official Record, New York, December 18, 2015, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254(2015)).; UN, “Security Council Adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) Condemning Gross, Widespread Abuse of Human Rights by Extremist Groups in Iraq, Syria,” *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases 7242nd Meeting, SC/11520*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11520.doc.htm>.

¹³ David Sorenson, “Confronting the ‘Islamic State:’ Priming Strategic Communications Countering the Appeal of ISIS,” *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 33.

¹⁴ It should be stressed here that there are numerous armed opposition groups in Syria and Iraq, each with different ideologies and objectives. However, while many of these Islamic extremist groups have pledged their loyalty to the IS by committing to Baghdadi and his Caliphate, at times this comes only after extensive bloodshed as the IS ruthlessly targets and eliminates competition from other rebel groups. In June 2014, the IS “superseded al-Qaeda as the most powerful and effective jihadi group in the world,” a dubious honour. See Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State*, 2.

¹⁵ Shane and Hubbard, *ISIS Displaying a Deft Command*.

Armageddon¹⁶ and subsequently cleanse the world of non-believers and infidels supporting corrupt Western and secular values. The ideology the IS follows asserts it must conquer all countries as it takes over the world and brings about the Judgement Days.¹⁷

The Islamic vision which guides Muslims is one of emigration (*hijra*) and struggle (*jihad*) when faced with adversity in order to contribute to a global Islamic community (*umma*) focused on pan-Islamic unity.¹⁸ However, jihadist groups take these concepts and distort them, twisting the nature of Islam by misrepresenting scriptures from the Qu'ran to emphasize and proliferate radical and, often, violent actions to achieve their aims. These impassioned ideological narratives are not only used to counter nonbelievers, they aim to strike at the heart of all true Muslims, targeting them with falsehoods masquerading as truths to gain their support. The IS prescribes to an extreme brand of Islam, that of *Wahhabis*, whose followers denounce other tribes and Muslim communities they perceive as less devote or engaged in un-Islamic behaviour and, consequently, groups whom they are obligated to oppose with jihad.¹⁹ This jihad will ultimately lead to the final conflagration, Armageddon, and the final battle between Muslims and Christians.²⁰

TARGETING WESTERN AUDIENCES

The IS' narratives and target audiences are global and varied in nature. According to a *New York Times* article, by September 2015, nearly 30,000 foreign fighters had made their way

¹⁶ The concept of Armageddon is well known in Christian and Islamic traditions as the end-days period that will usher in the new religious reality anticipated by the faithful for centuries.

¹⁷ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 139-140.

¹⁸ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁹ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 6.

²⁰ Andrew Hosken, *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State* (London, England: Oneworld Publications, 2015), 257.

to Syria to join the IS.²¹ Inferences to be drawn from such staggering global numbers are far-reaching, and so this paper will solely focus on the IS' targeting of Western audiences. To appreciate this phenomenon, it is important to contextualize the IS' relationship with the Western world and its Western targets. In the IS' perspective, the Western world is looked upon as ripe with greed and un-Islamic tradition—a lifestyle condoning physical and spiritual corruption that must be cleansed through the IS' value-based conflict.

The dichotomy between Islam and modern Western society is difficult to conceptualize, especially since the IS deftly uses Western technology and cutting edge modern means to disseminate its propaganda and achieve its aims. Historically, propaganda has been used to influence people and support conflicts. Examples can be traced to earlier terrorist organisations and government movements such as: the anarchists in the 1890s, Nazi Germany, present day Russia, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, and Boko Haram.²² Propaganda is “central to any ideological struggle, where the goal is to persuade the uncommitted that you have the better ideology, and to reinforce the beliefs of your adherents.”²³ Indeed, it can be argued that all media which aims to influence a targeted population is propaganda of one sort or another, whether it be truth based or

²¹ Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, “Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2015, Middle East, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0, Accessed May 1, 2016.

²² Maya Jasanoff, “The First Global Terrorists were Anarchists in the 1890s,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2016, The Opinion Pages, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/30/opinion/the-first-global-terrorists-were-anarchists-in-the-1890s.html?ref=world&_r=0, Accessed May 1, 2016.; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, “Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics,” *UNESCO*, 159/1999, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic446176.files/Week_7/Keck_and_Sikkink_Transnational_Advocacy.pdf, Accessed May 1, 2016.; Alexander Thurston and Anthony Seaboyer, “Promoting Islamic Exclusivism: Overview of Boko Haram and al-Shabab Propaganda Activities,” Contract Report, January 2016, DRDC-RDDC-2016-C079.

²³ Kenneth Payne, “Winning the Battle of Ideas: Propaganda, Ideology, and Terror,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009): 110, doi:10.1080/10576100802627738.; Islamists can also be compared to fascist ideology as both use propaganda to segregate the world, breaking it down into friend or foe, inciting followers to hate, and threatening any opposition with violence. See Hamed Abdel-Samad, *Islamic Fascism*, Translated from German, (New York, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016), Kindle edition.

not. Certain people are easily influenced and key messages that target emotions, beliefs, and ideologies become critical enablers in adept hands. The main evolution of the IS' propaganda from previous models is its distribution means: engaging social media and, more broadly, the internet to achieve easier, cost-effective, and near real-time access to a diverse international following. The IS wants and needs attribution for its acts; social media helps it garner this support by appealing to the subversive nature of a greater scope of people. Indeed, "from a propaganda perspective, the essential point of terrorism is that it is itself a powerful form of propaganda."²⁴

Historically, terrorist movements targeted older demographics: mainly men aged 25 to 35 years who had fought in previous conflicts.²⁵ The IS' new digital jihad is increasingly targeting much younger demographics – those between 15-20 years old with no previous battle experience, specifically youth audiences that are increasingly proficient online and well connected through the use of games, cartoons, and entertaining clips.²⁶ These mixed-gender youth are predominantly Muslim, or recent converts, who are increasingly tech savvy and often alienated in their own communities.²⁷ Many are from vulnerable neighbourhoods and are searching for a deeper purpose, a need they find satisfied by the IS' grand quest for a Caliphate and ushering in Armageddon. They want to be part of something larger, with likeminded people, indeed "the same environmental factors that compel men to join are also found in women: a

²⁴ Payne, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*, 113.

²⁵ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 174.

²⁶ Ibid.; Homeland Security Institute, "*The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth*," HSI Publication Number: RP08-03.02.17-01, White paper prepared for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, Arlington, Virginia, April 24, 2009, 1-4, http://www.homelandsecurity.org/docs/reports/Internet_Radicalization.pdf/.

²⁷ Historically, youth have been targeted in conflicts due to their naiveté. This has been seen from Hitler's youth to the use of child soldiers in conflicts worldwide. Innocence and trust are abused as these impressionable youth are targeted and brainwashed to further the perverted aims of the strong.

feeling of alienation in their home country or a radicalized sense of religious obligation.”²⁸ They are easily reached and quickly assimilated into the jihadi ethos through social media, a familiar medium on which they spend an exorbitant amount of time; recently there has been an increase in self-radicalization of youth as their curiosity towards extremist ideology is easily satisfied through the internet.²⁹

Typically, the IS’ “sweeping statements that reflect essential human realities” appeal to the disengaged, disenfranchised and those perceiving or experiencing ethnic and/or religious isolationism and marginalisation.³⁰ Extremist groups are quick to manipulate these perceived grievances and leverage the anonymity of social media to overcome traditional barriers, such as social stigmas against Muslim women.³¹ Western individuals are initially targeted via social media where they are encouraged to post questions on message boards, retweet³² information to their social networks, and educate themselves through pro-jihadist websites. Personal information is easily accessible on social media, helping recruiters to individualize their messages and efforts to greatest effect.³³ Initially, potential Western targets are encouraged to play battle games and communicate via social media platforms. Once they are convinced of their desire to fight for the IS, they are put in touch with a local facilitator who helps them navigate

²⁸ Kate Storey, “The American Women of ISIS,” *Marie Claire* (April 22, 2016), <http://www.marieclaire.com/politics/a20011/western-women-who-join-isis>, Accessed May 1, 2016.; Pierre Jolicoeur and Anthony Seaboyer, “ISIS Social Media Exploitation: Effects on the Contemporary Operating Environment,” Contract Report, DRDC-RDDC-2015-C147, April 2015.

²⁹ Homeland Security Institute, *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool*, 1.; Shane and Hubbard, *ISIS Displaying a Deft Command*.

³⁰ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (STRATCOM), “DAESH Information Campaign and its Influence,” (Results of the Study, Riga, Latvia, November 2015), <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/daesh-information-campaign-and-its-influence>, Accessed May 7, 2016.

³¹ Homeland Security Institute, *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool*, 2-5.

³² Retweets are used by Twitter users to pass along information from another Twitter account to their own social network of followers. The IS adeptly uses this and other Twitter techniques to spread its messaging.

³³ Emily Golberg Knox, “Notes: The Slippery Slope of Material Support Prosecutions: Social Media Support to Terrorists,” *Hastings Law Journal* 66 (December 2014): 295-329, <http://heinonline.org>, Accessed April 7, 2016.

the intricacies of travelling to conflict areas via various safe houses and underground global networks. So proficient is the IS in transitioning strategies, one American foreign fighter described the ease of his journey from Florida to Idlib, Syria with only \$20 USD in his pocket.³⁴

INTENT OF TARGETING

The IS' use of social media is varied and Westerners are targeted for an array of purposes including recruitment, radicalization, legitimization of the IS narrative, and increasing global instability.³⁵

Recruitment and Radicalization

In order for the IS to be successful, it must continue to attract foreign fighters and supporters at the expense of other extremist groups.³⁶ It does this by cultivating a savvy, bellicose brand and publicising via social media and a strong international media presence. Terror and destruction are seductive and the IS capitalizes on this, distinguishing itself with bloodier and more horrific atrocities than its competitors.³⁷ Young men are often targeted as fighters and young women as supporters who breed and raise the next generation of fighters. The success of the Caliphate depends on procreation and continued recruitment; radicalized Western men and women play key roles in this campaign. They travel to the IS, join in the fighting, and establish lives there. Once on-the-ground, they contribute positively to the IS' ongoing media campaign by showcasing and sharing their satisfied lives and the happiness and acceptance they have found in the Caliphate. Recruits appeal to others within their social networks and continue

³⁴ Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad. Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

³⁵ Securing monetary assistance is also an objective; however, the IS has its own legitimate as well as illegitimate funding sources and does not depend heavily on external funding to further its cause, and so, this rationale is not considered here.

³⁶ Thurston and Seaboyer, *Promoting Islamic Exclusivism*.

³⁷ Anthony Seaboyer, "Take the Battle to Washington and New York: What al-Shabaab's Shifting Propaganda Reveals," Contract Report, DRDC-RDDC-2016-C057, January 2016, 8.

to spread jihadist ideology in their mother tongues and through vernacular language and social references to friends and Westerners around the world, garnering further support for the IS, as “the best recruiter of a foreign fighter is a veteran foreign fighter.”³⁸

Legitimization of the IS’ Narrative

As the Western world further securitizes the threat of the IS, it “allows the group to project strength and gain visibility,” increasingly legitimizing the fight between Islam and the West and “inspir[ing] recruits from all over the world.”³⁹ Each effort to bomb and destabilize the IS is spun by the IS as a step towards Armageddon and the final Judgement Days, declarations intended to rally further support and validation for the IS’ narrative.⁴⁰ The IS is strongly adept at spinning the truth and falsifying information to suit its narrative and legitimize its claim as a Caliphate. The locations of battles being fought are also tied to prophecies and highlighted to emphasize the continued actions towards prophetic fulfillment.⁴¹ Indeed, recruitment of foreign fighters has increased since the fall of Mosul as success in battle further emphasises the epochal nature of the IS’ narrative.⁴²

Increasing Global Instability

Increasing global instability is accomplished through the pursuits above. The IS’ aim is not to capture the hearts and minds of its audience through historical grievances in order to mobilise the Muslim world, as Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda did, or to gain international support

³⁸ Storey, *Women of ISIS*.; Schmitt and Sengupta, *Thousands Enter Syria*.; Clinton Watts, “Foreign Fighters: How Are They Being Recruited? Two Imperfect Recruitment Models,” *Small Wars Journal* (2008). www.smallwarsjournal.com, Accessed April 20, 2016.

³⁹ James Farwell, “The Media Strategy of ISIS,” *Survival* 56, no.6 (December 2014-January 2015): 50, doi:10.1080/00396338.2014.985436.

⁴⁰ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 252.

⁴¹ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 100-105.

⁴² Shane and Hubbard, *ISIS Displaying a Deft Command*.

or acceptance.⁴³ Rather “its actions [seek] only to sow chaos, hatred and division,” laying the fear laced conditions for this jihadist organisation to grow and thrive.⁴⁴ The aspirations of the IS are not only far reaching, they are urgent — a fact clearly articulated through the IS’ messaging.⁴⁵ As it expands the new Caliphate, it also emphasizes revolution to break the artificial Westphalian construct “which divided Muslim society.”⁴⁶ The transnational nature of the IS’ call to jihad increases global insecurity by inflicting abhorrent pain and suffering on innocents, displacing millions in the process, and threatening the security of bordering states. Adding to this, it disseminates its poisonous ideology among susceptible individuals worldwide who are incited to take up the conflict or pursue vigilante actions in their own regions.

EXPLOITATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Prior to engaging a dialogue on social media, an understanding of the term is necessary. The following description provides a broad enough definition to allow for a thorough examination of all aspect of the IS’ social media campaign. It follows that “social media encompasses a diverse range of communication styles, including multimedia and short messages, and connects a wide range of actors, it is a complex network.”⁴⁷ Further, its purpose is to connect people worldwide, facilitate relationships, “increase familiarity with one another by helping to reduce social distance between them,” and enable two-way, interactive sharing of information through social networking applications.⁴⁸ It is also widely agreed that social media tools and

⁴³ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 1-25.

⁴⁴ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 257.

⁴⁵ Shane and Hubbard, *ISIS Displaying a Deft Command*.

⁴⁶ NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH*, 27.

⁴⁷ Brett Van Niekerk and Manoj Maharaj, “Social Media and Information Conflict,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1176.

⁴⁸ Robin Thompson, “Radicalization and the Use of Social Media,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no.4 (2011): 176, doi:10.5038/1944-04724.4.4.8.; David Landsbergen, “Government as Part of the Revolution: Using Social Media to Achieve Public Goals,” *Electronic Journal of e-Government* 8 no. 2 (2010): 135, <http://www.ejeg.com>, Accessed January 15, 2016.; Mildred Pryor et al., “The Role of Social Media in Transforming

networks are critical technological enablers and valuable weapons in achieving success in current conflicts and warfare.⁴⁹ Its danger lies in that it “ultimately provide[s] users with increased access to information that could be used to manipulate the user’s perception of the world and the user’s environment.”⁵⁰ It is these aspects upon which terrorist groups seek to capitalize.

Terrorists have always relied on propaganda to spread their narrative and legitimize their actions; however, social media has significantly altered the dynamic of how terrorist groups organize, communicate, campaign, coordinate, and execute operations.⁵¹ Furthermore, it has emboldened such groups to spread their messages through social media platforms rather than rely on traditional media, thereby increasing the flexibility and scope of their terrorist narratives while simultaneously limiting censorship.⁵² The IS has developed online survival strategies, incorporated digital lessons learned, and imbedded redundancies, protections, and multiple profiles in its online presence.⁵³ These strategies are enabled by a “highly complex self-repairing and self-reinforcing web” where key messages are reposted by diverse users so that even if ten accounts are shut down, another twenty pop up to replace them.⁵⁴ This approach ensures the continuous flow of information and messaging from the IS.

Jihadi groups in Syria have found that to be taken seriously, they must be on numerous social media networks; and, in similar fashion, this prolific use of social media has strengthened

Governments and Nations,” *International Journal of Business and Public Administration* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 20.

⁴⁹ Sean Lawson, “The US military’s Social Media Civil War: Technology as Antagonism in Discourses of Information-Age Conflict,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27, no.2 (2014): 227, 236.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *Radicalization*, 177.

⁵¹ Jytte Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015): 4, doi:10.1080/107610X.2014.974948.

⁵² *Ibid.*; Jolicoeur and Seaboyer, *ISIS Social Media Exploitation*.

⁵³ Klausen, *Tweeting the Jihad*, 17.

⁵⁴ NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH*, 39.

the professional reputation of the IS and amplified its reach.⁵⁵ We are in a new age of conflict, one in which digital online success is just as critical, or at times more so, than on-the-ground, decisive armed actions.

IS' Information Operations and Messaging

Social media plays a key role in the IS' information campaign; propaganda is synchronised with battles and attacks, effectively weaponising its use.⁵⁶ From the beginning of the IS' campaign of terror and progressive seizure of territories, social media has been an integral, sophisticated, and creative part of its operational plan.⁵⁷ The IS quickly realized that “extremism is the fastest way to generate global publicity” and capitalized on this to inspire recruits and supporters worldwide.⁵⁸ Al-Qaeda first spoke of the need to win the hearts and minds of Muslims, with the intent to sway moderate and extremists to its cause.⁵⁹ The IS does not care about the hearts and minds war, though it does see immense value in exploiting target audiences' emotions to spread its own jihadist message of terror and bloodshed.⁶⁰ The “IS[IS] are experts of fear” who routinely use social media to ensure a steady flow of foreign fighters zealously committed to its cause and to globally legitimize its actions.⁶¹ In order to accomplish these goals, the IS has its own robust, state of the art media department, the Islamic State Institute for Public Information, which is responsible for producing, editing, and disseminating videos and messages through social media in a variety of languages.⁶² It controls all group

⁵⁵ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 4.

⁵⁶ NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH*, 8.

⁵⁷ Doug Bernard, “Uses and Abuses of Social Media in Conflict Zones,” *Voice of American News/FIND* (July 10, 2014), News/Science and Technology, <http://www.voanews.com/content/social-media-uses-and-abuses/1955029.html>, Accessed March 24, 2016.

⁵⁸ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 68.

⁵⁹ Payne, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*, 109.; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 148.

⁶⁰ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 148-151.; Jolicoeur and Seaboyer, *ISIS Social Media Exploitation*.

⁶¹ Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State*, xiv.

⁶² Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 255.

propaganda and media including synchronizing messaging, projecting strength, and maintaining visibility of key narratives.⁶³ It publishes the fanatical, online English language magazine, *Inspire*, and the multilingual *Dabiq*. Online sources are translated into numerous languages to further increase the IS' global relevance and reach. In 2014, it formed the al-Hayat Media Center which has the main responsibility of targeting Western audiences by producing media in their key languages.⁶⁴ The IS also actively recruits specialists in information technologies, online marketing, and photography as well as journalists and editors to ensure professional products.⁶⁵ *Hashtags* are commandeered with increasing sophistication, ensuring the IS' material is viewed by the largest audience possible.⁶⁶

These centralised messages are complemented by decentralized, regionally targeted and broadcasted media efforts, as well as by on-the-ground, near real-time accounts from individual fighters on the battlefield. These fighters post comments, photographs, and videos of their lives, from beheadings and bloody jihad battlefield posts, to playing with children and engaged in happy family life – in an attempt to normalize and glamorize jihadi life in the IS.⁶⁷ These messages are often delivered by foreign fighters in their native tongue to target and influence their respective social networks abroad, legitimize the IS' narrative, and motivate peers to join the fight, effectively capitalizing on the adage that “social media is about cultivating networks and using them well.”⁶⁸ This “direct connection to the front line” also increases the target audiences “sensation that they are part of the fight” as they are “constantly connected ... to all

⁶³ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 142.; Farwell, *Media Strategy of ISIS*, 50.

⁶⁴ Daniel Cunningham et al., “Non-Kinetic Threat Network Engagement: Countering ISIS with Social Media,” Contract Report, DRDC-RDCC-201-C125, June 2015, 4.

⁶⁵ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 19-21.

⁶⁶ Diana Secară, “The Role of Social Networks in the Work of Terrorist Groups: The Case of ISIS and Al-Qaeda,” *International Relations Supplement* no.3 (July 2015):79.

⁶⁷ Jolicoeur and Seaboyer, *ISIS Social Media Exploitation*.

⁶⁸ Landsbergen, *Government as Part of the Revolution*, 143.

relevant news.”⁶⁹ This continuous interconnectedness aids in the increased perception of group membership, an effective psychological strategy.⁷⁰

The IS’ “digital caliphate” campaign is robust and abundant across the internet and social media, from Facebook to Snapchat, online gaming, Instagram, Twitter, and numerous other encrypted programmes and applications.⁷¹ The IS produces “state-of-the-art video, ground images shot from drones and multilingual Twitter messages.”⁷² The IS’ resilient and flexible propaganda campaign manipulates other media as well; it has its own radio station, satellite TV station, and 24-hour internet television channel.⁷³ It even produces a full TV series “glorifying Islamic States’ achievements and deeds, . . . feature[ing] IS fighters, many of them foreign, in the midst of fierce battles.”⁷⁴

The IS has followers and social media centers that monitor online dialogue. When potential recruits are discovered, these systems initiate a targeted campaign of mass inclusion and messaging. Suddenly, individuals seeking information on the IS are bombarded with messages and friend requests from people who seem to care, understand, and cherish them: they find themselves enveloped into an immediate virtual family willing to guide them on the jihadi path and satisfy their need for acceptance.⁷⁵ This is the first step in the radicalization process. Romanticized connections are also promised at times: relationship matches with honourable jihadi fighters and an idyllic life are portrayed to sway vulnerable, often young, women.⁷⁶

Exploring the IS’ Narratives

⁶⁹ Jolicoeur and Seaboyer, *ISIS Social Media Exploitation*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Hosken, *Empire of Fear.*; Atwan, *Islamic State*.

⁷² Shane and Hubbard, *ISIS Displaying a Deft Command*.

⁷³ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁵ Storey, *Women of ISIS*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Mass violence and gory images increase the allure of the IS' apocalyptic narrative, in fact, "jihadists of all stripes, not just Islamic State followers, have been stirred by the promise of fighting in the final battles preceding the Day of Judgement."⁷⁷ Current political failings of the Syrian government in the prophetic area further generate a void ripe for jihadist exploitation.⁷⁸ This is precisely what the IS' narrative capitalizes on: it has generated a sophisticated and targeted information operations campaign, leveraging social media to globally spread and legitimize its narrative. In fact, "at the strategic level, ISIL plans, synchronises and coordinates its social media efforts" very effectively.⁷⁹ By exploiting social media, the IS has monopolized on battlefield victories and small wins to an unprecedented level. It has quickly gained international acclaim in underground and radical circles, further facilitating access to its target audience and increasing its notoriety.

The IS' narrative recruits hordes of foreign fighters "by using a propaganda mix of apocalypticism, puritanism, sectarianism, ultraviolence, and promises of a caliphate."⁸⁰ Bragging about its military victories and numerous enemies, including the Kurds, Shias, and the West, allows the IS to benefit from extremist ideological zeal and "reap all the recruitment and reputational benefits that that [brings]."⁸¹

Contemporary terrorist tactics now encompass social media: executions, firefights, and beheadings are recorded or streamed live to audiences worldwide. Multimedia is created and disseminated on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and other applications, effectively spreading terror beyond the battlefield and engineering a repellent sense of community and

⁷⁷ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 102.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷⁹ Captain Sean Childs, "Pure Manipulation: ISIL and the Exploitation of Social Media," *Australian Army Journal* VII, no.1 (Winter 2015): 20.

⁸⁰ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 153.

⁸¹ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 25.

connectedness among its global followers who at once feel assimilated into the violence. All of these approaches serve to further mobilize and radicalize followers. Abu Sumayyah Al-Britani, a British foreign fighter with the IS tweeted that jihad was really fun, describing it as being better than a video game because it's happening in 3D all around you.⁸² Violence and anarchy does not appeal only to those with aggressive tendencies. This narrative also calls to adventure seekers and those who are bored or unfulfilled in their everyday lives.

WESTERN COUNTER-NARRATIVES

In order to counter the IS' use of social media, the West must attack its center of gravity – its effective use of social media.⁸³ It must also strike at the IS' ability to “endure and expand[,]” thereby “errod[ing] its legitimacy.”⁸⁴ An effective Western counter-narrative must accomplish two mains goals: stop the IS and other terrorists groups, and contest the ideological underpinnings that embolden the overall IS narrative.⁸⁵ Since, “perception becomes reality and drives behaviour[,]” radical and violent ideas and ideologies must be challenged and disproven.⁸⁶ Integral to this narrative would be delinking the IS from Islam, an approach first employed to counter Al-Qaeda's narrative, and shifting the paradigm from radicalization to brainwashing by using appropriate vocabulary. Western counter-narratives must undermine the IS' by avoiding “bellicose language that reinforces and mirrors the terrorists/worldview.”⁸⁷ Another critical aspect to this narrative is to “expose the true nature of ISIS” by publicising the atrocities it commits and the repression and horrors of daily life in the territories it controls.⁸⁸ Counter narratives should also focus on devaluing the image of veteran fighters by showing atrocities

⁸² Klausen, *Tweeting the Jihad*, 4.

⁸³ Childs, *Pure Manipulation*, 28.

⁸⁴ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, 156.

⁸⁵ Payne, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*, 116.

⁸⁶ NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH*, 44.

⁸⁷ Payne, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*, 119-120.

⁸⁸ Katulis, *Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign*.

they have committed against innocent Muslims, thereby decreasing their hero status image for some youth and relegating them to the level of common criminals.⁸⁹ Emphasizing, legitimizing, and empowering the moderate voice of the *umma* is another important measure to debunk the IS' narrative, since "caliphates are not legitimate unless their origin is the *umma* itself."⁹⁰

An effective counter-narrative programme should be carried out via social media which has "enormous potential to shape events" and to engage the widest target audience possible, especially youths who are continuously online.⁹¹ Since "youth's Internet usage thrives on the ability to be involved with online content and communicate their opinions with the creators as well as with each other," interactive, virtual methods should be maximised.⁹² By leveraging social media to their benefit, governments, non-government organisations (NGOs), and other actors working in concert can capitalize on the successes that the IS has thus far exclusively manipulated, including the vast array of existing social networks.⁹³ Engaging youth in dialogue, "increas[es] the volume of proactive participation in ideological discourse."⁹⁴ This serves to empower youth and establish positive, emotional bonds that may help to satisfy unfulfilled personal needs.

Normally, Western governments have a lack of credibility with this target demographic so measures must be taken to increase authenticity and credibility; this is possible through honest

⁸⁹ Watts, *Foreign Fighters*.

⁹⁰ Sorenson, *Confronting the Islamic State*, 35.

⁹¹ Thorsten Hochwald, "How Do Social Media Affect Intra-State Conflicts other than War?" *Connection: The Quarterly Journal* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 21.

⁹² Homeland Security Institute, *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool*, 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 9.; Influence campaigns conducted by military Special Forces can help to manipulate the operating environment, shift paradigms, and infiltrate key areas and demographics in support of approved counter-narratives. See Ian Langford, "Australian Special Operations: Principles and Consideration," (Army Research Paper no.4. 2014): 29, <http://www.army.gov.au/Our-future/Publications/Research-Papers/Army-research-papers/ARP4>, Accessed May 1, 2016.

⁹⁴ Matthew Martin, "Social Media Fuels Online Activism," *Middle East Economic Digest* 6, no. 45 (2012): 20-21, <http://www.meed.com/sectors/telecoms-and-it/social-media-fuels-online-activism-in-the-middle-east/3157480.article>, Accessed March 7, 2016.; Childs, *Pure Manipulation*, 21.

and open dialogue, though other measures suggested in this section should also be explored.⁹⁵

Counter-radicalization and increased credibility may be best achieved by government partnerships with NGOs, community groups, and private enterprises to maximize capacities and competencies while minimizing democratic governmental handicaps.⁹⁶

The global refugee crisis presents another opportunity to debunk the IS' narrative, by "disprov[ing] the idea of the Caliphate as a place for every Muslim" and a "safe haven" for those under its care.⁹⁷ Another chapter in this narrative is to focus on attractive alternative realities to the IS. Such messaging should be branded with inclusiveness, kinship, and understanding as well as other tempting ideologies that originally enticed followers to the pursuit of the IS vision.⁹⁸ Yet another strategy is to showcase examples where Western fighters who joined the jihad are disillusioned and disheartened with the way they were manipulated and with the realities on-the-ground in Syria and Iraq.⁹⁹

De-securitizing the dialogue and narrative surrounding the IS would counter its aims and deny it further recruiting and legitimizing material. Each time the Western world emphasizes the threat that the IS poses to daily lives, or speaks of determination to rid the world of this jihadi entity, fear, legitimacy and admiration are generated in those most easily influenced by the terrorist narrative.¹⁰⁰ The West is, in fact, playing into the IS' own propaganda, helping it cement

⁹⁵ Tim Aistrophe, "Social media and Counterterrorism Strategy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (2016): 122, doi.10.1080/10357718.2015.1113230.; Homeland Security Institute, *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool*, 9.

⁹⁶ Aistrophe, *Counterterrorism Strategy*, 135.

⁹⁷ NATO STRATCOM, *DAESH*, 46.

⁹⁸ Payne, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*, 120.

⁹⁹ Dafna Rand and Anthony Vassalo, "Bringing the Fight Back Home: Western Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *Policy Brief: Center for New American Security* (August 2014), 9, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_ForeignFighters_policybrief.pdf, Accessed April 10, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 257.

its position internationally; indeed, the opposite goal of Western policy makers and government elites.

While complicated, strides are being taken to counter the IS' poisonous narrative. For instance, when certain key words are typed into *Google*, counter-narratives are now displayed, exposing potential recruits and marginalized individuals to broader information and optimistically influencing them towards moderation.¹⁰¹ Moderate Muslim officials, religious figures, and NGOs are spreading counter-narratives that directly address distortions and fallacies in the IS' interpretation of the Qu'ran.¹⁰² Another initiative the West has launched is a Twitter campaign to appeal to potential recruits through reasoned arguments using the IS' own media against it. The Twitter campaign is called #thinkagainturnaway; it emphasises commonalities between the West and Islam and highlights discrepancies in the IS' messaging.¹⁰³ The United States State Department has also set up anti-IS accounts on various social media networking sites with the mission to "expose the facts about terrorists and their propaganda."¹⁰⁴ It is difficult to comment on the success or weaknesses of any of these approaches since it is quite early in the campaigns and minimal research has been conducted at this point.

Any counter-narrative must address the sources of radicalization as well as the underlying issues and needs being fulfilled by the IS and other terrorist organisations. Real issues in the region need to be addressed, such as responsible government and governance, and real grievances against Muslims worldwide need to be understood and remedied.¹⁰⁵ By addressing

¹⁰¹ Storey, *Women of ISIS*.

¹⁰² Homeland Security Institute, *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool*, 7.

¹⁰³ Childs, *Pure Manipulation*, 28.; Belinda Robinson, "War on Twitter: State Department Makes Mock ISIS Recruiting Video to Counter Terror Group's Online Pursuit of Westerners," *Mail Online*, April 20, 2016, News, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2745875/War-Twitter-State-Department-releases-mock-ISIS-recruitment-film-bid-counter-terror-groups-online-pursuit-Westerners.html>, Accessed April 20, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, *War on Twitter*.

¹⁰⁵ Hosken, *Empire of Fear*, 255.

and reducing Islamophobia and xenophobia, much of the isolation and discrimination young Muslims may feel can be eliminated, thereby making them less vulnerable to the powerful sway of terrorist messaging and the promises of safety and acceptance in the IS' Caliphate.¹⁰⁶ This long term strategy must also focus on building community engagements focused on “inclusion, belonging and a sense of opportunity [for] vulnerable youths.”¹⁰⁷ Another, more radical, approach is to allow foreign fighters to return to their native countries and attempt to rehabilitate them and subsequently use them to dissuade others from joining the call to jihad.¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

As “the fog of war gives way to the digital smog of social media” the Western world is presented with a new, powerful threat, on one hand, but also with a valuable multi-faceted tool to counter this danger.¹⁰⁹ Whether an ambiguous state or an armed-state actor masquerading as a state, the IS holds considerable sway and leverage in this new social media information age. Its message resonates with disenfranchised Western target audiences with increasing trends of foreign fighters joining the conflict as the “Islamic States unprecedented ability to recruit and to radicalize followers over the Internet and on social media” continues.¹¹⁰ The IS' professional and adept use of social media enables it to present a horrific, global brand of terror and radicalization. Its proclamation of a Caliphate and apocalyptic narrative resound with disenfranchised audiences globally and insight them to violence.

The IS' jihadist brand must be countered with an “open, timely, effective and trustworthy presence” across all social media platforms as well as by in-person dialogue with at-risk target

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 253

¹⁰⁷ Aistrophe, *Counterterrorism Strategy*, 121.

¹⁰⁸ Atwan, *Islamic State*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ Luke Justin Heemsbergen and Simon Lindgren, “The Power of Precision Air Strikes and Social Media Feeds in the 2012 Israel-Hamas Conflict: ‘Targeting Transparency’,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no.5 (2014): 570, doi:10.1080/10357718.2014.922526.

¹¹⁰ Schmitt and Sengupta, *Thousands Enter Syria*.

audiences.¹¹¹ This counter-narrative must focus on negating the IS' world vision, emphasizing the atrocities they commit against innocent Muslims and countering their extreme Islamic teachings. It should be an interactive dialogue, engaging marginalised audiences and empowering them in their future. Leveraging disgruntled foreign fighters and key religious and community figures will help to increase the legitimacy and authenticity of the Western counter-narrative.

Referring back to the opening epitaph, technology is a critical enabler of good and bad. Having faith alone that people will choose the good is irresponsible when groups exist that capitalize and manipulate the weak to further their perverted goals. A strategic, coordinated plan to counter the IS' digital caliphate using social media and face-to-face techniques to present the blatant falsehoods and true realities of extremism is critical.

¹¹¹ Jolicoeur and Seaboyer, *ISIS Social Media Exploitation*.

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