

THE WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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General Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

THE WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA, by MAJ Jack B. Irby III, 106 pages.

This thesis posits that the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh) has weaponized social media platforms such as Twitter in order to spread its narrative globally, recruit fighters, and spread terror. This thesis highlights instances in which the Islamic State uses social media at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. The Islamic States' social media usage indicates a significant level of coordination and integration between those who fight on the physical battlefield and those who conduct operations in the social media domain. The United States' efforts to counter the Islamic State's social media narrative highlight a need for further interagency and joint service coordination.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ACRONYMS.....	vii
ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Islamic History and the Islamic State	8
Twitter and the Islamic State	12
The Recent History of the Islamic State	20
Policy and Strategy of the United States	31
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	42
CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS	47
Case Studies	47
The Fall of Mosul, 2014.....	47
The Beheading of Steven Sotloff, 2 September 2014.....	52
“Think Again, Turn Away,” 2012-Present	56
Analysis	64
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	85
Recommendations for Future Research.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	91

ACRONYMS

CSCC	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
CTCC	Counterterrorism Communication Center
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
POTUS	President of the United States
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
USAF	U.S. Air Force

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Map of ISIL Territory, April 2015.....	4
Figure 2. The U.S. Army Twitter Page	17
Figure 3. A popular “Parody” Kanye West Twitter Account	18
Figure 4. Kanye West’s Verified Twitter Account	18
Figure 5. An Islamic State T-55 Firing	24
Figure 6. Captured ZSU-23-4 Pressed into Islamic State Service	25
Figure 7. The Islamic State’s Death Threat against Jack Dorsey.....	31
Figure 8. A CTCC Response to an Islamic State Post on Ask.fm	59
Figure 9. A CTCC Response on Ask.fm.....	60
Figure 10. A CTCC Arab Language Video.....	63
Figure 11. The First Lady’s Original Tweet.....	68
Figure 12. The Islamic State’s Edited Version.....	68

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State is a hostile, non-state actor that takes a number of forms. In their recent book detailing the motivations of Islamic State, authors Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan said:

ISIS is a terrorist organization, but it isn't only a terrorist organization. It is also a mafia adept at exploiting decades-old transnational gray markets for oil and arms trafficking. It is a conventional military that mobilizes and deploys foot soldiers with a professional acumen that has impressed members of the US military. It is a sophisticated intelligence-gathering apparatus that infiltrates rival organizations and silently recruits within their ranks before taking them over, routing them in combat, or seizing their land.¹

As of November 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has affiliate organizations in eleven countries, including Pakistan, Egypt, and the Philippines.² The Islamic State's primary geographic area of operation is in the region that straddles the border between Iraq and Syria. Seizing the opportunity to fill a regional power vacuum created by the Syrian Civil War and an ineffectual central government in Baghdad, ISIL has carved out a massive geographic region where it can exert control ranging from fluid combat to low-risk transportation to full governance.³ The group's stated goals were to create a Sunni-controlled, fundamentalist Islamic caliphate, and expand it until it covered the world.⁴ The group is well known for its violent atrocities, both during and after combat as well as within zones that it has established governance. It is the stated policy of the U.S Government to "degrade, and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State.⁵ Given the growing support for The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and their expanded reach, it is doubtful the United States will achieve its desired end. According to James Clapper, U.S. Director for National Intelligence, ISIL has a force of between twenty and thirty-two

thousand fighters with thousands more joining the ranks. The United States began military operations against the group in August 2014.⁶

Despite its obscene violence, the group enjoys a large cult following in the Islamic world. Thousands of foreign fighters that have flowed into Syria and Iraq are willing to sacrifice their lives in frenzied combat. Islamic State's preferred means to recruit these fighters is social media.⁷

In addition to recruitment, ISIL uses social media to incite violence around the world. While the American news media and federal government have been quick to point out that ISIL did not orchestrate the terror attack on a Prophet Muhammad cartoon-drawing event in Garland, Texas, they also must concede that it was inspired by ISIL social media propaganda.⁸ During their investigation of the foiled attack, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) uncovered private communications via Twitter between one of the attackers and Jenaid Hussein, a notorious ISIL social media operative, who encouraged violence.⁹ Only hours before the attack, Hussein tweeted: "the knives [sic] have been sharpened, soon we will come to your streets with death and slaughter."¹⁰ Moments before opening fire at the event, one of the gunman tweeted and pledged allegiance to ISIL, and "May Allah accept us as mujahideen. #texasattack."¹¹ This event is an example of one of many ISIL-inspired terror attacks around the world.

Finally, ISIL uses social media as a means to propagate its narrative, their dogmatic, fundamentalist Islamic worldview, and unrelenting desire to consolidate recent territorial gains that is equaled only by their desire to secure more. J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan conducted a comprehensive analysis of Islamic State's use of Twitter, producing valuable insights into how ISIL spreads information from a technical

standpoint, and the lengths the group goes to manipulate the social media service.¹² This work will be referenced in more detail later in this thesis, but it is interesting to compare the technological sophistication the group uses to disseminate information against the simplicity of the group's narrative themes.¹³ The group's narrative themes can be distilled to success, religious duty, political grievance, and sense of adventure.¹⁴

These basic themes permeate all of the groups messaging across all mediums. The organization attempts to emphasize its successes and convey to the world that all Muslims have an obligation to serve the caliphate. The group also attempts to convey perceived legitimate grievances with their enemies, and that joining ISIL is a grand adventure. ISIL is especially adept in connecting with its key target demographic (young Muslim males) with easily digestible, yet well produced, content that teems with masculine overtones.¹⁵ Religious messaging is kept simplistic, never straying far from a duty to defend the caliphate from evil. ISIL conveys success by flaunting its money, firepower, and the respect their members enjoy within the caliphate.¹⁶

Much has been written by scholars, experts, and journalists about the Islamic State's social media capabilities, and how they use them to gain new recruits, incite terror, and spread its worldview. Though the United States has been stunned by Islamic State's tech and media savvy, there has not been any real consideration of Islamic State's narrative strategy or tactics in comparison to those of the United States'.

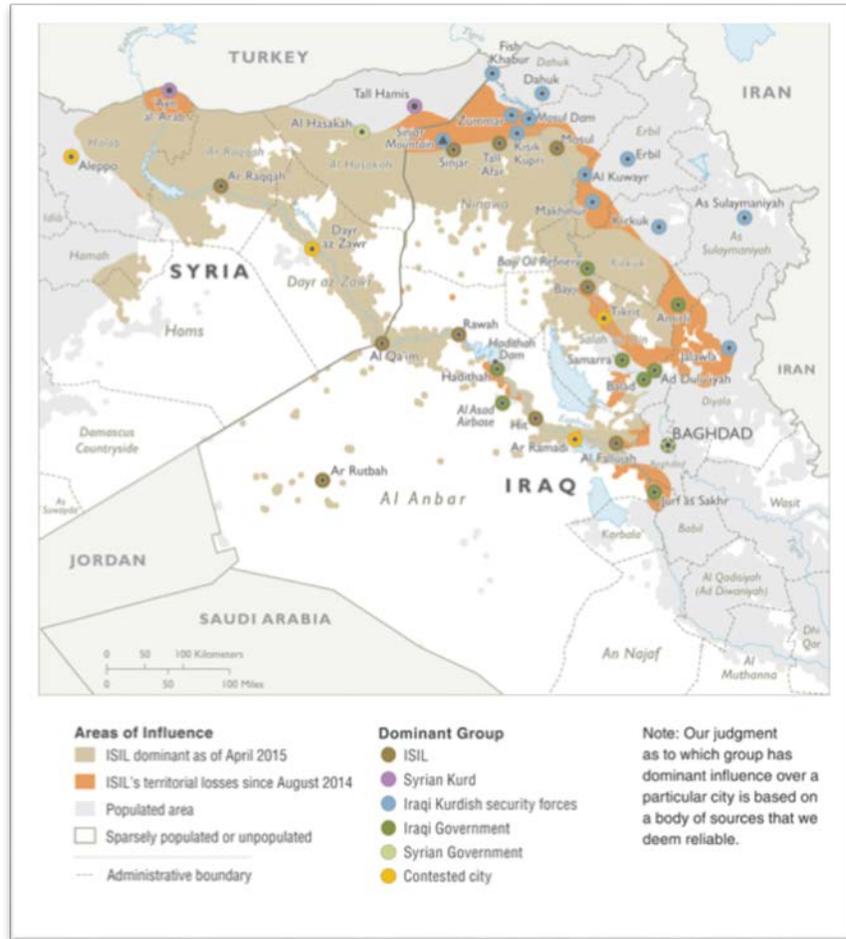


Figure 1. Map of ISIL Territory, April 2015

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Media Activity, “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s Reduced Operating Areas in Iraq and Syria,” April 2015, accessed 15 October 2015, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/20150410_ISIL_Map_Unclass_Approved.pdf.

The United States and its coalition partners have struggled in their efforts to contain or defeat Islamic State’s social media efforts. Even as the U.S. military bears down on them with pinpoint aerial precision bombing and special operations raids, ISIL continues to run circles around its enemy in the information domain. Chief among this difficulty is the ambiguity and complexity of the Western narrative.¹⁷ The U.S.

government takes a nuanced stance with respect to the ongoing conflict in Syria: it publicly supports some armed groups rebelling against the Assad regime while condemning ISIL fighters that are also fighting Assad's forces.¹⁸ This complexity leads to a lack of unity of the narrative. Furthermore, the Russians are currently conducting military operations in Syria, and do not make the same delineation between armed groups standing in opposition to the Assad regime.¹⁹ This lack of unity of effort and its associated dysfunction in narrative can only benefit the Islamic State's media efforts. While Islamic State conducts simple, streamlined, and effective information operations using social media, the United States' efforts, until recently, have been curtailed by self-imposed laws and bureaucracy that prevent it from responding quickly or effectively to emerging threats using social media. From a legal standpoint, none of the information operations products developed by the U.S. military could be distributed via social media as there was no way to ensure that the product would not end up affecting U.S. civilians, a situation prohibited by federal law.²⁰ With these restrictions in place, the United States had essentially conceded the critical social media aspect of the cyberspace domain to the Islamic State.

This thesis will examine Islamic State's social media operations and compare them to the U.S. response. The intent is to understand aspects of the Islamic State's social media operations that have made them successful according to most experts as well as reasons the U.S. response has fallen short of the mark. The Islamic State has seen the value of social media and gone to great lengths to fully integrate and streamline its use in conjunction with and in support of kinetic battlefield operations. The Islamic State also sees the value of social media as a stand-alone weapons platform and uses it to achieve

effects. The thesis will also highlight that while the U.S. is still the undisputed master of precision kinetic warfare it struggles with integrating social media into operations and is therefore perceived to be at a disadvantage within the social media domain. Proposed updates to tactics and policy required in an era of weaponized social media capabilities will be included in the conclusion.

¹ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York, NY: Regan Arts, 2015), iv.

² Katie Zavadski, "ISIS Now Has a Network of Military Affiliates in 11 Countries Around the World," *New York Magazine*, 23 November 2014, accessed 16 November 2015, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/11/>.

³ Kathy Gilsinan, "How ISIS Territory Has Changed since the U.S. Bombing Campaign Began," *The Atlantic*, 11 September 2015, accessed 23 October 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/ISIS-territory-map-us-campaign/404776/>.

⁴ House Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts in Syria: A Winning Strategy? 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2015, H. Rep., serial 114-101, 1-7.

⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard et al., *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, U.S. Library of Congress, 2015), ii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ Weiss and Hassan, iv.

⁸ Evan Perez, Pamela Brown, and Jim Sciutto, "Texas Attacker Had Private Conversations with Known Terrorists," *Cable News Network (CNN)*, 7 March 2015, accessed 16 October 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/07/politics/fbi-warning-elton-simpson-cartoon-event-attack/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Holly Yan, "What We Know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi," *Cable News Network (CNN)*, 5 May 2015, accessed 16 October 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/05/us/texas-shooting-gunmen/>.

¹² J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2015), 1-65.

¹³ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, *The Winner's Messaging Strategy of the Islamic State: Technically Excellent, Vulnerable to Disruption* (Washington, DC: Wikistrat, 2015), 1-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Karen Kaya, "ISIS's Information Operations: Analyzing Their Themes and Messages." *OE Watch* 4, no. 10 (October 2014): 60-63.

¹⁷ Viola Gienger, "Kerry Says Assad Staying as Syrian Leader is a 'Non-Starter,'" United States Institute of Peace, 12 November 2012, accessed 2 December 2015, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2015/11/12/kerry-says-assad-staying-syrian-leader-non-starter>.

¹⁸ Michael Gordon, "U.S. Begins Military Talks with Russia on Syria," *The New York Times*, 18 September 2015, accessed 7 December 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/19/world/europe/us-to-begin-military-talks-with-russia-on-syria.html?_r=0.

¹⁹ Julia Ioffe, "Russia's Game Plan in Syria is Simple," *Foreign Policy*, 25 September 2016, accessed 30 September 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/25/russias-game-plan-in-syria-is-simple-putin-assad/>.

²⁰ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013, H. 4310, 112th Cong., 2d sess. (26 December 2012): H327.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic History and the Islamic State

Since its inception, the organization referred to as the “Islamic State” in this thesis has been known by several names and acronyms. At the time of this writing, the leaders of this organization refer to themselves as the Islamic State. Some of the more popular monikers are the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Some nations have taken to using the term “Daesh” to delegitimize the Islamic State.¹ For the purposes of clarity, the term “Islamic State” will be used and is meant to encompass all names used for the organization both past and present.

In order to properly understand the Islamic State and its goals, it is first important to understand the history of the Islamic religion. This religion and its interpretation is the bedrock of the Islamic State’s worldview and motivations. Dr. John L. Esposito’s, *The Oxford History of Islam*, stands out as a comprehensive history of the Islamic religion. This edited collection of essays spans from the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abd Allah in the sixth century A.D. through the turn of the twenty-first century, and includes many of the great advances the world owes to the Islamic world, particularly in the areas of science, medicine, and technology. This work also includes a description of the schism between the Sunni and Shia sects of the Islamic religion and some of the long-term consequences associated with this divide. Early Christians and Muslims relations is perhaps the most important section covered within this book as it sets the stage for the world in which we live in today there is a seemingly vast void of misunderstanding between the Judo-Christian and Islamic societal traditions.² More recently, Dr. Esposito

wrote *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, which is a more condensed volume of knowledge of the Muslim world tailored for the layman. This book focuses on the ideological differences between the Muslim and Christian worlds, and reinforces that while some elements of the Muslim and Arab world engage in acts of violence and terrorism against the Western world, this is not indicative of the Muslim or Arab world as a whole. This distinction or delineation is important when attempting interpret the problem that is the Islamic State.³

Another key point within Islamic history that requires examination for the purposes of this thesis is the Salafi movement within the Sunni sect of the Islamic faith. According to *The Oxford History of Islam*, Salafism is, “the early twentieth-century Islam reform movement that called for a return to the principles followed by the venerable ancestors.”⁴ While the concepts of this movement date to the earliest days of the Islamic faith, it was codified, at least in part, by Egyptian reformers Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Ridda around the turn of the twentieth century.⁵ The objective of the movement was to update the Islamic religion in order to ensure that it would remain sustainable for the indefinite future. According to Muhammad Abduh, “Islam calls for the subordination of everything to God and thus rejects the separation of the spiritual and the temporal.”⁶ The term “Salafi” is derived from the Arabic word “Salaf,” which translates to “ancestors.” Salafists believe that it is the earliest practitioners of the Islamic religion that are the personification of what all Muslims should aspire to be.⁷ The first generation is considered the first followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Then, each subsequent generation is considered inferior to the one that preceded it. In the broadest sense, Salafists seek to practice Islam as it was in its earliest days and purest form. It is

considered one of the strictest forms of Sunni Islam.⁸ The Islamic State draws much of its rhetoric from Salafist doctrine.⁹

The relationship between Salafism and Wahhabism is a point of contentious debate amongst theologians and scholars. Some believe the two are the same, while others seem to think that Salafism and Wahhabism are two distinct movements.¹⁰ Wahhabism is considered a very conservative form of Sunni Islam, which seeks to practice Islam through a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith.¹¹ The Hadith is a series of "reports" that supposedly directly quote the Prophet Muhammad, used by both Wahhabis and Salafists to ascertain the Prophet's opinion on a variety of issues. Wahhabis trace their history back to Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, who, around the year 1740 on the Arabian Peninsula, began promoting a more fundamentalist version of the Islamic religion. This approach included strict prayer practices and the rejection of what he considered the worship of "holy men" or "saints." Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab declared any worship outside of his teachings heresy. This interpretation included seeking protection or salvation from any deity that was not Allah. In the opinion of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, Muslims, who disagreed with his interpretations, were not merely mistaken, they were not Muslims at all. Those ibn Abd-al-Wahhab excommunicated from the faith could be attacked and killed. Additionally, Wahhabi doctrine forbade befriending non-Muslims or non-Wahhabi Muslims.

In 1744, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud in which ibn Saud would use his power to spread the Wahhabi doctrine in exchange for ibn Abd-al-Wahhab's blessing.¹² In basic terms, ibn Abd-al-Wahhab would declare a tribe or group heretics for practicing a different form of Islam or engaging in idolatry,

which gave ibn Saud moral justification for going to war against them, and taking their lands and resources.¹³ By 1818, the House of Saud (and its adopted Wahhabi ideology) had expanded to an empire that was roughly the size of modern day Saudi Arabia. In 1818, the House of Saud came into conflict with the Ottoman Empire and was beaten back significantly, but not destroyed. Following the decline and eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the House of Saud established the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the Wabbahi-Saud alliance having been preserved and strengthened through a series of interfamily marriages in the preceding generations. Even today, the Saudi Minister of Religion is always a descendant of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab.¹⁴ In 1938, oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia. The following economic boom made Saudi Arabia a central power in the Middle East region, both culturally and militarily.

Some have said that Wahhabism and Salafism are synonymous, or that one is a subset of the other.¹⁵ However, a better comparison would suggest “literalism” versus “puritanism.” While the two sects share many common features and beliefs and both have served as inspiration for the Islamic State, Salafism seeks “pure” Islam without forsaking the benefits of modern society. For example, there is no way the Prophet Muhammad could have conceptualized the Internet or social media, but the Islamic State has been able to quickly make great use of this technology without any perceived ideological pains or excessive justification. Also, Salafism has developed independently of Wahhabism over a different timeline and different regions globally.¹⁶ Because the concept of Salafism is not connected with a single region or ethnic group, it might be seen as more appealing for groups like the Islamic State that rely on recruits from across the region as well as the West. While some scholars and experts consider “Wahhabi” and “Salafist”

interchangeable, Salafists consider the title to be derogatory.¹⁷ From a religious standpoint, the Islamic State is best described as a Sunni Salafist-Jihadist group.¹⁸

These Salafist religious underpinnings drive the Islamic State to commit atrocities like the destruction of ancient religious sites in Syria. Many of these sites are associated with the Sufi sect of Islam. The Sufi sect, sometimes called “Islamic Mysticism,” seeks to attain purity in the Islamic faith through the worship of sacred holy shrines and tombs.¹⁹ The Islamic State considers these holy sites as idolatry and not pure or correct Islam, which is used as justification to destroy them.²⁰ These acts are seen as an effort to cleanse their land of sacrilege. This history is only one way that religious doctrine has affected the conflict today.

While the historical underpinnings of the Islamic State’s war are rooted in history they have been quick to adopt new methods and techniques. This innovation is particularly true with the group’s use of social media. Since its inception, the Islamic State has proven to be extremely adept at using social media to its advantage.

Twitter and the Islamic State

To understand the Islamic State’s use of Social media, it is vital to have an understanding of the basic concepts of social media. While many use technology or services that fall under the umbrella of “social media,” few understand it. This ambiguity can be attributed to the fact that social media is a relatively new enduring phenomenon. In his book, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*, sociologist Dhiraj Murthy opines:

Social media has been broadly defined to refer to the many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools that enable anyone to publish and access information, collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships.²¹

This work lays the groundwork for the theory behind social media as a whole as well as Twitter. According to Mr. Murthy, “Twitter is a conduit for a global stream of consciousness.”²² The implication of this global consciousness is explored in relation to its effects on journalism, disaster scenarios, and activism. With respects to activism, Mr. Murthy expounds on the instrumental role Twitter played in the “Arab Spring” of 2011. The leadership of several Middle Eastern countries was ousted from power by mass protests organized using Twitter. Perhaps more importantly, Twitter was used to garner support for protestors on a global scale. It is important to note that Murthy wrote in 2013, and makes no mention of the Syrian Civil War, which was a product of the Arab Spring. It also does not mention Islamic fundamentalism and how these religious zealots use social media for their own aims. Despite this, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age* provides excellent insight on how people use social media to communicate, collaborate, and organize.

The social media platform, Twitter, was officially launched on 15 July 2006. It is similar in many respects to other social media services as it centers on users posting information and viewing information posted by other users. What distinguishes Twitter from competitors like Facebook is that any Twitter user can view the posts of any other user unless the poster makes their content “private” or restricts a specific user from using them (known as “blocking” on most social media sites). Twitter users do not have to “friend” another user to view their posts, but they can “follow” users, and those posts will be presented in their “feed” every time they check the service. Posts on Twitter are known as “Tweets.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word Tweet as “to talk in a quick and informal way about unimportant things.”²³ Tweets are limited to

140-characters in length, requiring a poster to be judicious in order to convey ideas to their followers; though in recent years, Twitter has enabled users to post photos and even embed short video clips within their Tweets. Twitter was originally coined as a “microblogging” service, intended for users to post quickly-consumed content as a lightweight alternative to bulkier rivals like Facebook and MySpace. Followers can repost or “retweet” the posts of other users, forwarding those posts to even more users. Tweets can be searched in mass through key word searches or through their “hashtag” if one has been created for a topic.

Hashtags can be created by any Twitter user simply by adding a “#” symbol in front of a word or phrase with no spaces between words. For example, on 17 December 2015, the United States Army posted on its Twitter account using the hashtag “#OperationToyDrop” to promote the holiday charity event, Operation Toy Drop, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.²⁴ The hashtag allows Twitter users to easily Tweet about and support an event or cause without wasting precious characters or posting confusing unclear Tweets. The concept of hashtags have transcended Twitter and become ubiquitous within pop culture, having been adopted by numerous other social media services. This ubiquity means that causes and concepts linked to popular hashtags can be easily spread across social media platforms and reach even more people.

Another interesting feature of Twitter is how users interact with one another. Unless specifically blocked from doing so, any user can send a publicly visible message to another by simply composing a Tweet with a “@” symbol in front of the recipient’s name, regardless who the user is. For example, anyone with a Twitter account can message the Vice President of the United States by composing a tweet containing

“@JoeBiden.” This Tweet would appear in the Vice President’s “notifications tab” on their Twitter feed. In common language, to send a public Tweet to someone is referred to as “Tweeting at them.” These kinds of interactions can be in response to Tweets not originally designed to be “at” anyone. Public Tweets between users can be viewed by all users. Disagreements played out on Twitter between celebrities or popular users are sometimes referred to as “Twitter feuds.” Twitter also allows users to send private or “direct” messages between users; however, both the recipient and the sender must follow each other to enable direct messaging. Twitter can be accessed using a traditional desktop or laptop computer as well on a variety of mobile devices using Twitter’s proprietary application or through third party software suites with additional features such as enhanced analytics or being able to schedule tweets to be posted in advance. These additional features have been useful for persons or organizations that use Twitter as an advertisement platform. Some electronics companies have integrated the Twitter application (as well as other social media services) into their “smart” or internet connected television sets.

Twitter initially became popular with journalists who use the service to break news or update stories and beat out their competition.²⁵ The simple, streamlined format makes it ideal for mobile computing and smartphone users. Celebrities and politicians use Twitter in order to engage directly with fans or supporters by providing updates on their events and causes. Businesses use Twitter to promote their products and services and receive feedback from customers.²⁶ However, the majority of users use Twitter to receive those posts from people whom they are interested in as well as Tweet to their friends and engage with other users. The restrictive nature of Twitter’s 140-character format has

served to hone and focus user's content and creativity with comedians, celebrities, politicians, and ordinary people creating memorable and meaningful content within the diminutive confines of a single Tweet. As the service and its use evolves, more users are informing and entertaining each other by Tweeting what is happening around them. Because of this constant evolution, there are endless possibilities for the application of Twitter and social media as a whole. Unfortunately, the leaders of the Islamic State came to the same realization. The Islamic State has used many of the features of Twitter that make the service unique and leveraged them to recruit fighters and spread its narrative.

Twitter has begun to "verify" the identity of select users. These users are so sought after or relevant as to warrant having their identities authenticated. While there is no criterion for which accounts are verified these accounts are routinely associated with individuals, brands, and organizations in the fields of music, acting, fashion, government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, and business.²⁷ A verified account has a blue check mark next the name. For example, the U.S. Army has a verified Twitter account (see figure 2).



Figure 2. The U.S. Army Twitter Page

Source: U.S. Army, “Official Twitter Page of the United States Army,” accessed 28 February 2016, <https://www.twitter.com/USArmy>.

When a Twitter account is verified, users seeking that account can be assured they have found what they are looking for and not a fake or “parody” account. For example, musician Kanye West has a verified Twitter account, which separates it from the myriad of imposters (figures 3 and 4). While the Islamic State has never had a verified Twitter account, it has been able to take advantage of the verification system. In January 2015, the Islamic State gained access to the U.S. Central Command’s verified Twitter account and for several hours used as a platform for propaganda and insults before the account was finally suspended and appropriate access restored to the U.S. Central Command staff.²⁸



Figure 3. A popular “Parody” Kanye West Twitter Account

Source: Twitter.com, “Kanye West,” accessed 12 March 2016, <https://twitter.com/kanyewset/status/702240617125040128>.



Figure 4. Kanye West’s Verified Twitter Account

Source: Twitter.com, “Kanye West,” accessed 12 March 2016, <https://twitter.com/kanyewest/status/698145869720371200>.

According to the Nielsen Company, research activity on the social media service Twitter “is strongly correlated with the combination of emotion, memory, and attention.”²⁹ While this study was conducted with the aim of connecting the use of Twitter and viewing habits, the results also show that people use Twitter to talk about issues and post content that has grabbed their attention or they are connected with emotionally. Nielson observed a surge in Twitter activity during a TV program’s commercial breaks, but the activity lulls during the show. This conclusion may appear to be common sense to most, and it is backed by empirical data. It provides another important insight on how people use Twitter. Television networks and advertisers have attempted to capitalize on these insights, and have begun to integrate social media hashtags into their content. For example, on the NBC show *The Voice*, the hashtag, #TheVoice, is displayed prominently in the lower right hand quadrant of the frame throughout the duration of the show.

This branding serves several interwoven purposes. First, it subtly prompts the user to use the hashtag in their Twitter posts about the show in hopes that the hashtag will trend and garner attention to the show that it would have otherwise received. Second, this gives TV networks the opportunity to quickly assess the feedback provided by viewers, and make adjustments to content, if necessary. These adjustments can even be done in near real time as the show airs. In some cases, a single TV episode will display multiple hashtags throughout its duration. These hashtags can appear and be replaced by others in correspondence to plot developments during the episode. These sequenced hashtags provide TV networks with even more specificity in feedback, allowing them to know which elements of an episode were the most impactful with viewers or which they simply

enjoyed the most. Again, while these facts are associated with Western television audiences and the entertainment industry, it will be demonstrated later in this thesis that the Islamic State has adopted several of these methods and used them to great effect in their operations.

The Recent History of the Islamic State

The Islamic State's use of social media is the primary subject of this thesis, but the Islamic State is a more than a group of accomplished Twitter users. The group carries out operations within the physical domain and many of those operations related to their activities in the social media domain. If only for this reason, it is important to understand the group holistically.

In their book, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, journalist Michael Weiss and regional expert Hassan provide a detailed history of the Islamic State, and a breakdown of the groups goals as well as their tactics and strategy. In order to understand the group's narrative and use of social media, it is imperative to understand the group as a whole. It is interesting to compare the Islamic State's dogmatic worldview to their technical and media savvy. This book provides an understanding of how the Islamic State came to be from its ideological patriarch, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, and his activities in the decades prior to its standing today as of January 2015. With a greater appreciation of the Islamic religion, it is possible to have a better understanding that Al-Zarqawi's adopted ultra-conservative orthodox Salafist Muslim doctrine and his violent street criminal pedigree made for a dangerous combination. While Al-Zarqawi was killed in Iraq by U.S. forces in 2006, the group that he created as well as his ultra-violent strategy and tactics served as the skeleton frame on which the Islamic State would be built. Following the withdrawal

of U.S. military forces from Iraq in 2011, the Islamic State was able to operate in the largely ignored and ungoverned Al-Anbar provinces of the country. When Syria plunged into civil war, the group seized the opportunity presented by the power vacuum in that country and quickly amassed new recruits and arms, fighting both the Syrian regime and other opposition groups that they deemed to be a threat. Weiss and Hassan note that while Al-Zarqawi was a natural “showman” with a keen media sense, the Islamic State’s media prowess dwarfs those efforts.³⁰

While Al-Zarqawi kept only three tech savvy followers to handle the creation of his propaganda videos and other content, the Islamic State has hundreds of people with the express task of creating content, in addition to those who are charged with engaging in social media operations. The Islamic State produces top-quality digital content, using the most up-to-date equipment and means available, placing that content into circulation to devastating effects.³¹ These effects will be expounded on later in this paper.

According to interviews with captured fighters and defectors, the Islamic State puts its media specialists’ through task-specific training prior to employing them on the battlefield. Following two months of training on basic combat skills, they are put through a month-long training course on video production and computer skills. Members of the media cells are divided into different groups based on their specialty. Some are tasked to serve as “combat cameramen” and provided with cameras, smartphones, weapons, and vehicles. “Regular” Islamic State fighters are not permitted to have cameras. Others are tasked to serve in video editing and are provided with state of the art computer editing equipment and internet access. There are also others tasked with logistical support for media operations such as securing and installing backup generators to ensure that media

operations can continue in the event of a power outage. Prisoners and defectors have also indicated that members of the media cells are selected based on their abilities with some having experienced gained by working at television station and technology companies. Equipment is brought in through Turkey, and internet service is procured through Turkish internet service providers. Cameramen and the video editors rarely meet face to face. Couriers are used to task cameramen with daily assignments. Once the cameramen complete their daily tasks, they submit their footage and pictures on a thumb drive through the use of a “dead drop” or another courier. This operational security is necessary to protect those who edit and upload the finished content. All members of media cells are considered high value assets in comparison with other Islamic State fighters, and are much better compensated. This compensation comes in the form of better living conditions, higher pay, and better equipment. These levels of compensation and preferential treatment are indicators of the importance the Islamic State places on media operations. More significantly, media cell leaders in the Islamic State are granted the title, “Emir.” This word literally translates to the word “prince,” but is synonymous with the English word, “commander,” in this context. Media cell leaders are equal in rank to the Islamic State military commanders in the geographic areas in which they operate.³²

Some Western media outlets have also highlighted reports from defectors and captured Islamic State fighters that many of the events depicted with their videos and other content are staged with some video makers employing the use of “cue cards” for dialogue and requiring multiple iterations or “takes” to get the material they need.³³ This practice can be construed that the Islamic State is being disingenuous in its messaging or that these revelations are a mark against the organization’s integrity. However, the

Islamic State is not the first organization that has engaged in these sort of practices in their media operations. Even the U.S. Army has staged seemingly candid events for the purposes of publicity. An example of this is the newsreel footage of General Douglas MacArthur's return to the Philippines in October 1944.³⁴ The footage was clearly shot from a tripod indicating prior setup and the camera operator deliberately frames General McArthur and pans with him as he moves ashore. This effort was almost certainly coordinated and staged to ensure that the visual would be effective in engendering the support of the American public back home. The leadership of the Islamic State understands the importance of compelling visuals and good storytelling, and applies the resources and personnel to that end. While Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi understood the power of fear and shock value, the Islamic State has transcended simple gore and embraced style. They created their own patented brand of ultra-violence and turned it into an entertainment art form.

The Islamic State is comprised of multiple types of individuals with varying and sometimes overlapping goals. Some are motivated by religious ideology seeking to do what they perceive to be their part for their religion. Others are motivated to join because of political grievances that in many cases also fall along ethnic lines. Some join for financial gain and others for the opportunity or justification to commit acts of violence. The Islamic State has also conscripted child soldiers into their service using coercion and fear of reprisal against the recruits' family or group as motivators. There have been reports from Islamic State prisoners that they were forced to use psychotropic drugs prior to combat in order to make them more willing and capable combatants.³⁵

Organizationally from a tactical and operational perspective, the Islamic State nearly epitomizes the term “hybrid threat” as defined in ADRP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*. They are a “diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, and/or criminal elements unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.”³⁶ The Islamic State has proven capable of fielding forces equipped and tasked to fight conventionally in strengths of platoon and bordering on company-level strength. Additionally the Islamic State has fielded armored vehicles (see figures 5 and 6), and has engaged in limited instances of combined arms maneuver.³⁷



Figure 5. An Islamic State T-55 Firing

Source: Islamic State T-55, Syria, accessed 28 February 2016, https://12.postimg.org/a2gemf1nh/B3n_D9wd_CEAAC_W0_K_jpg_large.jpg.



Figure 6. Captured ZSU-23-4 Pressed into Islamic State Service

Source: Islamic State Zsu-23-4, Syria, accessed 28 February 2016, <http://posting.org/image/9ovx3wzxl/>.

The Islamic State captured most of its tanks and heavy vehicles from Iraqi and Syrian military units that abandoned them on the battlefield or in their depots. The Islamic States' weapons appear to be a mixture of Soviet-era, European, American, and Chinese manufactures and have been acquired through a variety of means. Despite the Western media's focus on the Islamic States' limited heavy armor resources, the backbone of their vehicle fleet appears to be civilian pickup trucks and U.S. made HUMVEE vehicles, with thousands of the latter being captured following the fall of Mosul in June 2014.³⁸ HUMVEEs have been utilized as both as a combat vehicle and as a delivery platform for suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (SVIEDs). The HUMVEE has proven to be an effective SVIED platform as its frame can support larger explosive payloads and in its up-armored configuration the vehicle provides the

driver enhanced protection from small arms fire increasing the likelihood of making it to the intended target.³⁹ Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the iconic image of the HUMVEE is synonymous with the American military and therefore its employment as a weapon by the Islamic State is seen as a moral victory but also an assault on the United States' image in the region. Multiple generations of Iraqis have seen American Soldiers riding around their countries in the distinctive wide-bodied trucks and now they are seeing those same trucks being turned against them, if only indirectly.

When engaging in conventional style warfare, command and control of multiple combat elements appears to be rudimentary and yet moderately effective. Large-scale attacks are supported with preparatory indirect fires and large suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIED). The Islamic State has employed several simultaneous SVBIED attacks with attack vehicles as large as tractor-trailer trucks. When successful, the Islamic State has been able to use the chaos and confusion immediately following the SVBIED strikes to overwhelm numerically superior foes.⁴⁰ Much of this has been noted by authors Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello in their paper written for the *CTC Sentinel*. Knights and Mello also note that the Islamic State appears to be uncomfortable in defensive operations and is prone to attempting counterattack and other offensive operations even when conditions do not favor them. This eagerness to attack can be attributed to a variety of factors, but Knights and Mello single out that for the Islamic State to maintain its image as victorious warriors it must be seen as constantly attacking its enemies and defeating them.⁴¹ These attacks sometimes resulted in them squandering fighters and resources in hopeless assaults. The Islamic State realizes that

the world is watching them and has let this affect their operations down to the tactical level.

The style and type of combat that the Islamic State engages in can vary greatly based on threat, force composition, and geography. For instance while in some cases the Islamic State has fought as a standing army (the Battle of Mosul 2014 is an example of this practice) and in other instances has utilized other lower intensity warfare techniques more associated with insurgencies such as assassinations and kidnappings. In short, the Islamic State is doctrinally flexible.⁴²

Once the United States began its bombing campaign, the Islamic State appeared willing to abandon its vehicle and large formation tactics, transitioning to insurgency style operations. They have positioned critical resources and fighters in urban population centers using civilians as shields against American air power. There are reports that the Islamic State tightly controls the movements of civilians, fearing the loss of the perceived protection from coalition airpower that they provide.⁴³ There have also been reports that the Islamic State has attempted forms of basic governance in cities like Mosul such as enforcing laws on the street and settling legal disputes. The Islamic State has released videos and posted content intended to highlight these attempts at governance, depicting scenes of good order and tranquility without images of violence or combat.⁴⁴

The Islamic State also deals in black market criminal activities in addition to its terror operations. This illicit commerce is done to maintain a stream of revenue to finance their operations. The Islamic State has captured several oil refineries intact and used them to export millions of dollars in refined oil products.⁴⁵ Oil sales are by far its most profitable enterprise followed by asset seizure. The Islamic State also engages in human

trafficking, arms sales, and the sale of stolen antiquities on the internet. There is little indication of any illicit activities that the Islamic State will not engage in to generate revenue for its cause. As airstrikes have hampered their ability to export oil, the Islamic State has been forced to rely more and more on its less profitable ventures to generate funds. As a major component of the Islamic State's narrative, they need money in order to pay its fighters, procure resources, and keep up the appearance of success and wealth for attracting potential recruits.⁴⁶

The Islamic State has claimed sovereignty within the territory under its control. They refer to this territory as a caliphate. A caliphate is a state run through Islamic principles or an "Islamic State." This state is led by a "caliph." The word "caliph" is derived from the Arabic word for "successor," denoting that the caliph is a successor of the Prophet Mohammed. Several declared caliphates have emerged over time with varying degrees of power or success.⁴⁷ However, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus will remain on the caliphate calling itself the Islamic State.

The caliphate is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State's territory has been broken up into twenty-four regions called "Wilayats" (this is Arabic for province). Each Wilayat has an appointed governor. These territories have been strategically placed so as to, in many cases, overlap the internationally recognized Syria and Iraq border in hopes of establishing a unified state. Al-Baghdadi has a cohort of trusted advisors who come together with the Wilayat governors to form a Shura council for deciding on significant religious and military issues. The government of the Islamic State also uses various councils for issues similar to legitimate states. For example, the Islamic State has a Leadership Council for creating policy, a Security Council for enforcing the law within

its territory, and a Military Council that deals with combat operations against external threats. Separate from the Security Council is a court system for the prosecution of criminals. These courts reportedly handle high crimes such as theft and murder as well as more mundane offenses such as traffic violations or civil cases like landlord-renter lawsuits. The Islamic State boasts that it has several operational hospitals staffed by qualified doctors within its borders, and have even instituted a polio vaccine inoculation program. Children born within the Islamic State are now issued official Islamic State birth certificates. The Islamic State also has several schools where children can attend to learn basic reading and math as well as receive a state-approved Islamic education. Perhaps surprisingly, both boys and girls are allowed to attend school, although they are separated by gender. The education of women may seem out of step with Western perceptions of fundamentalist Islam, and specifically the Islamic State, but Muhammad Abduh, one of the founders of the Salafist Islamic movement advocated for the education of women. The University of Mosul is now operating under Islamic State control.⁴⁸

Underscoring the importance the Islamic State places on the war of narratives, the Media Council is considered equally as important as its other councils, including Leadership and Military Affairs.⁴⁹ The leaders making plans for the physical battlefields in Iraq and Syria are equal to those who are documenting those actions and sharing them with the world. The Islamic State uses social media as a means to support the physical battlefield and an independent combat arm in the cyberspace domain.

The question of the Islamic State's media organizational structure remains in flux. There appears to be some kind of dual-reporting or command relationship structure between regional governors and media operatives within those regions. This connection

could be that some media teams are tasked to regional level tasks within the Islamic State, handling internal messaging or public affairs and another caste or echelon that handles their external messaging. The delineation between the two remains in question. Are regional operatives tasked with producing or assisting in the production of external messaging when the situation requires it, or is there simply another team of individuals that handles this entirely? While numerous Islamic State defectors and captives have provided insights on the Islamic State media operation, there are still a lot of unknowns about their day-to-day operations.

J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan did a comprehensive statistical study of Twitter use specifically associated to users who were connected with the Islamic State. This work focuses on the technical aspects of the group's Twitter use, and highlights the lengths the group has gone to game the social media network as well as the sophisticated nature of its "applications" that users can download onto cell phones to allow Islamic State to "amplify" its messages through social media. J. M. Berger, a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution, specializing in the Middle East, has gone on to expound on many of these conclusions in a series of articles published in *The Atlantic*. Jonathan Morgan is a noted technology expert and data scientist. After the conclusion of this study, Twitter conducted an audit of its user base, and suspended or deactivated several thousand of the Islamic State's Twitter accounts.⁵⁰ The group has responded by threatening Twitter's founder, Jack Dorsey, claiming that he has started a "war" against the group (see figure 7). Perhaps more disturbing is the group's ability to adapt to Twitter's increased scrutiny and continued use of the platform.



Figure 7. The Islamic State’s Death Threat against Jack Dorsey

Source: David Goldman, “ISIS Supporters Threaten Twitter Founder Jack Dorsey,” *Cable News Network Money*, 2 March 2015, accessed 22 November 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/02/technology/ISIS-jack-dorsey-Twitter/>.

Policy and Strategy of the United States

The Congressional Research Service has produced a number of papers on the Islamic State, its motives, as well as the United States’ policy for the Islamic State and the Middle East as a whole. These sources provide excellent background on the Islamic State, but more importantly, provide insight into how the United States views the group and its methods. There is a wealth of Congressional testimony from public policy makers, military, and academic experts concerning the Islamic State. Some of this testimony relates directly to countering the narrative of the Islamic State, and specifically the group’s use of Social Media.

Service and joint publication manuals serve as a source to explain how the U.S. military views “Information Operations” and “Public Affairs” as well as outlining the legal differentiation between the two domains. These publications also include stipulations placed on military leaders, attempting to counter the media narrative of the Islamic State at the regional level. It is important to note that Information Operations covers activities such as military deception and psychological operations.⁵¹ Public Affairs is a much more straightforward field with the mission of informing and educating both the civilian populace and members of military.⁵² The strict delineation between Information Operations and Public Affairs stands in stark contrast with the Islamic State’s lack of codification, let alone restriction of these realms.

Public statements from the President of the United States (POTUS) provide interesting insight into the official public policy of the United States in relation to the Islamic State. On 10 September 2014, President Obama stated that the objective of the United States is to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”⁵³ This strategy is organized into four efforts:

1. A systematic campaign of airstrikes against the Islamic State.
2. Increased support to forces fighting the Islamic State on the ground.
3. Counterterrorism operations to prevent Islamic State attacks.
4. Providing humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by the Islamic State.⁵⁴

The official narrative concerning the Islamic State has shifted several times since it “debuted” in the summer of 2014. Once referred to as a “J. V. Team” incapable of sustained success, the Islamic State eventually became recognized as an organized

hybrid-threat to regional stability.⁵⁵ Now, in November 2015, the Islamic State is publicized as a terror threat capable of attacks against targets globally. While the leadership of the United States has held firm to its commitment to defeat the Islamic State, its policy narrative on the wider Syrian Civil War could be interpreted as in direct opposition. As of 2011, it was the policy of the United States that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad must step down from his position.⁵⁶ However, al-Assad has been able to hold on to power through over four years of bloody civil war against secular opposition groups and the Islamic State.

In September 2015, the government of Syria received vital military assistance from the Russian Federation to continue its fight against opposition forces (including the Islamic State).⁵⁷ In short, as of November 2015, the United States and Russia are both conducting military operations against the Islamic State, but are divided on the fundamental issue of the fate of the al-Assad regime. This uncertainty has been reflected in the media narrative of both nations. The United States has also publicly accused the Russians of specifically targeting Syrian opposition groups that were trained and equipped by the Central Intelligence Agency.⁵⁸ International observers and opposition groups have also noted that the Syrian and Russian militaries seem to be targeting religiously moderate or political opposition groups instead of striking the Islamic State.⁵⁹ These strikes are seen by some as a deliberate effort to eliminate any internationally acceptable alternatives, forcing neighboring countries and global powers to side with the al-Assad regime in a follow-on campaign to destroy the Islamic State in Syria.⁶⁰ The preservation of the al-Assad regime would be in direct contradiction to numerous statements from the President of the United States that Bashir al-Assad would not be a

part of Syria's political future after the conflict. On 15 December 2015, The US Secretary of State publically stated that the US government no longer sought a change in regime as an outcome of crisis in Syria.⁶¹

At the time of this writing, the conflict is ongoing. The situation on the ground in Syria is chaotic with both U.S. and Russian planes conducting airstrikes and opposition groups (including the Islamic State) fighting the Syrian regime, each other jockeying for an advantage. Moderate opposition groups are firing on Russian aircraft, one claiming downing a Russian helicopter in November 2015.⁶² Confounding the situation further, in November 2015, Turkey downed a Russian strike aircraft after the plane violated its airspace.⁶³ Additionally, Turkey is also conducting airstrikes against Islamic State positions within Syria while simultaneously battling with Kurdish separatists groups attacking the Islamic State.⁶⁴ Individuals, state actors, and other groups with sometimes conflicting and occasionally, but only coincidentally, aligned interests have created a perfect scenario to highlight the simplicity and consistency of the Islamic State's narrative. In short, according to the Islamic State, everyone who is not for the Islamic State is an enemy of the Islamic State.

With respect to strategic or international messaging up until 2012, the United States operated under the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948. This legislation is almost universally referred to as the "Smith-Mundt Act," owing its moniker to the bill's co-sponsors, Representative Karl Mundt and Senator Alexander Smith. According to Section 2, "the objectives of this Act are to enable the Government of the United States to promote a better understanding of the United States in other countries,

and to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.”⁶⁵

In the original iteration of the Smith-Mundt Act, the State Department was authorized to prepare and disseminate information about the United States through various media sources located overseas. Products produced for foreign audiences could also be produced in English for examination by members of Congress and American media organizations. However, in 1972, the Act was amended to specifically forbid the dissemination of products intended for foreign audiences within the United States for any reason. In 1990, the Act was amended again to allow these products to be made available after twelve years had passed from their original dissemination. This amendment was done for archival purposes.⁶⁶

Perhaps more important to the messaging efforts of the United States is the “Zorinsky Amendment.” Officially known as the “Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1986 and 1987,” this amendment, authored by Senator Edward Zorinsky, forbids the use of government funds allocated for public diplomacy to be used “to influence public opinion in the United States.” The amendment also states, “No program material prepared by the United States Information Agency shall be distributed within the United States.”⁶⁷ The United States Information Agency was disbanded in 1998 with the State Department absorbing the responsibility for these activities.⁶⁸

Both the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and the Zorinsky Amendment were enacted and updated during the Cold War to prevent the Executive Branch of the U.S. government from using the vast resources of the government to create a Soviet-like propaganda machine, undermining the Legislative and Judiciary Branches as well as the

will of the American people. However, it was impossible for anyone to foresee how media and technology would evolve over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Twitter was created in 2006, and in less than ten years has over 300 million active users globally.⁶⁹ The global user base of Facebook is over 1.4 billion, roughly 20 percent of the earth's population.⁷⁰ No one in either 1948 or even 1986 could have imagined the interconnected nature of today's world, in which people are turning away from traditional news sources and getting their information from social media services, essentially exchanging information and news amongst themselves. Indeed, it is these unconventional exchanges of information that now drive a significant percentage of what traditional news outlets choose to cover.

In 2012, recognizing the changing media landscape, the United States updated the Smith-Mundt Act and Zorinsky Amendment in order to make it easier for the government to conduct messaging on social media platforms. The United States can now disseminate its narrative and counter the Islamic State on the world's most commonly used platforms and means without hindrances.⁷¹ It is, however, just one voice amongst many, many others.

¹ Faisal Irshaid, "ISIS, ISIL, IS or Daesh? One Group, Many Names," *BBC*, 2 December 2015, accessed 28 February 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277>.

² John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Kindle edition.

³ John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-4.

⁴ Esposito, *The Oxford History*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Weiss and Hassan, 2.
- ⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (April 2005): 207-39, accessed 4 December 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100500497004>.
- ⁹ Weiss and Hassan, 5.
- ¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, 239.
- ¹¹ Ali Al-Ahmed, "Video conference with anonymous interviewer, 1 November 2001, interview Saudi Time Bomb?" Frontline, Public Broadcasting Service, WGBH Educational Foundation, accessed 23 February 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html>.
- ¹² Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 46-73, Kindle Edition.
- ¹³ Ibid., 10-11.
- ¹⁴ David Long, *Culture and Customs of Saudi Arabia* (New York: Greenwood, 2005), 11.
- ¹⁵ Wiktorowicz, 207.
- ¹⁶ Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya* (Washington DC: U.S. Library of Congress, 2008), 2.
- ¹⁷ Wiktorowicz, 207.
- ¹⁸ Weiss and Hassan, 121.
- ¹⁹ Esposito, *Oxford History*, 8184, Kindle edition.
- ²⁰ Kristin Romey, "ISIS Destruction of Ancient Sites Hits Mostly Muslim Targets," *National Geographic*, July 2015, 1, accessed 23 February 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150702-ISIS-Palmyra-destruction-salafism-sunni-shiite-sufi-Islamic-State/>.
- ²¹ Dhiraj Murthy, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age (DMS - Digital Media and Society)* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 7-8.
- ²² Murthy, 51.

²³ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Tweet,” accessed 23 February 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tweet>.

²⁴ U.S. Army, Twitter post, 17 December 2015 (3:50 PM), accessed 21 March 2016, https://mobile.twitter.com/i/nojs_router?path=%2FUSArmy%2Fstatus%2F677636922919944192.

²⁵ Murthy, 51-60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-24

²⁷ Twitter, Inc., “FAQs about Verified Accounts,” accessed 22 March 2016, <https://support.twitter.com/articles/119135>.

²⁸ CNN Politics, “CENTCOM Twitter Account Hacked, Suspended,” *Cable News Network (CNN)*, 12 January 2015, accessed 28 February 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/12/politics/>.

²⁹ Nielsen, “Brain Activity Predicts Social TV Engagement: Neuro-Twitter TV Linkage Study,” 2015, accessed 7 December 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/niensenglobal/co/docs/Reports/2015/Nielsen%20Neuro%20Report%20April%202015.pdf>.

³⁰ Weiss and Hassan, 1-21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1-270.

³² Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, “Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State’s Propaganda Machine,” *Washington Post*, 20 November 2015, accessed 22 March 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html.

³³ Miller and Mekhennet,

³⁴ U.S. Army, “Gen MacArthur Returns to the Philippines” (video), 9 January 1945, accessed 10 April 2016, <http://www.military.com/video/operations-and-strategy/warfare/macarthur-returns-to-the-philippines/660792871001>.

³⁵ Peter Holley, “The Tiny Pill Fueling Syria’s War and Turning Fighters into Superhuman Soldiers,” *Washington Post*, 19 November 2015, accessed 22 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/19/the-tiny-pill-fueling-syrias-war-and-turning-fighters-into-super-human-soldiers/>.

³⁶ U.S. Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2011).

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CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As discussed in the introduction, the primary aim of this thesis is to examine the differences in how the Islamic State and the United States conduct media operations to highlight the asymmetric differences between the two. The intent of this paper is not to critique the merits of standing foreign policy of the United States government or its leadership. These studies will focus primarily on narrative messaging as well as content creation, dissemination, and assessments. The phenomenon of social media will be of particular focus because of its unique ability to spread information at incredible speeds to a wider audience than could have been previously imagined. It is also important to note, for the purposes of clarity, that it is not the purpose of this study to oversimplify or generalize the Islamic worldview with specific regards to Sunni Muslims. While it is true that the Islamic State is made up of predominately Sunni Muslims, it would be incorrect to draw the conclusion that all Sunni Muslims are members or support the Islamic State. By all accounts, only a small number of people in the Muslim world, both Sunni and Shia, support terrorism or violent extremism. Even fewer specifically support the efforts of the Islamic State. However, the Islamic State does operate within that greater Islamic ecosystem. This delineation is important to take into account when understanding that actions against the Islamic State can and do have effects upon the Islamic world as a whole.

The three cases studied for the purposes of this thesis were selected based on their relevance to the broader topic as well as the abundance of open source information available for research and analysis. The aim is to examine the media strategy of the

Islamic State's media activities from a tactical, operational, and strategic perspective as well as assessing U.S. efforts to counter these efforts. All three events or initiatives occurred since 2014, resulting in a lack of academic-level research material.

The first case study is the fall of the Iraqi city, Mosul, in June 2014. This early battle between the fielded forces of the Islamic State and the Iraqi Army and police will be used to examine the impact of the Islamic State's narrative and its use of social media on operations at the tactical level. This event was chosen because both the events on the physical battlefield as well as those in cyberspace were documented extensively in near real time. While there has been empirical data collected about the Islamic State's social media usage during this period, the analysis of the effects of social media operations must be inferred from the reaction of Iraqi military units posted to defend the city of Mosul. The reactions of Iraqi and Western leaders, both during the battle and its immediate aftermath, can also be examined. The Islamic State's social media efforts will be compared to similar Western business and civic social media centric marketing efforts from both a technical and theoretical perspective. This examination will highlight the similarities and differences between the West and the Islamic State. At the tactical level, the Islamic State uses social media like a weapon system because of its low lead-time and inherent ability to generate disproportionately high levels of effectiveness when compared to the effort required to achieve them.

The second case study is the death of Steven Sotloff, or more specifically, the video depiction of his execution at the hands of infamous Islamic State executioner, "Jihadi John." This video was selected to highlight the efforts of the Islamic State in what Westerners call operational or national messaging. Indeed, the video itself is titled, "A

Second Message to America.”¹ Sotloff’s tragic death was the second in a series of execution videos released by Jihadi John in 2014.² Each of these videos followed a similar format showing the death of a Western journalist or aid worker. These videos were ostensibly meant to serve as a “message” to world leaders, including the President of the United States. While it is certain that the Islamic State has engaged in more horrific atrocities, both for the purposes of media operations as well as daily operations, the video of Sotloff’s death was a very specific kind of message. The details of this message will be examined further in order to ascertain both the overt components and the more subtle undertones that speak to both the culture of the Islamic State as well as the image it is attempting to portray to enemies and supporters around the world. As will most things within the purview of marketing, messaging, and social media, it is difficult to judge the enduring effect of this video or the others that are similar. While the reaction of the world’s leaders has been documented in the media, it is almost impossible at this time to understand the effects these videos had on policy decisions or military operations.

The third case study is the United States’ campaign, “Think Again, Turn Away.” This example was selected in order to examine the operations undertaken to counter the dominance of the Islamic State’s social media operations. The State Department’s Counterterrorism Communication Center (CTCC) is the lead agency for the U.S. government’s attempts to counter the Islamic State narrative in the social media sphere. Originally created to counter the messaging of extremist organizations like Al-Qaeda, the CTCC has had to quickly shift focus and techniques to combat a much more capable and savvy foe found in the Islamic State.³ While the early efforts of the CTCC have left much to be desired both in the form of their composition and end result, this is the first attempt

made by the U.S. government to conduct counter messaging after the revamp of the Smith-Mundt Act. The United States can now create and disseminate influence products in English through social media platforms that can be accessed by American citizens.⁴ This fundamental change in legislation will be examined in context to the CTCC's counter-Islamic State messaging activities.

This study will use a qualitative methodology seeking to interpret the impact of Islamic State and United States' media operations since June 2014. The conclusions of J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan's quantitative analysis of Twitter use will be used anecdotally in conjunction with case studies of recent events involving the Islamic State and their use of the media, particularly social media. U.S. activities to counter the Islamic State will be examined over a like period. Areas identified as possible subjects for further or follow-on research will be identified within both the analysis and conclusion sections of this thesis.

The Islamic State uses social media to further its narrative as well as recruit supporters and coordinate activities. For the purpose of this paper, Twitter will be the social media focused upon. Twitter is a widely used social media service by the Islamic State as well as the public at large throughout the world. The use of Twitter has been examined closely for the purposes of marketing in addition to its use by the Islamic State. However, it is important to note that the use of social media by the Islamic State does not occur in a vacuum. Propaganda or media operations can happen in support of, in conjunction with, or independent of physical domain operations. The primacy of the efforts can shift based on the infrastructure of their environment or the particulars of the specific target audience. It will be shown in specific case studies that the narrative

remains constant while the delivery of the information may change based on the aforementioned factors.

Steven Sotloff's beheading video was not the first of its type. It is one in a series of videos in which the Islamic State decapitates a Western journalist or aid worker. This video release was selected for study because it was extensively covered and researched by reliable media sources and security professionals. This video is also archetypal of the format, composition, and production of previous and subsequent videos released by the Islamic State.

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CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Case Studies

The Fall of Mosul, 2014

On 6 June 2014, the Islamic State, then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, attacked the city of Mosul in Northern Iraq. Mosul is the largest city in the region and the third largest in the country.¹ Prior to June 2014, it was estimated that the city's population was approximately two million people. It also the ancestral home of Iraq's previous dictator, Saddam Hussein. Significant populations of Shia and Sunni Muslims as well as a Christians lived there.² The Islamic State attacked the city with a force of fighters that numbered approximately fifteen hundred. The city was defended by approximately twenty thousand American-trained and equipped Iraqi soldiers and police officers who were amply warned of an impending attack. By 10 June 2014, the city of Mosul had fallen to the Islamic State and its defenders were in a disorganized retreat. The city of Mosul provided the Islamic State with significant oil infrastructure and depots of thousands of military vehicles and weapons systems that were quickly put into operation against their former owners.³ The fall of Mosul in 2014 marked the arrival of the Islamic State as a regional power in the Middle East.

A significant number Iraqi soldiers and policemen in Mosul dropped their weapons and threw away their uniforms, deserting their posts at the outset of the battle. More disturbingly, some of these men quickly defected to the Islamic State. The defenders, who stood their ground, endured attacks from suicide car bombs and fighters wearing explosive vests along with an intensive military style attack.⁴ Poor leadership

hampered an effective defense of the city with the senior Iraqi officers fleeing the city in the heat of battle. Those who had not already deserted, defected, or died in battle, turned and fled.⁵

The Islamic State's victory at Mosul proved to be a media boon for them. The Western media covered this event heavily, if not outright highlighting the Islamic State's prowess in battle, condemning the incompetence of their foes.⁶ This victory also spread fear throughout the region, for if the Islamic State could defeat an organized army, what else could they do? It served as a black eye to the United States' previous efforts to train the Iraqi army. More importantly, the defeat was a blow against an already weak and ineffectual central Iraqi government.⁷

While it is easy to point out the benefits of the battle of Mosul for the Islamic State from a narrative/media perspective, this case study will focus on the Islamic State's media efforts prior to the battle and the effects of those efforts on the battle's outcome. Admittedly, assessing the effects of nonlethal operations is difficult under even ideal standards, but the goal is to identify enough evidence to draw at least a reasonable inductive or anecdotal conclusion.

In the weeks prior to the battle for Mosul, the Islamic State began to increase its social media activity. The group Tweeted pictures, videos, and descriptions of atrocities it had committed against Iraqi security forces including gruesome executions and torture, warning that the same fate awaited those that opposed them in Mosul. They also took to Facebook to message journalists as well as Iraqi Army and police commanders posted in Mosul with threats of violence specifically leveled at them individually.⁸ While much of this social media activity was done by motivated individual Islamic State supporters, a

great deal of it was done using sophisticated technology employed to strategically “game” social media services. According to J. M. Berger, the Islamic State employed an application known as “The Dawn of Glad Tidings” in order to extend their social media outreach. Fajr al-Basha’ir, as it is known in Arabic, was an application, which until June 2014, could be downloaded from the Google Play application storefront onto nearly any mobile device using the Android operating system. Once installed, Islamic State members and sympathizers could sign up and link their Twitter accounts to the application allowing the leadership of the organization to post Tweets on the user’s behalf. This application allowed the leadership of the Islamic State to send out “bursts” of social media activity that, if done correctly, could create a ripple effect leading to a larger, organic social media trend. This approach also eschewed Twitter search results for terms related to the situation in Iraq, giving the naïve user the impression that things were quite worse than what it might have actually been. During the lead up to the battle for Mosul, the Islamic State was able to generate almost forty thousand tweets in a single day.⁹

“The Dawn of Glad Tidings” is not an innovative technology. Quite the contrary, it is actually derivative in nature. The Islamic State’s social media application functions nearly identically to a service known as “Thunderclap.” This service gives users a way to “rise above the clutter when you need to be heard” on social media.¹⁰ Users create a message they want to “thunderclap” throughout social media platforms, and set a benchmark of the number of people that must sign up for that message before it is sent out in mass. The user recruits as many people as possible to “donate their social reach” to that message by signing up on the Thunderclap website and connecting their social media

accounts. Once that benchmark has been met, the message is sent to all of the associated social media accounts. This message is then seen simultaneously by more and a wider variety of people, again with the hopes of driving genuine organic web traffic to the content. The success of these Thunderclap campaigns is often measured in the number of “impressions” a message makes, or simply the number of users that saw the message in their social media traffic feed.¹¹ Several celebrities and political figures have used Thunderclap to amplify their social media reach and promote various causes or endeavors.¹² The White House recently employed Thunderclap to promote a gun control initiative through social media.¹³ The Islamic State has merely taken this concept and repurposed it for their own more nefarious ends.

Of note, according to the case study, the White House’s Thunderclap campaign “was strategically timed to tip during a key press conference with Vice President Joe Biden, right before the Senate voted on an amendment to its gun bill.” The White House’s campaign execution plan centered on generating attention with the hashtag, #NowIsTheTime. The hashtag alluded to using the tragic mass school shooting at Newtown, Connecticut, as an impetus for enacting new gun control laws. The goal was to create mass support for the proposed legislation that would sway the votes amongst members of the U.S. Congress. The White House website was updated with a button that linked users to the Thunderclap campaign enrolled. Within twenty-four hours, the campaign had over ten thousand people sign up. Ultimately, over eighteen thousand people pledged their support, including celebrities Brent Spiner and Russell Simmons.¹⁴ These participants were able to spread the #NowIsTheTime hashtag to over sixteen million people, this is known as an “impression,” meaning that hashtag was seen by the

person, but without any indication of the impact it had or action taken afterwards.¹⁵

Despite over sixteen million impressions made through social media, the United States Senate did not pass the aforementioned gun control legislation.¹⁶

While further research is required into the gun lobby's response to the #NowIsTheTime campaign, early conclusions drawn by gun control advocates in both policy and media circles determined that gun advocates engaged in a smaller scale social media campaign that was more narrow in scope. Instead of attempting to reach a large number of people, gun advocates sought to engage with a select group of individuals, specifically gun-owning and politically conservative voters in important congressional and senate districts.¹⁷ Gun advocates maximized their effects by targeting the right people that would influence critical legislators to secure victory. While these conclusions require further study, they seem to make sense. For example, while Brent Spiner, known for his role as "Data" on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, has over one million followers on Twitter, there is no immediately apparent indication that a significant number of these followers were passionate about gun control or located within important Congressional districts, or even within the United States for that matter.¹⁸

Examining the White House's Thunderclap gun control campaign and the initial conclusions of the gun lobby's counter effort, it is clear that the Islamic State has taken aspects of both for their own social media efforts in the Battle of Mosul, message artificial amplification to reach a wide audience through technological solutions combined with a measure of targeted specificity against key individuals. The Islamic State amplified the amount of Social Media traffic it generated in the run up to and during

the battle, directing that amplification towards a specific initial audience: the Iraqi military and police defending the city of Mosul.

Following the Battle of Mosul and the Islamic State's follow-on victory in Tal Afar, "The Dawn of Glad Tidings" connection to Twitter was cut off by the company's leadership. This action essentially "killed" the application.¹⁹ Also following the Battle of Mosul, the Iraq government imposed draconian restrictions on access to the internet, presumably to either cut off the Islamic State's ability to post materials on the internet or restrict the civilian populace from seeking out that content.²⁰ Predictably, the use of Virtual Private Network (VPN) software, allowing users to bypass internet restrictions, shot up almost overnight.²¹ The Iraqi government also terminated internet service to areas that were under the control of the Islamic State.²² It was reported that the Islamic State was able to tap into other internet infrastructures not under the direct control of the government as well as establishing satellite internet connections.²³ It is, however, an excellent indicator of how effective the Islamic State's social media efforts were against Iraqi forces in the Battle for Mosul. It would be nearly impossible to prove quantifiably that Iraqi soldiers and police officers abandoned their post, in part, because of a social media campaign. However, this could also be the perception of actual effectiveness on the part of the Iraqi government, which they then, in turn, took the action of shutting down the country's internet. This crackdown in and of itself could be considered an effect.

The Beheading of Steven Sotloff, 2 September 2014

On 4 August 2014, freelance journalist Steven Sotloff entered into Syria from Turkey, accompanied by a Syrian guide and a small caravan of the guide's cousins

serving as armed guards. Near the Syrian city of Aleppo, Sotloff and his guards were stopped at a group of Islamic State fighters who had established a checkpoint along the highway. Without a shot fired, Sotloff's group was taken prisoner. Shortly afterwards, Sotloff's guide and cousins were released with a warning, leaving Sotloff with the Islamic State.²⁴ On 2 September 2014, the Islamic State released a video of Sotloff's brutal beheading by Mohammed Emwazi, (then known by the nom de guerre "Jihadi John," in a video titled, "A Second Message to America."²⁵ Despite being removed from popular video websites like YouTube, it has been widely circulated and reposted around the internet. Segments of the video have been shown by traditional news outlets extensively, and it can be still be found posted with merely a cursory Google search.

The release of this video is atypical of the group's previous videos, as it was uncovered by the Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Intelligence Group, a private, for-profit intelligence firm, before the video was officially posted by the Islamic State.²⁶ The company released the video to its clients, forcing the Islamic State to post it ahead of schedule.²⁷ While this uncharacteristic release cycle might have caused some level of consternation for the Islamic State leadership, it does not seem to have affected the impact the execution video had on its global audience.

For the purposes of academic clarity, it is important to note that the author of this thesis has not viewed Steven Sotloff's video in its entirety. This decision was made intentionally for a myriad of ethical, legal, and moral concerns associated with watching the death of a noncombatant. The only parts of the video viewed for the purposes of the case study were those commonly shown on American television media. Transcripts of the

videos audio and a description of the actions therein were used in lieu of watching the video in its entirety.

Beheading as a form of execution in Islamic culture traces its origins back to the era of the Prophet Muhammad. In 627 AD, after the conclusion of the Battle of the Trench in Medina, the Prophet Muhammad ordered the mass execution of hundreds of prisoners.²⁸ Some countries in the Muslim world practicing Sharia Law, the legal framework stemming from the principles of the Islamic religion, have at some point maintained beheading as an acceptable form of punishment for legal infractions. Saudi Arabia still maintains the practice, having conducted fifty-nine decapitation executions in 2014.²⁹ Decapitation as a form of punishment was likely not invented by the Islamic world, and several other cultures have engaged in the practice at some point in history. The manifesto, *The Management of Savagery*, published online in 2004, written by Al-Qaeda theorist, Abu Bakr Naji, describes the act of decapitating a prisoner or enemy as a preferred method of conducting jihad among other violent approaches. The theories contained within *The Management of Savagery* served as a primer for the Islamic State's founding father, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and it is still distributed among Islamic State members today.³⁰

The video, like those preceding it, begins with a short clip of President Obama making a statement in which he reaffirms the United States' resolve to defeat the Islamic State. The video fades to black, transitioning to executioner Mohammed Emwazi standing next to a kneeling Steven Sotloff in a desolate, non-descript landscape. Sotloff, wearing a loose orange jumpsuit and under obvious duress, begins to speak first by identifying himself by name, and then criticizes the President of the United States and the

nation's policy of intervention in the region. Sotloff blames the President personally for his impending fate, concluding by saying that the President is marching the American people "into a blazing fire." Following Sotloff's remarks, Mohammed Emwazi, knife in hand and clad in all black with his face obscured by a head covering, begins speaking. Emwazi states that he is doing this because of the President of the United States' continued bombing campaign against the Islamic State, also blaming him for Scott Soltoff's imminent fate. Once Emwazi is done speaking, he takes his knife and begins to cut at Soltoff's neck. The video then cuts to an image of Soltoff's severed head sitting on top of his stomach. The video transitions to Emwazi standing next to British hostage, David Haines. Emwazi warns that the allies of the United States should cease their operations against the Islamic State.³¹

On 13 September 2014, the Islamic State released a video title, "A Message to the Allies of America," in which David Haines was killed in a nearly identical fashion.³² It is important to note that Steven Soltoff was shown in the same way that journalist James Foley was beheaded, again, in an identical fashion to Soltoff and Haines' brutal murders.

Examining the video from a technical standpoint reveals a high level of production savvy, especially in terms of audio quality, video resolution, and color correction. It also appears that multiple cameras were used from at least two different angles. In addition to above-average skills in videography, it also indicates a higher level of planning of resourcing, both on the parts of those that captured the video and those that edited it in post-production. Unfortunately, for those in opposition of the Islamic State, this is typical of the quality products released.

The method by which Steven Sotloff and other victims of the Islamic State were executed was likely chosen for shock value. The video was meant to convey the resolve of the Islamic State in the face of United States' opposition as well as to generate fear and outrage amongst the general population. The resolve demonstrated in the video was meant, in part, to entice like-minded people to come and join the Islamic State's cause. The Islamic State also understands that, in a world where people are bombarded by sights and sounds vying for their attention, beheading someone is a nearly guaranteed way of making sure their message is heard.

An Islamic State defector claiming to be present at several of these video executions stated that hostages were subjected to several "mock" executions prior their actual executions. They had been assured that they would not be killed and that the whole affair was merely for show or demonstration purposes.³³ This careful orchestration would explain why all of the hostages in these videos appear to be calm prior to being beheaded.

It was reported on 12 November 2015, that Mohammed Emwazi was killed in an airstrike in Raqqa, Syria, during a multinational operation conducted by U.S. and U.K forces.³⁴ While the situation on the ground in Syria prevents a 100 percent confirmation that the now-infamous executioner is dead, it is noteworthy that he has not been seen in a video since. In January 2016, the Islamic State released a new execution video featuring an English-speaking executioner. This video bears many similarities to the previous "Jihadi John" series of execution videos.³⁵

"Think Again, Turn Away," 2012-Present

The United States has attempted to counter the narrative of the Islamic State in the digital realm. In fact, a select group of individuals from the U.S. Department of State has

the specific task of countering the Islamic State’s narrative. This organization is known as Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). Founded in 2011 by Executive Order 13584, the CSCC has the mission to “coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism.”³⁶ Originally envisioned to counter the messaging of Al-Qaida, the CSCC shifted its focus to the Islamic State in 2013. With a staff of only about fifty, the group has attempted to counter extremist propaganda in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, and Somali across a wide variety of social media platforms.³⁷

In 2013, the group transitioned to generating content in English in order to counter the Islamic States efforts to radicalize and recruit English speakers to their cause.³⁸ This action coincides with the passage of the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012, which eases the restrictions on the U.S. government allowing the CSCC to produce content in English and distribute it over social media platforms that can be accessed by American citizens.³⁹

With a less restrictive legal environment and latitude to conduct operations in English, the CSCC unveiled its “Think Again, Turn Away” social media campaign in 2013.⁴⁰ The results of this aggressive campaign have been less than ideal. Products produced by the CSCC have been poorly received and have shown no evidence of effectiveness in stemming the tide of foreign fighters into the Islamic State’s ranks or damping support for the group globally.⁴¹

On 22 August 2014, the CSCC uploaded a video entitled, “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land,” to the video-sharing site, YouTube. The one-minute, nine-second video acts as a mock recruiting commercial that boasts to the viewer that by joining the

Islamic State they will learn new and valuable skills like “blowing up mosques” and “crucifying and executing Muslims”. The video also shows a montage of video clips of Islamic State members committing various atrocities such as crucifixions, summary executions, and whippings as well as the dumping of bodies into mass graves. As of 5 December 2015, the “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ land” video has been viewed over 880,000 times and has over 1,200 comments.⁴² It is also noteworthy that this video was created using clips taken from Islamic State propaganda videos. Also, Islamic State propaganda videos are routinely removed from YouTube because they violate the sites terms of service agreement.⁴³ The Islamic State clearly has no qualms about displaying its barbaric tactics for a global audience. It otherwise would not have been able to keep displays of barbarism on a high traffic site like YouTube for this long without the “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land” video.

The CTCC has also created Twitter accounts, posting in both English and Arabic, in order to spread the United States’ narrative. Instead of shying away from the efforts of the CTCC, the Islamic State has proven more than willing to confront them directly. Members of the CTCC staff have even gone as far as engaging in “Twitter arguments” with members of the Islamic State. In one instance, a CTCC member using the Think Again, Turn Away Twitter account was lured into a debate about the merits of U.S. foreign policy regarding the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal with Islamic State supporters.⁴⁴ In other exchanges, members of the CTCC would even taunt or “troll” Islamic State supporters on social media platforms.⁴⁵

The CTCC expanded its Think Again, Turn Away to other lesser-known social media platforms. One of these was Ask.fm, a site built around the concept in which a user

can post a question anonymously and solicit answers from other users. As Twitter began to suspend Islamic State accounts en masse, in 2014, support began to migrate to Ask.fm because it was, at the time, a largely unmoderated space.⁴⁶ As with Twitter, the CTCC aggressively targeted the posts of Islamic State supporters, attempting to counter the narrative (figure 8). Some of these posts were quite bizarre and, at times, unrelated to the CTCC's mission (figure 9).



Figure 8. A CTCC Response to an Islamic State Post on Ask.fm

Source: Kate Knibbs, “The State Department Tried to Fight ISIS on Ask.fm, and It Didn't Go Well,” Gizmodo, 4 December 2015, accessed 5 April 2016, <http://gizmodo.com/the-state-department-tried-to-fight-isis-on-ask-fm-and-1746071495>.



Figure 9. A CTCC Response on Ask.fm

Source: Kate Knibbs, “The State Department Tried to Fight Isis on Ask.fm, and It Didn't Go Well,” Gizmodo, 4 December 2015, accessed 5 April 2016, <http://gizmodo.com/the-state-department-tried-to-fight-isis-on-ask-fm-and-1746071495>.

The above-mentioned efforts of the CTCC were under the supervision and direction of the group’s then director, Alberto Fernandez. A 55-year-old career diplomat and expert on Islam known for being confrontational and opinionated, Fernandez pursued the strategy based around aggression and directness.⁴⁷ Evaluation of Fernandez’s efforts has been decidedly negative.⁴⁸ Almost all experts have said that the CTCC’s efforts have been ineffective.⁴⁹ Some have gone so far as to say that they have had a negative impact on the efforts of the United States to counter Islamic extremism.⁵⁰

Alberto Fernandez has recently retired from public service and has been replaced by a former White House advisor, Rashad Hussain.⁵¹ After leaving public service, Mr. Fernandez provided an interview to CBS about his counter messaging efforts in which he said, “It’s not that ISIS is so great. It is that the response against ISIS is both limited, and

weak.” Mr. Fernandez also later said that some government officials believed, “Somehow if you put magic social media or public diplomacy pixie dust on a problem, it will go away.”⁵²

Under new leadership, the CTCC has ceased direct confrontation with the Islamic State, and focuses more on the curation of content created by others than creating content themselves. There is also a new focus on publishing testimonials of Islamic State defectors.⁵³ The CTCC has now reportedly started generating content such as maps depicting the Islamic State’s dwindling geographic area of control and quietly disseminating that information to a pool of three thousand people, who then use that information on their own social media feeds. The products sent to these proxies are sometimes devoid of markings denoting they are the work product of the United States government. It would appear that the CTCC is spurring or influencing the creation of the content that it wants to later curate in hopes that this perceived level of separation will lend an air of authenticity or resonate more with the target audience.⁵⁴ The State Department has also assisted in the setup of “messaging centers” similar to the CTCC in countries in the Middle East.⁵⁵ It is too soon to gauge the effectiveness of this change of strategy. There have also been reports that the CTCC was allocated an annual budget of \$5.5 million dollars.⁵⁶

The most widely viewed Arabic language video the CSCC has produced currently has 126,000 views on YouTube having been online for 630 days as of the time of this writing (figure 10). A cursory examination of the video’s statistics reveal that a majority of the views received were in the first month of its upload and a majority of viewers do not finish watching the video. For the purposes of comparison the population of Iraq is

approximately 33 million people and the population of Syria is 22 million. This comparison of views to population is rudimentary but it demonstrates how few views this video received against a vast target population. Conversely, leaked “helmet-cam” footage from a special operations raid against an Islamic State prison compound in October 2015 received 1.2 million views within five days of being uploaded.⁵⁷ This video, filmed by a Kurdish fighter working with U.S. Special Forces was widely circulated around the internet and traditional TV news media. It is important to note the production and dissemination of this compelling combat perspective video was not done at the direction or supervision of the U.S. government.⁵⁸ This video is similar to Islamic State content widely circulated around the internet.⁵⁹



Figure 10. A CTCC Arab Language Video

Source: U.S. Department of State, “DAASH threaten Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and Jordan,” YouTube, 2014, accessed 29 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcQxGG6y-MY>.

The United States has stepped up its intelligence collection efforts against prolific Islamic State social media users in order to locate and engage them with lethal force. This effort has usually been made using standoff weapons. On 1 June 2015, General Herbert “Hawk” Carlisle, Commander of USAF Air Combat Command, revealed they had attacked and destroyed an Islamic State compound based on intelligence gathered from a fighter’s social media posts. General Carlisle even went so far as to call the poster, a “moron.”⁶⁰ While these kinetic strikes have been able to silence individual voices, there is little in the way to suggest that those operatives have not been replaced or that this has

weakened the Islamic State's resolve to keep engaging on social media in an attempt to control the global media narrative.

Analysis

The Islamic State is an enemy of the United States and global peace, and this study is conducted from that perspective bias. The social media service, Twitter, is the primary focus of the investigation into the Islamic State's social media use as this has proven to be the group's primary social media platform.⁶¹ Also, it is abundantly clear from the outset of this thesis that while the Islamic State is extremely media savvy, they view the use of media differently from their Western foes and may not conform to the doctrinal terms and constructs commonly used by the West.

The first question posed when examining the Islamic State's use of the media is, what is the Islamic State's narrative? While it is easy to be dazzled by the group's masterful use of social media or their uncanny video production skills, it is important to understand the message that the group is trying to convey. The Islamic State's narrative can be broken down into four parts: success, political grievance, religious obligation, and a sense of adventure.

Success for the Islamic State is conveyed in a variety of ways. Islamic State military victories are shown to create a perception that the group is undefeatable. The group makes a conscious effort to show off its military-grade vehicles and firepower.⁶² This depiction serves to intimidate foes and impress potential recruits. Success is also conveyed by displays of monetary wealth gained through oil exports and other means. This further impresses young, economically disadvantaged Muslim youths. Finally, success is imparted through displays of what Westerners would call "normal" life. The

Islamic State touts that doctors are available in the territory they control, there is a steady supply of electrical power, and the streets are safe for citizens.⁶³ The overarching theme of these displays is that the Islamic State is winning in combat and improving the lives of people within its controlled territory.⁶⁴

The Islamic State is quick to point out what it perceives to be political corruption amongst its enemies. This task has been comparatively easy to accomplish, given the political situation of the countries in which it and its proxy allies operate. For example, the government of Syria has allegedly used chemical weapons against its own civilian populace,⁶⁵ and has committed other highly publicized atrocities.⁶⁶ Following the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq in 2011, the Shia government quickly marginalized the Sunni minority population, effectively shutting them out of all aspects of the political process.⁶⁷ The Islamic State has been able to use these abuses to draw strength and portray themselves as fighters against political injustice.

Much of the rhetoric of the Islamic State is steeped in religious overtones. The Islamic State sees itself as defenders of the faith of Islam with the ultimate goal of establishing a state, known as a caliphate, led by a group of religious figures under one, overall supreme leader. This leader, known as a caliph, is the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. ISIS says it has proven through research that its current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and therefore is entitled to serve as the Caliph.⁶⁸ The Islamic State leadership believes that establishing a caliphate will usher in the Apocalypse in the form in a final battle between the forces of good and evil that will end in a final judgment of all mankind.⁶⁹ The Islamic State's beliefs will be expounded upon in detail in other parts of the thesis. For the purposes of its media

narrative, the Islamic State states that all “true” Muslims have a duty to support its efforts.⁷⁰

Finally, the Islamic State portrays its struggle as a grand adventure. Much of the materials it publishes appeals to masculinity with a heavy emphasis on the firing of weapons and explosives. Music appears to be carefully mixed with the video in order to enhance the tension and action contained within the videos.

These narrative elements work together and complement each other seamlessly. More importantly, they appeal to a wide variety of people: the politically disaffected, religious zealots, and adventure seekers. None of the narrative lines conflicts with another in any significant way meaning that while some of the Islamic State’s content might not resonate with certain groups, it will not dissuade or negatively affect their propensity to be swayed by other kinds of content.

The simplicity of the Islamic State’s narrative with its knowledge of social media and its target audience has enabled it to corrupt or usurp its enemies’ social media trends. For example, on 15 April 2014, Islamic State affiliate, Boko Haram, kidnapped hundreds of young girls in Nigeria in retaliation for the girls being sent to attend school. On 23 April 2014, Nigerian lawyer, Ibrahim M. Abdullahi, Tweeted the hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls, in support of the missing girls and efforts to recover them. This hashtag quickly gained popularity in Nigeria and spread globally, being Tweeted over 1.2 million times by 6 May 2014. Numerous celebrities and notable figures Tweeted the hashtag during this period. The popularity of the hashtag and the plight of the Nigerian girls were covered by mainstream media further enhancing its popularity. On 7 May 2014, the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, tweeted using the hashtag

with a picture of herself holding a handwritten sign reading “#BringBackOurGirls”⁷¹ (figure 11). The Islamic State quickly capitalized on the opportunity by downloading that image, digitally editing it so that the sign read “#BringBackOurHumvee,” and posted it throughout the internet (figure 12). This edited photo mocking the First Lady was retweeted and reposted several thousand times with the #BringBackOurHumvee hashtag, generating significant news coverage through traditional news outlets. The hashtag, #BringBackOurHumvee, alludes to the several thousand, American-made Humvee military vehicles that had been captured by the Islamic State, and put into operation by the group. The hashtag presumably served to mock the First Lady, taunt those concerned with the missing Nigerian girls, and flaunt the Islamic State’s regional dominance in military hardware to entice potential recruits as well as frighten opponents.⁷²



Figure 11. The First Lady's Original Tweet

Source: Michelle Obama, Twitter post, 7 May 2014 (2:03 p.m.), accessed 12 December 2015, <https://twitter.com/flotus/status/464148654354628608>.



Figure 12. The Islamic State's Edited Version

Source: Patrick Baz, Twitter post, 18 June 2014 (12:30 a.m.), accessed 29 November 2015, https://twitter.com/Patrick_Baz/status/479164318974746624?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw. Created by an unknown Islamic State sympathizer or member.

The Islamic state has also usurped other seemingly unrelated global social media trends. During the 2014 World Cup, the group Tweeted a picture of an Iraqi police officer's severed head, stating that they were using it to play soccer. This Tweet included the #WorldCup hashtag. Because of this, thousands of people saw this chilling image while searching information about the World Cup soccer tournament.⁷³ This Tweet sparked outrage around the world, but it also raised awareness of the Islamic State.

In stark contrast to the Islamic State's simple, streamlined narrative is the narrative of the West, primarily the United States. The narrative of the United States could be best described as "complicated." Much of this can be attributed to the fact that, unlike the Islamic State, the United States is a global power with interests that stretch to all four corners of the globe, both directly and indirectly. Because of this massive span of responsibility, it is unlikely that the United States' global narrative could be so easily defined, and certainly not as easily as that of the Islamic State. The National Security Strategy, published in February 2015, is an excellent document for examining the goals (and associated narrative) of the United States. This document centers around four major tenants that can be examined as narrative lines: security, economic prosperity, values, and international order.⁷⁴

As mentioned earlier, the sections of the 29-page National Security Strategy are organized to describe the complex nature of the goals of the United States. For example, the United States wants to confront climate change and increase global health security as security goals, while the Islamic State maintains their consistent and simple message of supporting their single focus of establishing a caliphate.⁷⁵ The United States uses vague language to describe its goals, such as "Build Capacity to Prevent Conflict" and "Assure

Access to Shared Spaces.”⁷⁶ Neither of these phrases leads the reader to a concrete understanding of what U.S. goals and strategy are. They do not resonate with the audience as a call to action. The merits or virtue of preventing climate change and global health notwithstanding, this highlights the stark difference between the “simple” Islamic State and the “complex” United States goals and narrative.

It is almost universally accepted that the Islamic State has been able to spread its narrative globally in order to incite violence, recruit fighters, and generate awareness. Statistical researchers and journalists like J.M. Berger as well as the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense share this sentiment. The reasons for its relative level of success in these efforts can be attributed to its level of understanding of itself as an organization, available technology, its target audience, and its foes.

The Islamic State has defined itself as a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist organization that is at war with anyone and everyone that does not share their worldview. They aim to establish a state and purge it of those they deem unworthy. They are savage in their methods and show no mercy to their perceived enemies, believing they are carrying out the will of God.⁷⁷ The execution of Steven Soltoff was drawn out over the course of two video releases and required an extreme level of cruelty. Amplifying this cruelty required a number of people with the videos production, editing, and release to achieve that high of a level of product. As critical as the preceding description of the Islamic State is, it is not one they would deny. They might, in fact, relish in it. They know what they are, and they know what they want. Additionally they are determined to see their goals realized. This self-awareness and determination led to the simplicity of their narrative. This simplicity could be also due to their maturity as an entity. They are not

burdened by the complexities of modern international relations. Entities are either an ally of the Islamic State or its enemy. The Islamic State will attack any enemy it sees as a threat or that has left itself vulnerable to attack. It is interesting to note that as the Islamic State's military advances have been stalled and are beginning to be reversed as they have transitioned to "spectacular" international terror attacks. These attacks could signify that the Islamic State has had to transition its tactical and operational approach in order, at least in part, to remain in the public eye and shape the news cycle. If this were the case, it would appear that the Islamic State has been trapped by its own narrative; they have gone to great lengths to craft an image that depicts themselves as victorious warriors that strike down their enemies with ease. In order to maintain that image, they have had to change tactics. While recent global attacks against soft targets are sure to secure the "street cred" the Islamic State so desperately seeks from its target audience, it also could potentially galvanize the Western world to destroy them.

As recounted by the Western media, the Islamic State has proven highly adept at leveraging technology to spread its narrative. The battle for Mosul in 2014 indicates that the Islamic State information operations are completely integrated into their planning. They have dedicated a significant amount of resources toward their efforts in social media, and these efforts have paid dividends. They have also proven adept at circumventing efforts to stop them from using social media by governments, internet service providers, and social media services. Despite being dogmatic in their beliefs, they have proven adaptable and innovative in their media tactics. Furthermore, they have produced professional-grade video content and other media quickly and efficiently. The Islamic State's tech and social media savvy could be attributed to the youthful nature of

the organization as well the education of some its members. For example, Mohammed Emwazi, the executioner known as “Jihadi John,” was only 27 years old at the time of his death, and had a degree in Information Technology (IT). Prior to his radicalization, he had worked in IT in Kuwait.⁷⁸ The Islamic State has recruited tech-savvy, young people from both the Arab world and the West, and it is clear that they have benefited from this experience. As of January 2015, a second UK national has stepped up to replace Jihadi John, appearing in execution videos.⁷⁹

The Islamic State understands its target audience and feeds that audience exactly what it wants. From the perspective of an American, the execution of Steven Sotloff is an act of unimaginable brutality and a crime that cannot go unpunished. To a disaffected and disenfranchised Muslim male, its one man standing up to the entire United States and getting vengeance for a lifetime of slights (either real or imagined). The concept of a video depicting the beheading of a prisoner is not a new concept. In fact, beheading was one of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s favored tactics based on its shock value. What separates al-Zarqawi’s beheading videos from those of the Islamic State is that in al-Zarqawi’s videos, the viewer can see the entire beheading from start to finish with all of the horrific gore on full display. The Islamic State curiously seems to sanitize these moments of terror, choosing to cut the video at the moment the beheading begins and then showing a shot of the deceased decapitated. This editing is likely to ensure that the Sotloff execution video was shown on Western TV.⁸⁰ While the grisly images of a decapitated Steven Sotloff would never be seen on TV (Islamic State supporters and other attracted to gore would certainly seek it out on the internet), his calm and rehearsed statement could be shown. The Islamic State wanted to convey a few very basic messages with this video:

Steven Sotloff is dead, he died badly, and he made a statement condemning America prior to dying. While extreme violence is certainly the hallmark of the Islamic State, it was the message that was more important than the visual in this video. Other videos are released for the purposes of only being shown on the internet without aspirations to be seen as a political message for the public at large. For example, the Islamic State recently released a video of an execution in which the prisoner was bound and then run over by a tank.⁸¹ The death is captured in its entirety, but the rest of video follows a familiar format in which the condemned is forced to make a statement followed by the executioner's statement. The Islamic State tank video features high production values with multiple camera angles and scene cuts.⁸² While levels or degrees of horror and revulsion are purely subjective, both beheading and being run over by a tank are incredibly terrible ways to die. The differentiation in the ways these men were killed and the way the videos were made may be the perceived value of those killed. The man killed by tank was a captured Syrian soldier who spoke no English while Steven Sotloff was an educated American reporter. The Islamic State understood that Sotloff's video would have more impact on Western audiences and the violence would be edited out to ensure it would be seen on Western media. The Syrian soldier's statement would be less compelling, so his video is centered on the death itself instead of his message.

The United States has attempted to counter the Islamic State's narrative with truth and facts. Unfortunately, the Islamic State understands that it is often the loudest voice that wins regardless of the facts. People are attracted to the "loudest" things on social media and they, in turn, increase the overall volume. The Islamic State also understands the tastes of the people they are attempting to sway. Where Al-Qaeda would release hour-

long, sermon-like audio recordings, the Islamic State has opted for two to five minute internet videos and picture-laden articles.⁸³ The Islamic State maintains a constant stream of content chosen for quantity and superficial quality as opposed to overall depth. While it could be argued the Islamic State has chosen to dilute their values in the name of recruiting or public relations, they have also made the concept of Jihad accessible to the common man and specifically young men. These videos and other content do not seek to challenge the audience intellectually or incite intelligent, well reasoned debate. They are meant to make young, disaffected men angry or long for adventure by using compelling visuals and religious themes that they may or may not have a clear understanding. The Islamic State is also willing to adapt and experiment with their content in order to stay relevant in the minds of their target audience. For example, the Islamic State has made successful attempts at humorous content, though this could be argued based on perspective. Conversely, attempts by the United States to create humorous content to counter the Islamic State have been universally panned by nearly all audiences, especially the one that counts the most: the Islamic State's recruiting pool.

Failing to make significant inroads against the Islamic State's media offensive with its own social media campaign, the United States appears to have reverted to a less sophisticated approach: military force. The United States has the world's most advanced intelligence gathering equipment and techniques available and has the military capability to strike nearly any target at any time. This approach has made physically locating prolific Islamic State social media users and killing them an attractive option. However, the ease at which Islamic State media operatives can be targeted with air strikes is only bested by the ease at which the Islamic State can replace those casualties. The United

States has proven adept at exploiting social media for the purposes of lethal targeting but it has yet to prove its prowess at integrating social media into operations.

While the Western world struggles to gain a holistic understanding of the Islamic State, the opposite is true of the Islamic State's understanding of the West. With an influx of Western recruits or recruits who have lived or worked for significant periods in the West, this understanding has only grown.⁸⁴ Several of the Islamic State's top members have significant experience with the Western world.⁸⁵ This experience has enabled the Islamic State's efforts to create content that resonates with the West, both positively in the case of recruiting and negatively in generating fear and outrage. The problem is that they can do this simultaneously. The Islamic State also understands the 24-hour news cycle and the speed at which information can spread. Following a series of brutal terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 and a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015, the Islamic State quickly claimed responsibility and offered encouragement for its followers.⁸⁶ While the governments of the West attempt to downplay the amount of operational control or material support the Islamic State provided in these attacks, the Islamic State understands that these points are moot.⁸⁷ The Islamic State was able to apply its brand to these deplorable acts, which was enough to frighten or outrage most people and inspire a choice few. The Islamic State is not wedded to the truth. It is adept at sidestepping it, bending it, and even outright lying as long as it can spread the "greater truth" of its overall narrative. Speed of delivery and quality of presentation has superseded the need for factual accuracy.

By understanding itself as an organization, the available technology, its target audience, and its foes, the Islamic State is able to continue to spread its narrative, gaining

support throughout the world despite its shrinking physical territory in Iraq and Syria. While dogmatic in belief, it is dynamic and adaptive in its use of the media. This seeming contradiction is interesting considering the group's Salafist machinations that romanticize the world in the time of the Prophet Muhammed, and seek to recreate it in modern times. The Islamic State has not just accepted the use of social media pragmatically, they have clearly embraced it enthusiastically. While their Islamic fundamentalist messages might have been simplified to meet the requirements of the delivery platforms and the tastes of the consumer, the narrative remains constant.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following will serve as a series of conclusions and recommendations based on the research and analysis conducted as well as concepts for future research. These should not be considered all-inclusive or definitive. Countering the Islamic State's toxic narrative is no small task by any measure.

This challenge is not a social media or "tech" problem. While it is easy to focus on the quality products that the Islamic State can produce and disseminate globally, this is an effect or symptom of a larger problem. Given a short period of time and a reasonable amount of resources, nearly anyone could learn to produce digital content at the same level of proficiency as that of the Islamic State. Their digital media is only advanced when compared to older and less capable Islamic fundamentalist organizations like Al-Qaeda, and not to the total content produced on the internet every day. If this were a matter that could be settled by producing higher quality videos or websites, the United States would easily triumph. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The United States cannot engage the Islamic State "Tweet for Tweet" and expect to win. It also cannot ignore the social media space or merely use it as a resource for intelligence collection or lethal targeting. Killing a single fighter with a cell phone and a Twitter account is ineffective and, in many cases, counterproductive. That fighter killed in an airstrike will be replaced and be made a martyr. Some forces of the Islamic State must be defeated militarily, but a majority of them can be swayed by a better message. It is the responsibility of the United States and its allies to develop, disseminate, and live up to

that narrative. Social media provides access to content, but it is ultimately the content that sways the opinion of the viewer or the reader.

Furthermore, technical solutions by themselves will prove to be ineffective at preventing the Islamic State from accessing the internet to spread its message. The Islamic State has proven adept at bypassing restrictions imposed by governments and the owners of social media platforms. As Twitter bans pro-Islamic State Twitter accounts, Islamic State operative simply create new accounts. They have also gone so far as to develop a simple naming taxonomy so that followers will know how to find newly created accounts and reduce downtime. The Islamic State's media production team, Asawitiri Media, is currently on its 335th Twitter account: "@TurMedia335."¹ By restricting members of the Islamic State from accessing social media, the United States cuts off a potential method for influencing those members. While the United States' previous efforts at countering the narrative of the Islamic State on social media have been found wanting, this should not preclude future and better planned attempts to leverage social media.

There are elements of the US government attempting to shift public opinion on domestic policy issues using social media to gain an advantage. While the example of the White House's Thunderclap campaign ended in failure as it did not achieve the stated strategic end state of changing federal laws concerning gun control it would be unwise to dismiss the effort as frivolous. The failure of the Thunderclap gun control campaign was that it began with the incorrect presupposition that a shift in public opinion would directly correlate to legislative results. Considering the complexity of the US political system as well as concerted and well-resourced resistance from opposition groups, it is now clear

that the Thunderclap campaign was insufficient. There is reason to believe that the effort would be more effective within the realm of military campaigns.

Combining social media with other methods can render additional effects disproportionate to the level of effort to achieve them. The Islamic State was able to augment its physical combat power in the 2014 battle of Mosul using techniques used by US lawmakers and their surrogates. The US government should apply the same kind of techniques used to shift public opinion on domestic issues to foreign policy and military operations. Social media services will come and go as well as the technical platforms and methods used to manipulate them. As these services and platforms emerge, they should be assessed and incorporated into an overall larger strategy of shifting and understanding public opinion in conjunction with or in lieu of lethal military operations.

This problem is not one that can be solved symmetrically or unilaterally. It must be a combination of both soft and hard power that comes together for a compound effect. Some members of the Islamic State and their media team must be eliminated with lethal force. However, killing people does not equate to killing ideas. The United States and its allies must offer a real alternative to Islamic extremism that can sway a large percentage of Islamic State fighters to leave the cause. With the exception of the worst offenders, former Islamic State fighters must be allowed to reintegrate into society. A living Islamic State veteran who is willing to publicly and sincerely renounce his former masters is better message than any amount of gun-camera footage of airstrikes. In order to achieve this end, the United States needs more and better content in the social media space. Efforts should be made to recruit younger people who are tech, media and culture savvy, who can generate the content that connects with their peers. As stated earlier, the best-

produced content in the world will fall on deaf ears if it is not backed up with substance. Leaders in the Middle East and around the world need to look at their societies and determine how so many young men and women became so disaffected and dissatisfied with their lives that they would risk the arduous journey traveling to a violent, war-torn country, and take up arms, in some cases against their own countrymen. For a message as the Islamic State's to work, it has to find a receptive audience.

While the Islamic State can and will be defeated, this problem will not die with the Islamic State. The world has seen what the Islamic State has been able to accomplish with social media, and other groups will attempt to replicate their success. There will always be loopholes for extremists to exploit in order to gain access to social media. Humans will continue to connect and share with each other on a global scale; those people with compelling or interesting content to share will attract more attention than others. Social media provides a certain level of equality that cannot be entirely overcome by corporations or brands. The things that make social media so unique and exciting are also what make it potentially dangerous. In the social media space, the voice of the United States government is no louder and no more inherently compelling than that of an enemy, whether that enemy be a near-peer nation state or a single anonymous individual with a smart phone. In order to be ready to face off against future iterations of social media savvy adversaries the United States must not wait until the adversary presents itself to take action. The United States should perpetually continue to shape the social media environment to present enemies with the most challenging environment at the outset. Disaffected people posting on social media should be engaged early and often before they can fall into the cycle of extremism. People that post complaints about U.S.

foreign or domestic policy should be engaged with sincere responses and provided with well-produced, fact-based content to either change their mind or inform their arguments. Lastly, with tens of millions of people posting content to various social media platforms and services, the United States should make a concerted effort to monitor the opinions of users based on this information within the confines of the law. While this should be done from the perspective of intelligence collection for the purposes of identifying new or emerging threats, it should also be done from a public relations perspective. The perceived effectiveness or favorability of the United States should be readily understood by policy makers and military leaders during the planning phases of any decision or operation. The data is available and could effectively be used for commanders and policy makers to understand their operational environments. This is not to say that the opinion of social media users should be the deciding factor on United States foreign policy or military decisions, but these decisions should not be made in a vacuum in today's technology.

Recommendations for Future Research

Areas in which further research is encouraged are the effects of the Islamic State's social media operations base on more specific target audience demographics. While women joining the Islamic State has been often written about in media sources a more thorough quantitative analysis is required to ascertain the effects of Islamic State propaganda on women and the amount of actual effort the Islamic State puts into recruiting women. The same could be studied concerning people living Western society.

This thesis used open source material and does not reference any classified reporting. Additional research at higher level of classification is recommended to

understand US efforts to counter the Islamic State's social media narrative. This could also clarify the Islamic State's true social media capability and organization which could be in opposition to what is generally accepted in the Western media and unclassified sources.

Specific research is recommended into how the Islamic State leverages social media to further its agenda in less developed parts of the world. How does the Islamic State use social media in countries without an established internet infrastructure or social media user base ready to receive its content? Both the technical and the operational aspects of this question are worthy of future study.

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