

INFLUENCING TOMORROW: A STUDY OF EMERGING INFLUENCE  
TECHNIQUES AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO UNITED STATES  
INFORMATION OPERATIONS

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
General Studies

by

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

INFLUENCING TOMORROW: A STUDY OF EMERGING INFLUENCE TECHNIQUES AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO UNITED STATES INFORMATION OPERATIONS, by Major John M. Boehnert, 119 pages.

The rapidly changing information environment and media landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for United States Information Operations professionals. This thesis utilizes qualitative cross-regional comparative case studies of three actors conducting influence operations during the timeframe of 2001 to 2015. The first influencer, Al Qaeda, offers insights into an international network that has preserved a holistic identity, while simultaneously franchising globally. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is the second study and an outstanding example of a regional non-state actor who rapidly claimed market share and crafted a compelling narrative that powerfully resonated with a heavily message saturated audience. The final case study, the Russian Federation, is an example of a regionally dominant state actor integrating information operations and offensive military operations among a culturally similar, adversary populace. The techniques employed, and the corresponding results, offer excellent insights into the influences practices that resonate with target audiences, and by extrapolation, those techniques that may offer the greatest future potential to the United States Department of Defense.

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## ACRONYMS

ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
US	United States
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In effect, the human being should be considered the priority objective in a political war. And conceived as the military target of guerrilla war, the human being has his most critical point in his mind. Once his mind has been reached, the ‘political animal’ has been defeated, without necessarily receiving bullets.<sup>1</sup>

— Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare, CIA Manual

The development of a faster and more powerful internet combined with the wide spread proliferation of mobile cellular devices has fundamentally and profoundly revolutionized the way people communicate and share information with one another. Further advancements in mobile cellular technology has fueled widespread changes in the methods used to produce, record, share, and consume information. As a result, the information landscape of today is radically different than that of five or ten years earlier.<sup>2</sup> These changes have forced individuals, organizations, and governments to re-examine and adapt the tools and techniques that they use to communicate, share information, and shape attitudes and beliefs. Information and influence professionals from both foreign governments, as well as violent extremist organizations (VEOs), have aggressively moved to leverage emerging technologies for the purpose of disseminating their ideology, recruiting supporters, and soliciting funding. Many emerging communications

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<sup>1</sup> Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare: A Tactical Manual for the Revolutionary. First published by the Central Intelligence Agency and distributed to the Contras in Central America.

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Purcell et al., “How Mobile Devices Are Changing Community Information Environments,” Pew Research Center, March 14, 2011, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/03/14/how-mobile-devices-are-changing-community-information-environments/>.

technologies have effectively lowered the barriers to entry for individuals and groups, and have diminished the historical competitive advantage large organizations and governments once enjoyed. The United States Information Operations and Psychological Operations communities within the Department of Defense must modify and evolve the technologies and methods currently used to conduct influence campaigns and counter hostile information operations activities. The failure of the United States (US) to adapt to this new environment could grant information dominance to adversary actors. Timely identification of relevant, emerging communications technologies, and the understanding of how to most effectively leverage them to achieve desired results, will prove critical to the United States in remaining effective in a rapidly changing communications landscape.

#### Primary Research Question

What influence techniques have the greatest potential for use by the US Department of Defense Information Operations community to influence foreign target audiences?

#### Secondary Research Questions

1. What are the most effective influence techniques used by Al Qaeda?
2. What are the most effective influence techniques used by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)?
3. What are the most effective influence techniques used by the Russian Federation?

## Assumptions

This paper contains five fundamental assumptions. These assumptions are believed to be true and provide a foundation for analysis of the case studies, as well as contribute to the relevance of this research project. These assumptions are:

1. The contested audiences that violent extremist organizations seek to influence are the same or very similar to those that the United States Government also seeks to influence for the purpose of countering violent extremist ideology and conducting counter terror operations.

2. The influence practices of Al Qaeda and its affiliates and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as practiced from 2001 to April 2015 represent successful examples of a non-state actor influencing select target audiences.

3. The influence practices of the Russian Federation as practiced from 2001 to April 2015 represent successful examples of a state actor influencing select target audiences.

4. The influence and information operations resources available to Al Qaeda, ISIL, and the Russian Federation are equally available to the United States Department of Defense Information Operations community.

5. State and non-state actors may employ different influence techniques and both should be examined in order to represent the full spectrum of possible influence actions.

## Definitions

Al Qaeda: Arabic for “the Base,” is an international terrorist network founded by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s. Al Qaeda grew out of the Services Office, a clearinghouse for the international Muslim brigade opposed to the 1979 Soviet invasion

of Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the Services Office—run by bin Laden and the Palestinian religious scholar Abdullah Azzam—recruited, trained, and financed thousands of foreign mujahadeen, or holy warriors, from more than 50 countries. Al Qaeda seeks to rid Muslim countries of what it sees as the profane influence of the West, and replace their governments with fundamentalist Islamic regimes. Operating globally, Al Qaeda is affiliated with many other terror groups including: Egyptian Islamic Jihad; The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group; Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad (Kashmir); Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Algeria) (formerly Salafist Group for Call and Combat); Armed Islamic Group (Algeria); Abu Sayyaf Group (Malaysia, Philippines); Jemaah Islamiya (Southeast Asia).<sup>3</sup>

Exploitation: The deliberate capitalization or leveraging of an event or action for the purpose of advancing the progress of an information operation. Identified in Joint Publication 3-13 *Information Operations* as a component of information superiority.<sup>4</sup>

Framing: A psychological device that offers a perspective and manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jayshree Bjoria and Greg Bruno, “Al-Qaeda (a.k.a. Al-Qaida, Al-Qa’ida),” *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated June 6, 2012, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/al-qaeda-k-al-qaida-al-qaida/p9126>.

<sup>4</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012), GL-3.

<sup>5</sup> Khelton Rhoads, “Admiring the Persuasive Frame,” *Working Psychology*, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.workingpsychology.com/whatfram.html>.

Indoctrination: Causing another person to respond to reasons in a pattern that serves the manipulator's ends.<sup>6</sup>

Influence: The act or power to produce a desired outcome or end on a target audience.<sup>7</sup>

Influence Operations: Operations focused on affecting the perceptions and behaviours of leaders, groups, or entire populations. Influence operations employ capabilities to affect behaviours, protect operations, communicate commander's intent, and project accurate information to achieve desired effects across the cognitive domain. These effects should result in differing behaviour or a change in the adversary's decision cycle, which aligns with the commander's objectives. The military capabilities of influence operations are psychological operations, military deception, operations security, counterintelligence operations, counter propaganda operations and public affairs operations. Public affairs, while a component of influence operations, is predicated on its ability to project truthful information to a variety of audiences (Air Force Doctrine Document 2-5).

Information Operations: The integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence,

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<sup>6</sup> Gideon Yaffe, "Indoctrination, Coercion and Freedom of Will," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67, no. 2 (2003): 335.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-13, *Information Operations*, I-3.

disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own. Also called IO.<sup>8</sup>

Information Warfare: Conflict between two or more states in information space with the aim of causing damage to information systems, processes and resources, critically important and other structures, subverting the political, economic, and social systems, mass psychological work on the population to destabilize society and the state, and coercing the government to take decisions in the interests of the opposing side (from Section 1, Fundamental Terms and Definitions of “Conceptual Views on the Activity of the Russian Federation Armed Forces in Information Space,” a document presented at an information security conference in Berlin on 14 December 2011 and released in text form on 22 December 2011).<sup>9</sup>

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Also referred to (translated as) the Islamic State; the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; the Arabic acronym Da‘ish. The self-proclaimed ISIL is a militant movement that has conquered territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria, where it has made a bid to establish a state in territories that encompass some six and a half million residents. The group that calls itself the ISIL can trace its lineage to the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, in 2003. The Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi aligned his Jama’at al-Tawhidw’al-Jihad with Al Qaeda, making it Al Qaeda in Iraq. Though spawned by Al Qaeda’s Iraq franchise, it split with Osama bin

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<sup>8</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Keir Giles, “Russia’s Public Stance on Cyberspace Issues” (Cyber Conflict (CYCON), 2012 4th International Conference, Tallinn, June 5-8 June 2012), 67, accessed April 7, 2015, [http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpls/abs\\_all.jsp?arnumber=6243966](http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpls/abs_all.jsp?arnumber=6243966).

Laden's organization and evolved, to not just employ terrorist and insurgent tactics, but the more conventional ones of an organized militia. In June 2014, after seizing territories in Iraq's Sunni heartland, including the cities of Mosul and Tikrit, the Islamic State proclaimed itself a Caliphate, claiming exclusive political and theological authority over the world's Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

Islamism: Refers to the broad range of political movements and parties that share the belief that principles drawn from the Islamic tradition should have substantial influence on the public sphere and on the manner in which a society conducts or organizes its political life.<sup>11</sup>

Islamists: Members of Islam who reject the notion of a separation between religion and public life. Islamists believe that ideals, values, or principles rooted in Islam are relevant to the modern world, and that they provide useful guidance on contemporary political and public-policy issues.<sup>12</sup>

Message: A narrowly focused communication directed at a specific audience to support a specific theme.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "The Islamic State," *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated May 19, 2015, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>.

<sup>11</sup> Guilain Denoeux with Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, February 2009), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 157.

Mitigation: The identification and deliberate moderation of the anticipated or actual negative impact of an event as it pertains to its effect on the desired progress of an information operation.

Narrative(s): A holistic combination of a subject's verbal and nonverbal communication activities, whose semantic meanings form a network whose properties reveal the principles and values of one's cause.<sup>14</sup> Narratives are messages that represent the ideals, beliefs, and social constructs of a group. Narratives may change how one thinks (i.e., neuro-cognitive functions) and appeal to some more than others (i.e., neuro-cognitive phenotypes).<sup>15</sup>

Propaganda: A form of communication in which the leaders of a ruling group have near or total control over the transmission of information, typically relying on mass media to reach target audience members, using language and symbols in a deceptive and manipulative fashion.<sup>16</sup>

Psychological Operations: Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and

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<sup>14</sup> Lars Ruth, "Battle of Narratives" (Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA. 2012), 4, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/7409>.

<sup>15</sup> Dr Lawrence Kuznar, *Thematic Analysis of Islamic State Speeches* (Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, October 1, 2014), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28.



individuals in a manner favorable to the originator's objectives. Psychological Operations is also called Military Information Support Operations.<sup>17</sup>

Recruitment: To seek out, evaluate, obtain commitment from, place, and orient new employees to fill positions required for the successful conduct of the work of an organization.<sup>18</sup>

Salafism: A literalist Sunni theological and legal orientation that takes its name from the expression "al-salaf al-salih" ("the pious predecessors"), a phrase referring to the first three generations of Muslims who represent the religion's "golden age." According to Salafists, these early Muslims most accurately preserved the Prophet Muhammad's statements and actions because they knew him or those close to him. Salafists seek to adhere to the reports of Muhammad's words and deeds (*sunna*) and to avoid innovation (*bid'a*).<sup>19</sup>

Takfiri: Pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim. Takfir is used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious. It has become a central ideology

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Andrews, *The Personnel Function* (Pretoria: Pearson South Africa, 1988), 94.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Olidort, "The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism" (Analysis Paper, Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, February 2015), 7, accessed April 3, 2015, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/02/salafism-quietist-politics-olidort/brookings-analysis-paper\\_jacob-olidort-inside\\_final\\_web.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/02/salafism-quietist-politics-olidort/brookings-analysis-paper_jacob-olidort-inside_final_web.pdf).

of militant groups such as those in Egypt, which reflect the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Kathir.<sup>20</sup>

Theme: A subject, topic, or line of persuasion used to achieve a psychological objective.<sup>21</sup>

### Scope

This research focuses exclusively on actions conducted as a planned, deliberate, and coordinated operation designed to influence a specific targeted audience, in order to achieve attitudinal or behavioural change. The information environment is an endless iteration of action, reaction, interaction, and transaction between individuals, groups, and organizations. Despite the legitimate impact that the exercise of national instruments of power exerts, these will only be included in this research to the degree that they were planned and executed for the deliberate effect of influencing a pre-determined target audience.

Only those influence campaigns conducted by Al Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents, the ISIL and the Russian Federation during the time period of 2001 to 2015 are included within the scope of this research.

Any recommendations regarding the adoption, adaptation, or implementation of general or specific influence techniques is made within the scope of those activities that

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<sup>20</sup> The Oxford Dictionary of Islam, "Takfir Definition," Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2319#>.

<sup>21</sup> Arturo Munoz, *U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001-2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), 20. Originally from FM 33-1-1, 1994, 8-1

could be applied by the US Department of Defense's Information Operations community. This thesis seeks to focus on the influence techniques that represent the most promising exportable models for use by the United States.

Information contained within this thesis is accurate as to April 2015.

### Limitations

This research is limited in that only English language sources will be examined. No translation of primary source material is available for the production of this thesis. In the case of Al Qaeda, ISIL, and Russian generated content, this thesis must rely on existing English translations or the paraphrasing (characterization) by third party observers and reporters.

Further all three influence actors of the case studies contained within this research are predominantly viewed as adversary, or at best, neutral, by the majority of English language observers who publish materials relevant to this subject. This has the potential to introduce a degree of bias within the source material.

Finally, no material currently classified by the United States Government is included as a primary source for this work. This restricts research to those sources and materials that are currently available from open sources and are not currently classified. This research specifically excludes any product or material that is available on open source but still remains classified by the United States Government (primarily leaked or compromised classified materials).

### Delimitations

Many of the US Department of Defense's Information Operations existing tactics, techniques, and procedures are classified at the SECRET level or above. The majority of the detailed analysis of the technical aspects of adversary influence techniques is also currently classified. This thesis will only address that information which is readily available in the open source arenas and not currently classified by the United States Government. Recommendations as to potential future tactics, techniques, and procedures will be generalized and not go into such detail, as they could constitute an operational plan.

### Conclusions

The significance of this study is three-fold. First, the realm of information operations is inherently competitive. Competing interests vie for the acceptance of their argument and the accompanying attitudinal and behavioural change. For hotly contested audiences, this acceptance and the resulting change most often precludes the simultaneous acceptance of a differing argument, and one must be abandoned for the allowance of the other. For this reason each influence actor must pursue their chosen strategy in relation to both the audience and other actors. Failure to effectively reach, communicate, and persuade target audiences increases the effectiveness of influence operations conducted by neutral or adversary actors.

Second, the United States must message audiences that are often much different from the general composition of the United States populace. The more different the audience is from the messenger the more difficult the influence operation becomes. Over the last decade, the United States has attempted to gain the attention, establish relevance,

and successfully influence audiences that have vastly different cultures, languages, religious beliefs, life experiences, and ideological frameworks than the US Department of Defense's Information Operations community. This places the US Department of Defense at a marked disadvantage to adversary actors who share more in common with contested target audiences.

Finally, the ever-increasing pace of technological advancement requires a correspondingly rapid identification, adoption, and adaptation of influence techniques to keep pace and exploit changing methods of communication. The internet, cellular communication, and social media has dramatically changed the communications landscape in ways that were largely unforeseen. These rapid communications evolutions tend to favor small, agile, less bureaucratic organizations that can more quickly leverage technological advancements without having to negotiate lengthy oversight and authorities processes. The US Department of Defense's advantage in material, financial, and technological resources will be effectively negated if it fails to secure a foothold in these emerging communications spaces. Identification of the most promising techniques and technologies is the crucial first step in positioning to establish relevance in a rapidly changing environment.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of available literature to determine the techniques that hold the most promise for use by the US Department of Defense to influence select foreign target audiences. This chapter surveys the literature relevant to: the modern information environment, as found during the time period 2001 to 2015; framing theory and techniques; recruiting theory and techniques; indoctrination theory and techniques; mitigation theory and techniques; and exploitation theory and techniques.

#### The Modern Information Environment

Media, once the domain of corporate interests and governments, has through information technology been largely democratized to become a tool of nearly every individual and group with an agenda to advance.<sup>22</sup> Where once money and access served as barriers to entry for those non-corporate or non-governmental entities today anyone with internet access can gain exposure to a potential limitless audience. Social medias, blogs, videos and picture sharing platforms, alternative journalism sites, and web pages are all equally available to potential communicators around the globe.

This technological evolution has also been marked by a corresponding shift in the manner in which information is discerned as credible. A study conducted by Andrew J.

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<sup>22</sup> Anthony R. Dimaggio, *Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Examining American News in the "War on Terror"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 1.

Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger and published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* found that respondents reported they considered internet information to be as credible as that obtained from television, radio, and magazines, but not as credible as newspaper information.<sup>23</sup> Further influencing the issue is that formerly, credibility was derived from authoritative sources in a top-down approach. The new media environment that allows for the sharing and evaluation of information among groups promotes a bottom-up credibility evaluation, where the appearance of consensus and social proof influences perceived credibility.<sup>24</sup> This dynamic is particularly at play among youths, who are prime audiences for recruitment and indoctrination activities. As Metzger and Flanagin point out in their work *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility*, the dynamic of rejecting traditional authority and ascribing greater credibility to information provided by peers is a characteristic of youth audiences that is also reflected in the digital medias that they frequent.<sup>25</sup> This organic behavioral shift in youth populations, combined with the complimentary movement on social medias, renders youth more susceptible to peer messaging.

The influence of online media extends not only to its consumers but also to the industry itself. As observed in *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and*

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew J. Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger, "Perceptions of Internet Information Credibility," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 2000): 515-540.

<sup>24</sup> Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Ryan B. Medders, "Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online," *Journal of Communication* 60, no. 3 (August 2010): 434.

<sup>25</sup> Miriam J. Metzger and Andrew J. Flanagin, *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 108.

*Research* many online sources such as focus blogs serve to exert influence over other more traditional medias and may serve as sources, bring a story or issue to prominence, or extend its duration in the news cycle.<sup>26</sup> In this way, traditional media may be influenced indirectly via the conduit of agenda setting internet sites that may prove more accessible to an influence actor.<sup>27</sup>

### Framing

As noted by Richard M. Perloff in *The Dynamics of Persuasion*, framing is a powerful tool that can override the logical reasoning of rational thinkers and can trigger exploitable cognitive biases and mental traps.<sup>28</sup> A frame, or the overarching way an idea is communicated or phrased, is established when select information is promoted in order to elicit a specific reaction. By simply varying the way in which a message is communicated (with all factual information remaining constant) the attitudes and perceptions of the messages target audiences can be profoundly influence.<sup>29</sup> Perloff goes on to provide a simple yet powerful example of framing that occurred in Europe. In Germany and Denmark, very few citizens volunteered to be organ donors<sup>30</sup> while in Austria and Sweden the rates of organ donation connected with accidental death were

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<sup>26</sup> Don W. Stacks and Michael B. Salwen, *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 395.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion*, 275.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>30</sup> twelve percent and four percent respectively.



dramatically higher.<sup>31</sup> The startling difference between these rates was ultimately attributed to the simple fact that Germany and Denmark who had low rates required citizens to “opt in” to the program, while Austria and Sweden who had the highest rates required citizens to “opt out” if they did not wish to participate.<sup>32</sup> This simple twist of wording accounted for a difference of over 96 percent between the highest and lowest rates of organ donation and is a powerful example of the framing technique in use.

In *Improving the U.S. Military’s Understanding of Unstable Environments Vulnerable to Violent Extremist Groups*, the authors describe the use of framing by Islamist militant groups. The technique of frame alignment is employed by VEOs in order to promote claims that resonate with the wider social narrative and increase the group’s popularity. Efforts made by influence actors to justify and explain their actions to supporters represent their attempt to establish, maintain, and defend their messaging framework. A final element of the framing theory is that influence actors deliberately attempt to re-establish values and beliefs that they perceive to be threatened by modern society in order to foster group identity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> nearly 100 percent and 86 percent respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century*, 277.

<sup>33</sup> David E. Thaler, Ryan Andrew Brown, and Gabriella C. Gonzalez, *Improving the U.S. Military’s Understanding of Unstable Environments Vulnerable to Violent Extremist Groups: Insights from Social Science* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 8, accessed November 20, 2014. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10836478>.

## Recruiting

There exists some debate as to whether recruitment exists in the traditional sense amongst jihadist-Salafist organizations. As Randy Borum points out in the Winter 2011 *Journal of Strategic Security*, debate exists as to the extent of terrorist recruitment by militant jihadist-Salafism groups. Borum references Marc Sageman who has argued that most members join the groups motivated by their own desire to further the groups cause, and not due to a dedicated recruitment campaign.<sup>34</sup> Although there may be some truth to this distinction of enlistment vs. recruitment, it is difficult to deny that influence actors deliberately craft messaging strategies in order to appeal to potential supporters and influence their participation and active support to the group. The modern lack of “traditional” recruiting may represent an evolution of the activity vs. an extinction of the practice.

It is important to keep in mind that there is seldom one single overarching recruitment process for a group. The recruitment of any individual, or group, is highly dependent on the time, circumstance, location, recruiter, and recruited.<sup>35</sup> In information operations the recruitment technique most commonly employed is referred to as the net approach. In this methodology the potential recruitment population is viewed as a relatively homogenous group and all members are equally exposed to the recruitment

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<sup>34</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (January 2011): 14, accessed January 13, 2015, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss4/2>.

<sup>35</sup> Sara A. Daly and Scott Gerwehr, “Al-Qaida - Terrorist Selection and Recruitment,” (RAND reprint 2006), 75, accessed January 12, 2015, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1214.html>.

mechanism.<sup>36</sup> This is the most commonly employed device for reaching larger groups of potential recruits and has the added benefit that messages that fail to achieve their aim of recruitment, may still provide value to the group for the purposes of framing or narrative advancement.

### Indoctrination

Both education and indoctrination fall on the continuum of influence and it can be difficult to distinguish where one begins and the other ends. Dr. Kelton Rhoads described this dilemma as such, “those who do not understand the power of social influence may live in the happy delusion of unlimited freedom, but the influence expert is aware that social influence is powerful enough to make certain actions and thoughts extremely likely on the part of the influence target.”<sup>37</sup> In examining influence campaigns meant to indoctrinate target audiences into a group’s ideology and worldview, you must make subjective distinctions as to whether a communication constitutes education vs. indoctrination (or possibly advertising, propaganda, or even thought control).

Dr. Margaret Thaler Singer offers the following distinctions on her Continuum of Influence. Education is described as “a limited consensual relationship where logical thinking is encouraged and is infrequently deceptive with the teacher having no agenda. The goal of education is productive and capable citizenry.”<sup>38</sup> Indoctrination on the other

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>37</sup> Kelton Rhoads, “Ethics of Influence,” Working Psychology, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.workingpsychology.com/ethics.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Rhoads, “Ethics of Influence II,” Working Psychology, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.workingpsychology.com/ethics2.html>.

hand is described as “authoritarian and hierarchical but also consensual and contractual and is infrequently intentionally deceptive, but often selective with the goal of the activity being a cohesive and effective group.”<sup>39</sup> All education and indoctrination are designed to influence attitudes and beliefs, and indoctrination may be deliberately concealed under the guise of education. For this reason determining the presence of a deliberate indoctrination program and its methods are often difficult and subjective.

### Mitigation

As Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson point out in their book *Age of Propaganda* from the earliest of times it has been recognized that the efficacy of a message can be eroded by events that take place largely outside of the control of the messenger.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle referred to this as *atechnoi*—the facts and events outside of the immediate control of the speaker.<sup>41</sup> Aristotle offered suggestions as to how to address this problem such as challenging the validity of the information or discrediting the rival influence actor.<sup>42</sup> Although Aristotle acknowledged the phenomenon he felt that actively addressing it was outside of the normal course of rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> Cicero, the notable Roman lawyer, further advanced the theory by introducing the idea of *statis* or the status of the issue. Cicero proposed that outside issues should not only be addressed but that it was the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (Princeton, NJ: Holt Paperbacks, 2001), 52.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony R. Pratkanis, ed. *The Science of Social Influence: Advances and Future Progress* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 20.

duty of the orator to define the issue (or redefine the situation) in the way that is most advantageous to the line of persuasion.<sup>44</sup> This fundamental distinction lies at the heart of modern mitigation strategies.

The strategies and theories for responding to the unintended consequences of an action (your own, your adversary, or a neutral actor) is as varied as the types of problems that can be encountered during the conduct of an information campaign. Despite the uniqueness of each particular problem, Michael Levine in his book *Guerrilla P.R. 2.0* groups most issues that require a deliberate and active mitigation strategy into at least one of the following categories: a lack of coverage or a lack of interest following actions designed to attract attention; a popular reaction that is generally negative or condemning; inaccurate, undesirable, or deliberately misleading coverage of an act; and-or insufficient resources to reach target audiences and propagate messages.<sup>45</sup>

Proactively engaging a messaging problem in a timely manner is crucial in determining the extent of mitigation that can be achieved. As Gini Dietrich explains in her book *Spin Sucks*, the manner in which an organization addresses and deals with negative consequences determines the extent to which the negative consequence will be a crisis or merely an issue.<sup>46</sup> Modern mitigation strategies are important not just in light of the incident or issue that prompted them but in the larger context of brand protection. Organizations, to include VEOs, must expend resources to protect and strengthen their

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Levine, *Guerrilla P.R. 2.0: Wage an Effective Publicity Campaign without Going Broke* (New York: Harper Business, 2008), 282.

<sup>46</sup> Gini Dietrich, *Spin Sucks: Communication and Reputation Management in the Digital Age* (Indianapolis, IN: Que Publishing, 2014), 125.

brand to constituents while defending against attacks that seek to reduce perceived credibility, efficacy, and legitimacy. These brand protection strategies may include: identifying and addressing unauthorized messengers operating under the brand without the permission of the brand itself; proactively establishing presence on emerging medias in order to prevent impersonators; and strengthening security that prevents unauthorized access to messaging accounts and conduits.<sup>47</sup>

### Exploitation

Capitalization and exploitation of advantageous events or actions through a deliberate media strategy provides a force multiplier effect for influence actors and is the foundation of any sound information operations campaign. A popular theory of propaganda, one of the most commonly practiced forms of exploitation, called the propaganda model is described in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. This model describes five filters that influence the coverage and placement of information by the media in a profit driven system. The five filters are:

1. Concentrated ownership and profit orientation;
2. Profit derived primarily from advertising revenue;
3. Information provided by experts or official sources;
4. Negative commentary as a means of disciplining the media; and

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<sup>47</sup> Charlie Abrahams, "Top 10 Online Brand Protection Strategies for 2014," Digital Marketing, February 3, 2014, accessed January 12, 2015, <http://digitalmarketingmagazine.co.uk/articles/top-10-online-brand-protection-strategies-for-2014>.

5. The perception of an external enemy (anticommunism).<sup>48</sup>

The model predicts that the result is that the intuitional pressures exerted by these five filters will have the effect of corporate owned news media acting in favor of the current and established power brokers.<sup>49</sup>

In media markets, like the Russian Federation, where media outlets are primarily state owned and less susceptible to market pressures, public opinion, and profit incentive the propaganda model advocated by Herman and Chomsky may be less applicable. With greater control over the media landscape, centralized or authoritarian regimes can pursue more aggressive information warfare tactics than more open societies. The information warfare approach employed by the Russian Federation has three primary lines of operation. The first is the deliberate shaping of the international information environment through diplomatic and political means.<sup>50</sup> The second is to protect internal audiences and the government from the effects of external influence.<sup>51</sup> The third line of operation is the integration of information warfare tools (both offensive and defensive) into traditional military activities.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Beautiful Trouble, “The Propaganda Model,” accessed May 12, 2015, <http://beautifultrouble.org/theory/the-propaganda-model/>.

<sup>50</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, “Russian Information Warfare Theory: The Consequences of August 2008,” accessed December 14, 2014, [http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/118969/ichaptersection\\_singledocument/d550520b-4937-4967-a3f5-38fbc5d76b48/en/Chapter\\_4.pdf](http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/118969/ichaptersection_singledocument/d550520b-4937-4967-a3f5-38fbc5d76b48/en/Chapter_4.pdf), 267.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

Areas for further study: (1) Recruitment vs. Radicalization theory and methodology; (2) counter narrative theory; (3) propaganda theory and social media; and (4) Propaganda theory and authoritarian regimes.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The US Information Operations community faces challenges in both realms of emerging technologies and evolving influence techniques. In order to meet these challenges, it is advisable to not only conduct unilateral innovation, but to also carefully observe the successful innovation of competitors. The information domain is inherently a competitive space where adversaries and competitors vie for the attention and acceptance of messages from contested target audiences. As in the fields of advertising and marketing, success leaves clues and a careful examination of one actor's success within a specific demographic, will guide an astute and agile messenger to modify techniques, in order to counter competitor's messages or claim a larger demographic share.

In order to better understand the techniques that offer the most promise for influencing future target audiences, three successful influencers are examined. The first influencer, Al Qaeda, offers insights into an international network that has preserved a holistic identity, while simultaneously franchising globally. The ISIL is an outstanding example of a regional non-state actor who rapidly claimed market share and crafted a compelling narrative that powerfully resonated with a heavily message saturated audience.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the Russian Federation is an example of a regionally dominant state actor integrating information operations and offensive military operations among a culturally similar, adversary populace.

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<sup>53</sup> J. M. Berger, "Al Qaeda's American Dream Ends," *POLITICO Magazine*, April 23, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/04/al-qaeda-adam-gadahn-isis-rebirth-americans-recruited-to-isil-117285.html>.

## Data Collection and Analysis Method

Qualitative cross-regional comparative case studies of three actors conducting influence operations during the time frame of 2001 to 2015. The techniques employed, and the corresponding results, offer excellent insights into the influence practices that resonate with target audiences, and by extrapolation, those techniques that may offer the greatest future potential to the US Department of Defense. Each case study has been selected on the basis of its scale of operation, character of primary actor, relevance to current and expected future US operations, and degree of success achieved.

In order to provide a comprehensive examination that offers the broadest survey of influence techniques, three diverse actors operating on scales that span from regional to international have been chosen. Represented in these case studies is Al Qaeda, a non-state actor with global reach who has successfully messaged and influenced diverse populations from around the globe.<sup>54</sup> The Al Qaeda messaging campaign represents the strategic level of operational messaging. Al Qaeda's target audiences span nearly every demographic, language, age range, social strata, and educational background.<sup>55</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is the second case study and second non-state actor (despite its chosen moniker). This organization started within Al Qaeda, but later broke off into a separate organization, has risen to regional prominence, and has effectively crafted a narrative that has reached beyond the Levant and motivated action in

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<sup>54</sup> Donald Holbrook, *The Al-Qaeda Doctrine: The Framing and Evolution of the Leadership's Public Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 48.

<sup>55</sup> Marta Sparago and Louis Klarevas, *Terrorist Recruitment: The Crucial Case of Al Qaeda's Global Jihad Terror Network* (New York University, Center for Global Affairs, 2007), 12, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.scps.nyu.edu/export/sites/scps/pdf/global-affairs/marta-sparago.pdf>.

multiple countries. Operating in a war-torn region and utilizing brutal techniques, this group represents a higher tactical to lower operational level of influence operations. ISIL's core target audiences include many of the groups and sub-groups that the United States aggressively targeted with mixed success during the Iraq conflict of 2003 to 2010.

The final case study that is examined is the Russian Federation, a world power and state actor who has deftly blended information operations and kinetic military operations in their operational preparation and annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Analysis of the Russian Federation reveals how the conventional military and special operations integrate influence operations, in concert with other elements of state power. The Russian Federation's information operations apparatus also closely represents that of the United States and suggests methods for mobilizing national level influence campaigns.

All three case studies were evaluated and compared in respect to five specific influence goals or outcomes. First, the methods in which the influence actor attempted to frame events in order to establish a construct, and guidelines that influenced how their target audience perceived information, or the manner in which they categorized and attributed meaning to that information, was examined. Secondly, influence actors' ability to reach and recruit adherents to their ideology or belief system was assessed. Third, how the actors conducted indoctrination was evaluated and compared. Fourth, instances of negative outcome mitigation, where the influence actor recognized a stimulus or event that, if unaddressed, would have the potential to degrade messaging efforts and actively worked to mitigate any negative outcome for each case study was evaluated. Finally, the

fifth evaluated category was the effort made by the influence actor to exploit and capitalize on organizational success or adversary setbacks.

By viewing each case study through these five lenses, the commonalities, differences, and techniques can be compared to determine trends and patterns that offer insights into the most effective methodologies currently used today. Nearly all influence activities can be grouped within one of these five categories, which allows for a measure of standardization across vastly different organizations with widely varying goals and objectives.

Influence operations are most effective when their true aims are concealed from the general public and specifically, the audiences that they target for influence. For this reason, it is exceedingly rare to find current accounting of influence operations produced by the influence actor.<sup>56</sup> Most accounts of influence operations are produced by neutral third parties, who attempt to discover the influence actions and decide the true aims and intent of the influencer. This requires a certain degree of inference on the part of the reporter. Additionally, influence operations are often conducted along extended timelines, sometimes on the order of generations. This can make it exceedingly difficult to detect, evaluate, infer, and report on current, ongoing, or recently conducted influence operations. This thesis draws from a variety of sources to include published works, trade journals, academic journals, periodicals, academic writing, and first person published accounts.

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<sup>56</sup> Loch K. Johnson, *Strategic Intelligence: Understanding the Hidden Side of Government* (Portsmouth, NH: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 109.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

#### Al Qaeda Framing

Sheikh Usama knows that the media war is not less important than the military war against America. That's why Al Qaeda has many media wars. The Sheikh has made Al Qaeda's media strategy something that all TV stations look for. There are certain criteria for the stations to be able to air our videos, foremost of which is that it has not taken a previous stand against the mujahideen. That maybe explains why we prefer Al-Jazeera to the rest.

— Al Qaeda Spokesman<sup>57</sup>

The Al Qaeda ideology, both explicitly stated and implied, has deep historical roots. The current ideology of Al Qaeda is heavily influenced by Islamic ideologues and scholars like Ibn Yamiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and Abdallah Azzam.<sup>58</sup> Al Qaeda's basic premise is the removal of the man-made kingdoms and the establishment of a heavenly kingdom on earth.<sup>59</sup> Al Qaeda has condemned the current social-political systems and seeks to establish a global Caliphate that would unite the Muslim world and restore conditions to those found prior to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923.<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," ITAC, 2007-02, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.itac.gc.ca/pblctns/pdf/2007-2-eng.pdf>, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Henzel, "The Origins of Al Qaeda's Ideology: Implications for US Strategy" (National War College, Washington, DC, 2005), accessed April 14, 2015, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA486421>, 71, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," 6.

<sup>60</sup> Malcolm Nance, *An End to Al-Qaeda: Destroying Bin Laden's Jihad and Restoring America's Honor* (Macmillan, 2010), 86.

perceived fall of the Islamic world from its historical grandeur to its current state is, blamed by Al Qaeda, on those members of the Muslim faith who fail to faithfully practice their religion to the standards set by the Prophet and his companions.<sup>61</sup>

Within this framework, Al Qaeda positions itself as championing the religious war against unbelief and worldly corruption. The religious war is further framed as jihad against unbelievers. This interpretation of jihad differs from that of many Muslims who recognize both a “greater jihad” a struggle within ones soul, and a “lesser jihad” a violent fight against unbelievers. Al Qaeda’s teaching draws upon Mohammed Abdel Wahhab’s 18th century revival of Tamiyya’s 14th century doctrine and rejects the distinction of two jihads. Al Qaeda teaches that there is only one jihad, the fight against unbelief, and holds that this form of jihad is a profession of faith in itself, regardless of the outcome that it produces.<sup>62</sup> In this way participation in Al Qaeda’s jihad may be seen to have a redemptive quality and sets the jihadi apart as a Muslim of superior faith. This teaching serves to offer Al Qaeda members and supporters increased status and self-worth, and encourages enduring support to and participation in the group’s activities.<sup>63</sup>

Al Qaeda’s ideology resonates with an audience who accepts the message that they have been repressed, discriminated against, and humiliated by corrupt governments and institutions. These teachings leverage themes of revenge and humiliation of the Muslim world, and offer jihad as a solution to seek retribution and regain status. Al

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<sup>61</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>63</sup> John M. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 9.

Qaeda ideology stokes the resentment of Muslim populations, legitimizes and directs violent jihad, and targets the West as well as the “apostate” governments of the Islamic world. Adherents believe a final confrontation is predestined and the success of the true Muslim believer is predetermined. In this way current conditions are explained away as victimization by the West and apostates, the direction forward is clearly defined as jihad, the outcome of victory is portrayed, and offensive actions and violence can be justified as defensive action on behalf of a greater good, for the protection of the faith and Muslim lands.<sup>64</sup>

Al Qaeda’s propaganda campaign seeks to explain and justify their rules of engagement and ground their actions within an Islamic framework, as well as instruct the Muslim world as to their duties, all while promoting the legitimacy of the groups aims and strategies. This ideological frame heavily leverages religious themes to achieve political ends, and both elements, religious and political, are incorporated in Al Qaeda’s propaganda.<sup>65</sup> Religious themes stress the strict emulation of the practices of the Prophet and his companions as well as the personal, vice collective, obligation of the faithful to take part in jihad in defense of Muslim lands. The outcome of this individual jihad is promised as either victory or martyrdom which carries the reward of eternal Paradise.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Philipp Holtmann, “Countering Al-Qaeda’s Single Narrative,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (April 2013), accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/262>.

<sup>65</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

The religious elements of Al Qaeda teachings include uniting the Muslim community under one global Caliphate; the confrontation and removal of secular Muslim states and leaders, the “near enemy;” the confrontation and removal of the West’s hegemony and any non-Muslim control of Muslim lands, the “far enemy;” the elimination of the Israeli State; and avenging Muslim oppression.<sup>67</sup>

### Al Qaeda Recruiting

Al Qaeda employs a global recruitment strategy, which focuses on the corporate acquisition of local VEOs and the franchising of the Al Qaeda brand and ideology around the globe.<sup>68</sup> This approach differs from that of the regionally oriented VEOs, which primarily aims to identify and recruit unaffiliated individuals into the organization. This approach has allowed Al Qaeda to claim rapid expansion of their membership, while at the same time securing mature footholds in regional conflicts around the world.

This recruitment methodology for Al Qaeda is not new, and has been practiced since the inception of the organization. Many of Al Qaeda’s original members were drawn from a large database created by Osama bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghanistan conflict that was meant to ostensibly track those fighters who were recruited, trained, and may be killed or go missing during the war.<sup>69</sup> This organized pool of pre-vetted fighters

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel L. Byman, “Al Qaeda’s M&A Strategy,” The Brookings Institution, accessed February 3, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2010/12/07-al-qaeda-byman>.

<sup>69</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 55, accessed January 12, 2015. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=81180>.



combined with the benefit of a training and operational infrastructure that had been established by the United States, European, and the Saudi Arabian Government, provided the fledging terrorist organization an advantageous start.<sup>70</sup>

The Al Qaeda narrative is attractive to many local VEOs that are engaged in a struggle for dominance and relevance within their regional context. Al Qaeda's message, which typically focuses on a larger external enemy, primarily the United States, appears to be the natural extension and logical extrapolation of the local VEOs own narrative.<sup>71</sup> Al Qaeda is often able to portray a regional groups struggle as part of the greater global movement that Al Qaeda champions.<sup>72</sup> It was in this way that Al Qaeda acquired Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, who would ultimately succeed Osama bin Laden, as the leader of the Al Qaeda organization. Al-Zawahiri was heading up the Egyptian Islamic Jihad that was intent on toppling the Egyptian regime, when in 1998 he oversaw the merger of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with Al Qaeda and the acceptance of Al Qaeda's globally focused anti-American and pan-Islamic Agenda.<sup>73</sup>

Although the focus of Al Qaeda recruiting is on the identification and acquisition of suitable groups for incorporation under the Al Qaeda umbrella, it is not to the total exclusion of addressing potential individual recruits. Al Qaeda actively recruits from

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Laura Ryan, "Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here's How and Why," *National Journal*, October 9, 2014, accessed January 16, 2015, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/tech/al-qaida-and-isis-use-twitter-differently-here-s-how-and-why-20141009>.

<sup>72</sup> Byman, "Al Qaeda's M&A Strategy."

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

prisons, mosques, madrasas, and their media activities.<sup>74</sup> Not all recruits are destined for inclusion into the organization. Some will be influenced to take actions advancing Al Qaeda's interest within their local context. *Inspire*, a magazine produced by Al Qaeda that is one of the organizations flagship media products, is aptly named. The magazine seeks to both motivate and instruct the reader. Articles such as "Car Bombs inside America" and "Why Did I choose Al Qaeda" provide both potential inspiration and rudimentary instructions for potential homegrown terrorists.<sup>75</sup>

### Al Qaeda Indoctrination

"Past jihads failed because those fighting them did not win popular support. The Muslim masses did not understand who the jihadis were, what they wanted to accomplish and why they used violence to achieve their goals because jihadis did not sell themselves and their movement effectively."<sup>76</sup>

Al Qaeda's teaching and indoctrination methods are as varied as its membership. As a global organization that draws its support from a myriad of cultures, ethnicities, and groups, Al Qaeda has been challenged to convey its ideology in such a way that it is attractive, understandable, and persuasive to a wide spectrum of adherents while simultaneously maintaining a discreet profile to avoid the attention of law enforcement

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<sup>74</sup> Sparago and Klarevas, *Terrorist Recruitment*.

<sup>75</sup> Ryan, "Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here's How and Why."

<sup>76</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," 4.

and counter terrorism groups.<sup>77</sup> Al Qaeda has consistently resourced its outreach and media strategy as equally as its tactical and operational strategy. Al Qaeda demonstrates an understanding that devoid of large-scale acceptance and support by the Muslim world, its tactical demonstrations will accomplish little to achieve its overarching aim.<sup>78</sup> Al Qaeda marries demonstrations of physical violence, which are relatively short in duration to an information campaign that is designed to prolong the psychological damage for as long as possible. This strategy serves to both inflict maximum damage on the target, and target audiences, and to demonstrate the efficacy of the group in order to win support among Muslim audiences.

Al Qaeda's most far-reaching, and visible, form of indoctrination is its propaganda that is made available in nearly every conceivable media form. Arguably it is these media activities that make Al Qaeda relevant in the long periods between conducting spectacular attacks.<sup>79</sup> Al Qaeda promotes itself with persistent messaging engagements in order to remain in the public consciousness and reinforce their relevance in the eyes of their target audiences. In order to maintain their brand awareness and disseminate their message Al Qaeda utilizes numerous sub organizations, most notably

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<sup>77</sup> Eben Kaplan, "Terrorists and the Internet," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 8, 2009, accessed January 13, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism-and-technology/terrorists-internet/p10005>.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War," The Brookings Institution, February 24, 2015, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/02/24-byman-williams-isis-war-with-al-qaeda>.

<sup>79</sup> Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, "Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda's Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, no. 2 (June 5, 2011), accessed January 14, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/braniff-towards-global-jihadism>.

the Global Islamic Media Front and the Al-Sahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication (also known as Al-Sahab). The Global Islamic Media Front is an Al Qaeda propaganda wing that serves as a jihadist information aggregator, packager, and disseminator. The Global Islamic Media Front collects jihadi relevant propaganda from Al Qaeda directly, as well as from around the web, and repackages the information into products and formats that are easily consumable, to include reformatting and editing in order to facilitate sharing. The Global Islamic Media Front then disseminates these repackaged materials to a variety of internet sites, as well as distributes them to a number of file sharing platforms where they are available for download.<sup>80</sup> Al-Sahab, which translates to “the cloud,” is an Al Qaeda media production house that creates primarily web content, to include documentary quality films and content enabled and formatted for mobile devices (such as smart phones and tablets).<sup>81</sup>

Al Qaeda conceals and protects its media production infrastructure by utilizing a distributed network of studio locations hidden around the world.<sup>82</sup> Although the group diffuses their investment in propaganda production amongst multiple locations, the group has been able to achieve and maintain the production of relatively sophisticated media products, using technologies similar to Chroma Key, commonly referred to as “green

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph Lieberman, *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat: Congressional Report* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing, 2010), 19.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Kimmage, “Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet” (New America Foundation, 2010), 3, accessed January 11, 2015, [http://homelandsecurity.gwu.edu/sites/homelandsecurity.gwu.edu/files/downloads/HSPI\\_Report\\_15.pdf](http://homelandsecurity.gwu.edu/sites/homelandsecurity.gwu.edu/files/downloads/HSPI_Report_15.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 16.

screen.” The use of multiple locations and layers of security provides a measure of redundancy and protection in the event of the compromise or destruction of another facility in the network.<sup>83</sup>

Al Qaeda segments its audience into three primary groups and targets its media and messages specifically to each of these three groups. The Al Qaeda audience consists of the Adversary, the Ummah, and the Support Base.<sup>84</sup> Al Qaeda defines the adversary as the West, led by the United States; all unbelievers and non-adherents to the Muslim faith; atheists; polytheist; and the apostate secular Muslim regimes, which includes Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The second audience, the Ummah, is the global community of Muslims that extends from the devout, the moderate, and those whose identity as Muslim is more cultural than religious. The final audience is those who support the ideology of global jihad. This group, by far the smallest audience, is comprised of those individuals and organizations that are prepared to provide tactical, operational, or logistical support to Al Qaeda operations.<sup>85</sup>

In messages directed to the Ummah and the Supporters, Al Qaeda purposefully leverages emotionally charged language and topics which evoke an emotional response, useful in both motivating action and discouraging critical questioning of the Al Qaeda

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<sup>83</sup> Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media: The Post-Al Qaeda Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>84</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, “Trends in Terrorism No. 2: Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” ITAC, April 29, 2014, accessed January 16, 2015, <http://www.itac.gc.ca/pblctns/index-en.php?id=07>.

<sup>85</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 16.

message. This emotive technique focuses heavily on long held grievances of the global Arab community and portrays a long history of Arab humiliation at the hands of the West and the perceived power imbalance that continues to this day. In this way the Ummah is portrayed as victims and Al Qaeda their champion who stands up to the corrupt aggressors. This framework is further reinforced by Al Qaeda references to local grievances and injustices, which are weaved into the narrative as collaborating evidence of the Al Qaeda worldview.<sup>86</sup> Al Qaeda's messages to the Ummah and Supporters also aims to create a sense of togetherness and virtual community. Al Qaeda recognizes the importance of fostering and reinforcing group identity, in order to avoid the factionalism and splits that occur within many ideologically based communities.<sup>87</sup>

Al Qaeda's program of indoctrination advances six efforts. First, the West (led by the United States) is shown to be the aggressor of the Muslim world and the current struggle is depicted as the final confrontation from which Islam will emerge victorious. Next, global jihad is portrayed as a defensive action undertaken in order to preserve the Muslim faith and way of life. The third "effort," in order to aid the struggle Al Qaeda calls for the "awakening" of the Muslim Ummah and their support for the Al Qaeda cause. The fourth call to action is bolstered by the portrayal that the group is strong and capable of achieving its aims. The fifth perception is that the actions of Al Qaeda are justified and legitimate under Islamic law. The last effort of Al Qaeda's strategy is to

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>87</sup> Daniel L. Byman, "Breaking the Bonds Between Al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations" (Analysis Paper, Saban Center at Brookings, August 2012), accessed March 24, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2012/7/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman/alqaida%20terrorism%20byman.pdf>, 32.

disseminate messages that generate fear and infighting among their adversaries and opposition.<sup>88</sup>

A final notable facet of the Al Qaeda indoctrination strategy is the group's innovative internet based activities. Al Qaeda has progressed their internet operations to include not just forums, audio and video products, and file sharing, but also dynamic medias that target children, teenagers, and adults. A variety of online games, cartoons, and stories have been designed specifically to attract and hold the attention of impressionable children while older youth are targeted with popular programming, such as music videos that feature jihadi messages (such as the British rapper Sheik Terra who has produced a music video entitled *Dirty Infidel*). For those who may not have direct access to Al Qaeda-approved religious instruction, Al Qaeda has created a "cyber-mosque" operated by Omar Bakri Mohammed, a radical Muslim cleric who was banned from the United Kingdom after inciting violence.<sup>89</sup> Al Qaeda has produced a wide variety of medias designed to appeal to broad-spectrum target audiences.

#### Al Qaeda Mitigation

"Al Qaeda has been turning itself from an active organization into a propaganda organization . . . they now appear to be focused on putting out disinformation and projecting the strength of the mujahideen. They're no longer the group that is organizing the mujahideen but are acting more as advisors to others."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," 10.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 18.

Al Qaeda mitigation efforts are challenged by a host of issues both internal and external to the group. The greatest challenge facing Al Qaeda influence actors is to control the reaction of Muslim populations to the group's activities and to provide encouragement and optimism for the group's success, in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. In effect Al Qaeda has the task of making violent jihad and terror tactics appealing to mainstream and moderate Muslim audiences while consistently portraying themselves as the victor.<sup>91</sup> The cornerstone of these efforts is to portray the group as legitimate and operating in accordance with Islamic law.<sup>92</sup> Al Qaeda seeks to justify its actions under a mandate from God and achievement of this argument would serve to make the group impervious to the objections of fellow man. Al Qaeda tactics such as providing pre-attack warnings or offering a "truce" to their enemies (in accordance with the *Hudna* or ceasefire), as in the case of Al Qaeda's 2006 truce offered to President Bush<sup>93</sup> and the 2009 truce offered to President Obama<sup>94</sup> are designed to send a message to the Muslim world that Al Qaeda conducts its operations in strict adherence to Islamic law.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>92</sup> James J. F. Forest, "Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 1 (August 2012), accessed December 22, 2014, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/forest-perception-challenges>.

<sup>93</sup> conditional upon United States forces withdrawing from all Muslim countries.

<sup>94</sup> conditional upon the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan.

<sup>95</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," 12.



One of the most difficult objections to Al Qaeda's claim to legitimacy is the group's violence directed against members of the Muslim faith. Al Qaeda seeks to portray itself as defenders of Islam who fight unbelievers in order to protect the faith; however this is at odds with studies and reports that claim only 12 percent of the people killed by Al Qaeda between 2004 and 2008 were Westerners and in fact Al Qaeda actually kills seven times as many Muslims as non-Muslims.<sup>96</sup> Al Qaeda has largely denied these allegations, and where the evidence is irrefutable they have attempted to explain away the inconsistency by claiming that the Muslims killed were apostates or martyrs. This line of argument was apparent in Ayman al-Zawahiri 2007 statement, "We haven't killed the innocents; not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else. And if there is any innocent who was killed in the Mujahideen's operations, then it was either an unintentional error, or out of necessity as in cases of al-Tatarrus."<sup>97</sup>

Bin Laden echoed these sentiments in another statement made in 2007 where he questioned the interpretation of the restriction on killing innocents in favor of a more radical view stemming from the work of Ibn Tamiyyah:

They say that the killing of innocents is wrong and invalid, and for proof, they say that the Prophet forbade the killing of children and women, and that is true . . . but this forbidding of killing children and innocents is not set in stone, and there are other writings that uphold it. God's saying: And if you punish [your enemy] . . . then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted . . . . Ibn Tamiyyah . . . and many others . . . say that if the disbelievers were to kill

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<sup>96</sup> Scott Helfstein, Ph.D., Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, "Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims" (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2009), 2.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

our children and women, then we should not feel ashamed to do the same to them, mainly to deter them from trying to kill our children and women again.

Here bin Laden clearly evokes themes of revenge and justified defense while subtly positioning himself as an Islamic scholar advancing interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence rooted in historical Islamic scholarship. The need of both leaders to address this uncomfortable topic suggests the recognition of this issue as a point of vulnerability in the Al Qaeda narrative.

A second mitigation challenge for Al Qaeda is to explain away the lack of success for recent Islamist uprisings. Failures of Islamist nationalist uprisings in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria have called in to question the efficacy of the movement and provide troubling data points that appear to contradict Al Qaeda's narrative.<sup>98</sup> In response Al Qaeda has chosen to recast this evidence as a confirmation of their propaganda by claiming that the Islamists would have been successful but for the continued Western support to corrupt apostate rulers.<sup>99</sup> Al Qaeda presents the West and corrupt secular Middle Eastern regimes as the primary problem, and the movement's lack of success in overturning them is shown to only reinforce the gravity of the issue. This reframing of the situation in order to mitigate negative outcomes plays heavily on their supporters' confirmation bias and positions Al Qaeda in a no-lose situation where success is capitalized upon and failure to achieve operational goals is confirmation of their overarching narrative.

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<sup>98</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline or Imminent Victory?*, Occasional paper OP-362-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), 6.

<sup>99</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, "Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy," 5.

### Al Qaeda Exploitation

“The media represents two-thirds of the battle.”<sup>100</sup> Al Qaeda’s exploitation strategy centers on garnering, maintaining, and expanding the support of the Ummah. For an Al Qaeda operation to be successful it must harm the enemy (both physically and psychologically) while being careful not to alienate or erode the support of the global Muslim community. Each terroristic act is accompanied by at least two carefully constructed information campaigns. While one campaign is meant to exploit psychological damage on the target, the second information campaign is designed to promote the act to Muslim audiences. While the group’s propaganda efforts form and furthers the messages, the exploitation efforts that follow an attack serve to manage the message and ensure that the act is viewed in a context that furthers the group’s narrative.<sup>101</sup> Al Qaeda demonstrates an understanding that its religious and political aims are only achievable with the support of the Ummah and without it the group is destined to fail.<sup>102</sup>

Al Qaeda’s narrative often references their historical “victories” and often exploits historical revisionism to reinforce perceptions of inevitable and pre-destined success. One month following the 9/11 attacks such a tactic was evident in Osama bin Laden’s interpretation of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and his optimistic vision for the future of Al Qaeda.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>101</sup> Henzel, *The Origins of Al Qaeda’s Ideology*, 76.

<sup>102</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 2.

And the people used to ask us: ‘How will you defeat the Soviet Empire?’ And at that time, the Soviet Empire was a mighty power that scared the whole world- NATO used to shake in fear in front of the Soviet Empire. . . . Today there is no more Soviet Empire . . . only Russia is left. So the one God, who sustained us . . . to defeat the Soviet Empire, is capable of sustaining us again and of allowing us to defeat America on the same land, and with the same sayings, So we believe that the defeat of America is something achievable, with the permission of God- and it is easier for us . . . than the defeat of the Soviet Empire previously.<sup>103</sup>

This statement exemplifies Al Qaeda’s exploitation technique of advancing their narrative through the use of rhetoric, “talking victory,” infused with religious themes and predicated upon a dubious historical interpretation that gives the appearance of a logical, linked, and predestined chain of events.

Al Qaeda has shown savvy in capitalizing on both the acts of the group as well as third party events. One of the group’s most successful exploitation activities followed the Saudi family’s rejection of bin Laden’s offer to raise a force of mujahideen to expel the Iraqi Army from Kuwait following the Iraq invasion. Instead of accepting bin Laden’s offer, the Saudis decided to cooperate with the United States Armed Forces who successfully, and in short order, removed Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait. This affront to bin Laden gave rise to his 1996 statement that has come to be known as the “Ladenese Epsittle:”

[T]he greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad is the occupation of Saudi Arabia, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of the revelation, source of the Prophetic mission, and home of the noble Ka’ba where Muslims direct their prayers. Despite this it was occupied by the armies of the Christians, the Americans and their allies.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Bin Laden further called for a boycott of American goods as well as jihad against what he declared to be a “Judeo-Crusader Alliance.” The rejection of his group by one of the most influential families of the Islamic world was ultimately exploited to be a cornerstone of jihadi doctrine, a declaration of war, and a promotion of bin Laden as a religious defender opposing corruption and defilement.<sup>105</sup>

The attacks of September 11, 2001 offered Al Qaeda yet another opportunity to advance their message and exploit the “propaganda of the deed.” The terror attacks of 9/11 were framed to be a show of strength and a wake up call to not just the West but also the Ummah.<sup>106</sup> Al Qaeda messaged this event as a call to arms, a proclamation of a new reality, and a decision point where members of the Muslim faith would be forced to choose a position, to side with the corrupt West who had oppressed the Islamic world for 700 years or the true followers of the Prophet who were engaged in a final struggle for the preservation of Islam.<sup>107</sup> Once again Al Qaeda seized on the opportunity to portray themselves as a strong and unstoppable movement capable of toppling the Western giant. The deliberate fusion and exploitation of action, historical interpretation, and propaganda creates a compelling narrative for those vulnerable to Al Qaeda messaging activities, and advances the Al Qaeda brand as they position themselves as the sole beacon of hope for oppressed Muslims the world over.

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<sup>105</sup> John David Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel, *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 259.

<sup>106</sup> P. E. Louw, “The ‘War Against Terrorism’: A Public Relations Challenge for the Pentagon,” *International Communication Gazette* 65, no. 3 (June 2003): 213.

<sup>107</sup> Canadian Centre for Intelligence and Security Studies, “Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy,” 10.

## ISIL Framing

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant crafted a clear and concise narrative frame that has found a receptive audience within elements of the Muslim world. ISIL's narrative is relatively complete in that it describes a clear problem ostensibly grounded in history and recent events; a clear vision of the steps necessary to remedy the problem; and a simply articulated and measurable description of their desired end-state, which is an idealized condition that stands in stark contrast to the initial problem that they have described.<sup>108</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant describes three clear issues that they seek to remedy. The first is the corruption of Muslim governments in the Middle East. This narrative plays on a widespread existing belief in much of the Muslim world, that their governments fall short of Islamic standards, and the dissatisfaction that many citizens feel with their Middle Eastern government's inability to provide adequate services and infrastructure. ISIL decries the corruption, inefficiency, and secularism of Muslim governments. ISIL portrays these governments as having strayed from their Islamic roots, succumbing to worldly temptations, and allowing themselves to be overly influenced by the West, particularly the United States.<sup>109</sup>

The second problem that ISIL describes is the interference of the West in what they consider to be Muslim affairs. This narrative describes a Western coalition led by

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Lavoy, Alexa Monti, and Elizabeth Wentz, "Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?," Monitor360, accessed December 23, 2014, <http://monitor-360.com/ideas/isil-narratives>.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Barrett, *The Islamic State* (New York: The Soufan Group, November 2014), 9.

the United States that is intent on oppressing Muslims and denying Muslim independence.<sup>110</sup> In accordance with their salafist and takfiri beliefs, ISIL absolutely rejects any non-Muslim or modern influences and seeks to re-establish the utopian society that they believe existed at the time of the Prophet. The United States-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the United States-led coalition against ISIL are all seen to reinforce and confirm the belief that the West has a vested interest in the marginalization of the Muslim World.<sup>111</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's last grievance is the foreign partition of what they consider to be Muslim lands. ISIL has rejected the arbitrary lines drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement and seeks to portray the area under their control as one joined Caliphate rather than two artificially created countries established by non-Muslim imperial empires.<sup>112</sup> ISIL's removal of the Iraq and Syria border within their zone of control is both a demonstration of those governments' inability to exercise authority within the lands held by ISIL, as well as a symbolic casting off of foreign constructs.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Benjamin Sugg, "A Tale of Two Jihads: Comparing the Al-Qaeda and ISIS Narratives," IPI Global Observatory, February 9, 2015, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/02/jihad-al-qaeda-isis-counternarrative/>.

<sup>111</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 6.

<sup>112</sup> Jennifer Thea Gordon, "ISIS' Desire to Erase Sykes-Picot Is Rooted in Fiction, Not History," *The National Interest*, September 17, 2014, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis%E2%80%99-desire-erase-sykes-picot-rooted-fiction-not-history-11293>.

<sup>113</sup> John Allen Gay, "Welcome to the New Iraq War," *The National Interest*, June 13, 2014, accessed January 5, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chaos-iraq-dilemmas-america-10650>.

The remedy that ISIL proposes is the re-establishment of a Caliphate which would harken back to the earliest days of Islam. ISIL describes an ideal utopia where the state and its citizens are equally devoted to and governed by the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. This idealized end-state is predicated on the group's belief that the Muslim world at the time of the Prophet is the ideal state, and any deviation from those historical conditions and practices represents degradation.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant provides many solutions to span the gap between the current conditions that they have condemned and their grand vision of a worldwide global Caliphate. The primary method of realizing the group's vision is local and violent revolutions against corrupt institutions, to include Muslim governments. This approach is in contrast to that of Al Qaeda, who has long agitated for the fight against the West or "far enemy." ISIL calls for a fight against the near enemy and encourages revolt and violence against any individuals, organizations, or governances that do not accept the group's ideology and submit to its authority.<sup>114</sup>

Beyond ISIL's grand narratives that describe what is currently wrong with the world, how the world should be, and the methods needed to effect the change, ISIL must recruit and motivate its members to engage in the violent acts that the group deems necessary to achieve its strategic goals. This need has given rise to a host of sub narratives that the group tailors for three basic audiences: young male foreign fighters; young male indigenous Sunni; and mature disaffected Sunni.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> Kuznar, *Thematic Analysis of Islamic State Speeches*, 11.



The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant presents the sub narratives as a logical progression that runs in parallel to the ISIL's grand narrative, and provides the justification and motivation for member's actions. ISIL begins by portraying the world as an inherently unfair world that is controlled and manipulated by corrupt and unworthy tyrants. The next step in the narrative is the assertion that the Ummah, which ISIL would define as the supranational alliance of Muslims who share ISILs beliefs, are required to fight these corrupt tyrants. The narrative continues to explain that victory of the Ummah is assured as it has been destined to defeat those who oppose it. Next, the issue of manly courage is addressed. The ISIL narrative contends that violent action is the only way to defeat evil, and anything short of violent action is tantamount to weakness. ISIL's narrative then progresses to challenge believers to fully devote themselves to the struggle, which will ultimately be victorious. The capstone of the groups narrative arc is the position that infidels, all those who do not share ISIL's views, are completely dispensable and may be eliminated without mercy or consideration.<sup>116</sup>

As ISIL continues to spread its ideology, consolidate its gains, and advance into new territories the group has adopted the slogan, "remaining and expanding."<sup>117</sup> This slogan is not only an optimistic prediction of the future, but is also a boast of the limited effect the United States and its coalition of 60 nations has had in curbing ISIL's ambitions. Although ISIL's success is more a factor of the lack of resistance it has met to date (instead of an affirmation of the groups strength), the group currently enjoys the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>117</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Model," *Washington, Post*, January 28, 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-model>.

distinction of continuing their operations relatively unfazed by the opposition of the Western powers that they denounce and continued efforts by the coalition to stop the group gives credence to ISIL's conspiratorial narrative of Western interference in Muslim affairs.<sup>118</sup> This success in the face of Western military might appears to confirm the group's contextual frame and serves to reinforce the group's narrative which emboldens recruits and committed members alike.

### ISIL Recruiting

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has gained significant notoriety in recent months for not only its military action, but also its robust and effective information campaign. A notable component of this information campaign has been the group's deliberate efforts to recruit and motivate individuals to join ISIL's cause as well as to inspire "lone wolf" attacks in Western and European countries. Although there exists some debate about the degree of success that ISIL's messaging campaign has achieved, it is widely acknowledged that the group has been effective in reaching and mobilizing recruits around the globe. In November of 2014, the United States Central Intelligence Agency publically estimated that more than 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries, including 2,000 Westerners, had joined ISIL's fight in Syria and Iraq.<sup>119</sup> ISIL's messaging sophistication has grown steadily along with the territory it controls, and today

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<sup>118</sup> Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State" (Analysis Paper, Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, March 2015), accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>, 36.

<sup>119</sup> Lavoy, Monti, and Wentz, "Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?"

they have established themselves as one of the most innovative and dominant communicators in the VEO messaging space.

Although ISIL's media expertise was initially learned under the tutelage of Al Qaeda, since splitting from the group, ISIL has exploded on to the social media scene, clearly differentiating themselves from other VEOs through their use of social media.<sup>120</sup> ISIL is notable for its extensive and skilled use of social media and its direct and personal approach to messaging. Unlike other VEOs that message predominantly at a corporate or group level, publishing official statements and releasing articles, ISIL encourages its members to message from personal social media accounts. In this way potential ISIL recruits are able to interact with the extremist organization as a social media "friend" or contact on the virtual communities that they frequent.<sup>121</sup>

Beyond identifying the ISIL group through the lens of individual members, the individual human face that is portrayed in ISIL's social media campaign has the clear advantage of allowing potential recruits to closely self-identify with established members of the organization. For those members who were recruited from Western nations, ISIL prominently uses their country of origin along with their new Muslim name in their social media profiles and Twitter handles so that they can be easily identifiable to their former countrymen.<sup>122</sup> This allows recruits to "see themselves" reflected in ISIL's demographics. In this way, a potential ISIL recruit from Canada or the United States can observe the life of a group member and interact with current Canadian and American

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<sup>120</sup> Ryan, "Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here's How and Why."

<sup>121</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 51.

<sup>122</sup> Ryan, "Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here's How and Why."

members of ISIL. For potential Western recruits, this can serve as a powerful reference point and enticement to join, while at the same time helping to dispel apprehensions about what life will be like once a member of the group.

In counter balance to its use of individual social media personas, ISIL also makes use of designated personnel within the organization who provide expertise in brand management and media outreach. Like other extremist groups (as well as corporate and governmental entities, which ISIL clearly aspires to be) ISIL utilizes dedicated members of their organization who act as press officers or information officers to coordinate the group's message and interface with media outlets.<sup>123</sup> This balanced strategy allows ISIL to portray itself as both a state-like entity and at the same time an approachable persona with which one can directly interact.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's personalization of their message stands in stark contrast to the gratuitous violence often portrayed in their media releases. In spite of the intense violence displayed in the group's corporate propaganda, individual members use their personal social media feeds to portray lives that are orderly, peaceful, and purposeful.<sup>124</sup> Some ISIL recruitment videos have even gone as far as to attempt to lure recruits with promises of extreme comfort, as was the case in one recent recruiting video that depicted the luxurious interior of a four-star hotel in north western Syria and told recruits that they would be allowed to stay there free of charge when they joined the

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<sup>123</sup> Jennifer McCardle and Brian Barnett, "Understanding ISIL Messaging Through Behavioral Science," *Pacific Standard*, September 17, 2014, accessed March 17, 2015, [ria-messaging-behavioral-science-90792](#).

<sup>124</sup> Ryan, "Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here's How and Why."

group.<sup>125</sup> The deliberate portrayal of violence and order, conflict and luxury, is a cleverly employed device that is used to appeal to recruits who are simultaneously motivated to fight, while hesitant to accept the discomfort and pain that fighting often brings. ISIL's messages appeal to a recruit's desire for significance and acceptance, while subtly acknowledging and assuaging the natural human aversion to pain and discomfort.

Unlike many other groups, ISIL maintains a far more visible presence than one would expect from an organization that is currently being hunted by several nations' militaries. Historically VEOs have maintained relatively low profiles, emerging publicly most often after an attack to claim credit, reiterate their message, and make threats about future actions. Rather than remaining shrouded in the darkness, ISIL seeks to shine a spotlight on their activities. Countless acts of violence executed in rapid succession, captured for effect, slickly packaged, and widely disseminated serves as a lure and rallying cry to disaffected Muslim youth and intimidates ISIL's adversaries.<sup>126</sup> An additional benefit to the group is that the liberal use of violence not only attracts attention, but also serves as a pre-selection mechanism for recruitment, those who are attracted by violence tend to be violent themselves, and the cycle of recruitment-action-recruitment perpetuates itself.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Francesca Trianni and Andrew Katz, "Why Westerners Are Fighting for ISIS," *Time*, September 5, 2014, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://time.com/3270896/isis-iraq-syria-western-fighters/>.

<sup>126</sup> Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, last modified February 15, 2015, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

<sup>127</sup> Jesse Singal, "Why ISIS Is So Terrifyingly Effective at Seducing New Recruits," *Science of Us*, August 18, 2014, accessed March 22, 2015, <http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/08/how-isis-seduces-new-recruits.html>.

### ISIL Indoctrination

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's primary means of indoctrinating its members and adherents is through the exploitation of the Islamic religion, specifically the salafist-takfiri approaches. These direct the absolute rejection of any innovation or deviation in practice or custom from the time of the Prophet.<sup>128</sup> ISIL derives much of its legitimacy as an organization from its perceived religious underpinnings and expends significant resources to reinforce this perception. In a manner that is familiar to followers of Islam, ISIL positions itself as a small select group of enlightened individuals who must be followed by the wider population due to their superior knowledge, understanding, and piety. In keeping with the salafist-takfiri interpretations of Islam anyone who opposes the group could be branded as an apostate (*murtad*) or infidel (*kafir*) and punished accordingly.<sup>129</sup> This extremist interpretation serves to dissuade discourse, debate, or opposition to ISIL's policies and teachings.

To supplement the group's own claims, ISIL is active in the solicitation of endorsements from Muslim clerics and leaders. External endorsements both bolster the group's claims and provide corroborating evidence of the group as legitimate religious scholars who are justified to act in the best interests of the faith. Reportedly, the group has detailed one high ranking member, a Saudi officer, Bandar bin Sha'alan, to work as a full time liaison to seek endorsement from respected preachers and clerics.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 18.

<sup>129</sup> Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 10.

<sup>130</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 30.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant skillfully exploits its self-proclaimed position as a religious authority, to weave its agenda into existing beliefs and narratives that are served to a general population that often does not have sufficient knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence to refute the group's assertions. The group has found enormous success stoking the fires of the sectarian divide between Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria, and their Shia countrymen.<sup>131</sup> This narrative has proven successful in motivating violence against the Shia majority in Iraq and Shia minority in Syria, and has aided ISIL's rapid land-grab into formerly Shia held territory.<sup>132</sup>

The second narrative that ISIL exploits is the widespread belief that Muslim governments in the Middle East are corrupt and non-adherent to the strict tenants of Islamic faith.<sup>133</sup> By reinforcing this belief ISIL is able to position itself as an alternative to the corrupt governments of the past. ISIL plays on the optimistic belief that the early days of Islam were the high period of simplicity, unity, purity, and prosperity and appeals to a sentimental desire to return to those simpler times. ISIL claims to represent the pure unadulterated values of Islam and seeks to portray the Islamic State as a utopia that will replicate the times of the Prophet.

Another method of ISIL indoctrination is the exercising of strict social control over the populations under ISIL rule. After capturing territory, the group moves quickly to enact multiple means of formal and informal control over the population. One of the

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<sup>131</sup> Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 9.

<sup>132</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide," accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/sunnishia>.

<sup>133</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 9.

most visible and intrusive means of control is the Sharia police force that is charged with identifying and remedying non-Islamic behavior and conduct.<sup>134</sup> The Sharia police force is separate and apart from any other civilian law enforcement entity and does not concern itself with the protection of citizens or crime prevention outside of Islamic law.

Through this proxy force ISIL is able to enforce standards of conduct while reinforcing the group's Islam-derived legitimacy. For those matters that are beyond the scope of the religious police, a Sharia court system is established to mediate civil or religious complaints. Underlying both these systems is the threat of force. Compliance is not voluntary and running afoul of either the police or courts could result in financial loss, bodily harm, or death. Citizens who do use and benefit from these systems, such as a plaintiff who wins a court case in a Sharia court, are much more likely to be invested in ISIL's governance as their tangible benefit is now tied to ISIL's enduring presence.<sup>135</sup> ISIL capitalizes on this dynamic by maintaining the constant threat of physical force while simultaneously distributing benefits, such as property seized from Christian and Shia citizens, to those who support the ISIL governance mechanisms.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant maintains control through the manipulation of group dynamics. One of the ways ISIL recruits members is by offering a new alternative life of purpose and significance free from all past troubles and difficulties. Once a member of ISIL the group offers identity, purpose, and belonging.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Hadil Aarav, "ISIS Enforces Strict Religious Law in Raqqa," *Al-Monitor*, March 21, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/isis-enforces-islamic-law-raqqa-syria.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 30.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



This combined with the groups “with us or against us” philosophy creates a false dichotomy where members see few viable options outside of the group. This high degree of control and lack of alternative options leading to extreme member commitment greatly facilitates ISIL’s indoctrination activities. Under these conditions members are unlikely to reject the group’s teachings and beliefs, as the result of rejection would be alienation from the group and a loss of perceived benefits derived from group membership.

Along with philosophy and force, ISIL offers tangible demonstrations that reinforce their narrative and teachings. ISIL’s declaration of a Caliphate spanning Iraq and Syria was bolstered by their public destruction of the berm that separated the two countries and the removal of the border posts that once marked the border.<sup>137</sup> Similarly the rapid establishment of Sharia law, courts, and administrative services within conquered territories, lends credence to the groups claim to be a legitimate functioning government capable of replacing the former corrupt system. Education under ISIL rule also demonstrates and reinforces the ISIL belief system. Reportedly general education and vocational education in ISIL held areas have been discontinued in favor of the three Islamic subjects of *aqida* (belief), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *sira* (life of the Prophet).<sup>138</sup> In this way education is tailored to confirm what the students see in their environment, and experiences in their environment mutually confirm their course of education.

The final tool of ISIL indoctrination is their sophisticated network of media production and dissemination. ISIL maintains a media production department capable of

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<sup>137</sup> Katie Welsford, “When Borders Are Meaningless: The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham,” Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs, July 2014, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://iisa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/When-borders-are-meaningless-ISIS.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 44.

generating high quality content for distribution on the internet, in the ISIL magazine *Dabiq*, and in print.<sup>139</sup> Short movies featuring high production value, including video footage from drones and satellite imagery are packaged with the group's rhetoric for world wide consumption over the internet.<sup>140</sup> These products are promoted by an army of bloggers, writers, and internet activists overseen by Abu Amr al Shami, a high ranking Syrian born member of the group, who directs media activities.<sup>141</sup> These products serve not only to educate, but also to attract attention, recruit members, and raise money for the group.

### ISIL Mitigation

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's information strategy to moderate the negative consequences of undesirable events centers on the group's ability to manage public perceptions and direct or redirect the focus of their audiences. ISIL effectively plays the victim when it suits their purposes and is apt to attribute any organizational shortfalls to the interference of their opposition. When ISIL is able to adequately provide services and administration to a region, the group is quick to claim credit and reinforce their narrative that the burgeoning Caliphate is a superior replacement for the

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<sup>139</sup> Olivia Becker, "ISIS Has a Really Slick and Sophisticated Media Department," *VICE News*, July 12, 2014, accessed February 20, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/isis-has-a-really-slick-and-sophisticated-media-department>.

<sup>140</sup> Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, "ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2014, accessed February 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 52.

governmental entities that they have ousted.<sup>142</sup> However, when ISIL's lack of capacity or capability renders them unable to deliver upon their promises, the shortfall is attributed to Iraqi or Syrian force intervention or the United States led anti-ISIL coalition.<sup>143</sup> This strategy may be feasible in the short term, but is likely to wear thin overtime and leaves the group vulnerable to their own success. If ISIL is able to administer in areas unopposed, and falls short of its promise, the viability of the group as a governing institution would likely be called into question by the populace.<sup>144</sup>

This strategy is also evident in ISIL's reaction to the air campaign launched against the group. In this case ISIL fighters sought protection from airstrikes by locating themselves adjacent to civilian populaces and infrastructure. This tactic served not only to discourage aerial targeting due to collateral damage concerns, but also allowed ISIL to redirect the issue from the damage the group sustained at the hands of the anti-ISIL coalition to the toll inflicted on innocent civilian populations. In this way, ISIL cast itself as a sympathetic co-victim of Western aggression and diverted blame from their evasive measures which purposefully endangered the very populace they have claimed to protect.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, *ISIS Governance in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, July 2014), accessed December 12, 2014, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS\\_Governance.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf), 25.

<sup>143</sup> Kevin Johnson, "ISIL's Sophisticated Recruiting Campaign Poses Persistent Threat in U.S." *USA Today*, April 26, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/26/foreign-fighters-isil-fbi/26202741/>.

<sup>144</sup> Lavoy, Monti, and Wentz, "Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?," 4.

<sup>145</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 38.

Amid ISIL's concern about the effectiveness of the air campaign against them, the group has sought to publicly frame the success of the air campaign as confirmation of the anti-ISIL coalition's inability and unwillingness to engage the group in ground combat. ISIL has repeatedly called for the anti-ISIL coalition to abandon air strikes and engage directly in ground combat. ISIL claims to have defeated the United States led coalition during the second Gulf War and promises to do so again if the coalition dares to meet them on the ground.<sup>146</sup> This use of historical revisionism greatly misrepresents ISIL's combat record, denies the efficacy of the air campaign, and allows the group to portray strength and bravado to their constituents.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant deliberately inflates their accomplishments and span of influence in order to bolster public perception. This tactic is evident not only in their rhetoric, but also in the group's social media campaigns. ISIL's Arabic-language Twitter application called *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*, or *Dawn* is ostensibly a program designed to keep the user current with ISIL related news, but in fact installing the application allows the group to post tweets through the users account. The program is sophisticated enough to space the automated tweets sufficiently far enough apart so that Twitter's spam-detection algorithm does not detect the manipulation. The effect is that ISIL is able to portray that its tweets (to include links, hash tags, and images) appear to be trending and resonating with audiences to a much greater degree than is actually the case.<sup>147</sup> The technique has proven effective as ISIL's hash tag on

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> J. M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, last modified June 16, 2014, accessed January 12, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

Twitter consistently outperforms its rival, Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra, despite the two groups having a roughly equivalent number of online supporters.<sup>148</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's mitigation strategy also incorporates grand acts or statements meant to distract and redirect from issues that they wish not to address. Following an uptick in the effectiveness of air strikes against the group ISIL released a statement directing recruits to not travel to Iraq and Syria and rather to remain in their countries of origin and conduct "lone wolf attacks" in the groups name against governmental targets. Although this statement did little to effect conditions on the ground it was very effective in distracting from the groups losses and fueled debate around the world about the groups spreading influence and the danger it posed. ISIL employed a similar technique after territorial gains stalled. The 19 August 2014 video "Message to America," which depicted the execution of a United States hostage James Foley, effectively directed attention away for the group's operational failures and reinforced the perception that ISIL stood ready to confront the United States and the anti-ISIL coalition.<sup>149</sup>

A final mitigation strategy employed by the group is the deliberate market testing of initiatives conducted in order to gauge public reaction and inform the group's decision process prior to committing to a course of action. Prior to declaring the Caliphate, ISIL tested the concept on social media and with influential members of other jihadist groups

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<sup>148</sup> Ajay Kumar, "Rise of ISIS, ISIL: Cyber Jihad Is as Important to Growth of ISIS as Conflict in Iraq and Syria," iDigitalTimes.com, accessed December 12, 2014, <http://www.idigitaltimes.com/rise-isisil-cyber-jihad-important-growth-isis-conflict-iraq-and-syria-report-374450>.

<sup>149</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 38.

in order to gauge reactions, identify objections, and fine tune their information campaign to address these issues.<sup>150</sup> The group again used this tactic in early 2014 when ISIL contemplated a name change. Observers reported that the group manipulated social media to give the appearance of a grassroots movement advocating for the group's leader to declare a new name for the group. Tracking reactions through the use of hash tags, ISIL likely measured audience response, prior to arriving at a decision.<sup>151</sup>

### ISIL Exploitation

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's information campaign capitalizes and leverages advantageous events in order to ensure the widest messaging dissemination and to advance the groups narratives. One of the main aims of these efforts is to portray the group as vast, growing, and influential.<sup>152</sup> Outside of the territory that ISIL controls, this is most effectively pursued by using social medias and online technologies. Unlike other groups, ISIL deemphasizes the role of any one official spokesman in favor of utilizing a wide network of social media accounts, file sharing platforms, and Twitter hash tags.<sup>153</sup> This gives the group the appearance of being a well-coordinated movement and provides mutual collaboration, as well as social proof to the group's information campaign. This interrelated network performs in two distinct ways.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>151</sup> Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter."

<sup>152</sup> Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 31.

<sup>153</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 53.

First, ISIL allows its members general freedom to create and disseminate messages on behalf of the group via individual social media account. These messages are intertwined with the personal communications of the individual because these communications are not scripted; they appear to be organic and genuine expressions of personal thought. This practice has allowed ISIL to, in essence, crowd source their social media engagement and allow for a personal face to the groups operations.<sup>154</sup> This function of the network is ongoing, relatively unrestricted, and executed in a decentralized manner without ISIL conducting review or approval of individual messages or releases.

The second role of the social media network is to surge messages in a manner tightly coordinated and controlled by the ISIL's media arm. In this role themes and messages are developed by the organization, distributed to messengers, and disseminated in unison at pre-coordinated times.<sup>155</sup> The goal is to achieve a massing of information in order to create a spike or trend and gain the attention of larger audiences. This technique is most readily apparent when it goes awry, as in the case of the public announcement of the murder of Stephen Sotloff on 2 September 2014.<sup>156</sup> In this instance, individuals messaging on behalf of the group botched the timing of the news release and mistakenly send links to products prior to the launch of the information campaign.<sup>157</sup> These mistakes

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>155</sup> Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter."

<sup>156</sup> Chelsea J. Carter and Ashley Frantz, "ISIS Video Shows Beheading of Steven Sotloff," *CNN*, September 9, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/02/world/meast/isis-american-journalist-sotloff/index.html>.

<sup>157</sup> Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 51.

are largely the exception, and for the most part ISIL is able to maintain a high degree of control over its network of mouthpieces.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's exploitation campaigns are characterized by the group's emphasis of status enhancing information. Reoccurring themes that both convey information and simultaneously reflect the apparent growing status of the group include glorifying the Caliphate, and its expansion, and ISIL's role in determining who is and is not a Muslim.<sup>158</sup> The pledging of allegiance by other VEOs, as in the case of Nigeria's Boko Haram which literally translated from Hausa is "western education sinful,"<sup>159</sup> in March of 2015 was spun to give the appearance of a global Caliphate gone viral and to suggest ISIL's dominant influence in the region which was once the domain of Al Qaeda. The public executions of both Muslims and Westerners that the group broadcasts sends the clear message that ISIL alone will be the arbitrator of true Islam. At every opportunity ISIL seeks to leverage events both deliberately executed and conducted by third parties, to reinforce the legitimacy that they believe they derive from their interpretation of Islam and place the group's leadership in an exalted position.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's messaging is not only self-aggrandizing, but also is designed to evoke emotion and create unease in their audience. The group regularly incorporates elements of historical symbolism, long held belief, core grievances, and strategic objectives when messaging their successes.<sup>160</sup> This mix of

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<sup>158</sup> Lavoy, Monti, and Wentz, "Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?"

<sup>159</sup> The Economist, "What Is Boko Haram?" *The Economist*, May 1, 2013, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/05/economist-explains-what-boko-haram-nigeria>.

<sup>160</sup> Lavoy, Monti, and Wentz, "Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?"



messaging creates a push-pull effect that portrays victories in the context of the ongoing struggle. This is an effective recruiting tool that tells the audience that the group may be winning but the battle is far from over and individuals can help contribute to the group's success.<sup>161</sup> One particular fear that ISIL exploits is the Sunni fear of disappearing as a sect under the pressure and persecution of Shia Muslims.<sup>162</sup> By speaking to this deep-seated worry, in conjunction with ISIL tactical or operational level victories, the group provides both a beacon of hope and a call to arms for potential recruits and supporters.

### Russian Framing

“Making ideology part of psychological warfare was a Soviet innovation, turning this into a massive and universal warfare. Another innovation was the incessant use of psychological weapons. The point is that peacetime never exists for the government in Moscow.”<sup>163</sup>

Russia's approach to framing the information environment is grounded in President Vladimir Putin's 1999 manifesto, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium.” This ideology extols nationalism, Russia's role as a global superpower, and the idea of social solidarity among culturally Russian peoples. This understanding is in part a reaction to the Kremlin's view that Russia is the product of a post liberal revolution, with liberalism being represented and championed by the United States, and the idea that Russia will

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<sup>161</sup> Kuznar, *Thematic Analysis of Islamic State Speeches*, 18.

<sup>162</sup> Lavoy, Monti, and Wentz, “Why Is ISIL Winning the Narrative War?”

<sup>163</sup> Jolanta Darczewska, “The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study,” OSW Point of View Number 42, May 22, 2014, accessed December 2, 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2014-05-22/anatomy-russian-information-warfare-crimean-operation-a-case-study>, 20.

defend traditional conservative values as it leads the reemergence of a new Eurasian civilization. This grand ideology has been refined for the purposes of information operations as a triad of three issues: spiritual, state sovereignty, and cyber sovereignty.<sup>164</sup>

Russia's theory of geopolitical dominance is strongly linked to their recognition of the importance of information superiority in achieving strategic end-states.<sup>165</sup> An analysis of Russia's geopolitical history by Igor Parain, a leading Russian information warfare thought leader, concluded in 2006 that the greater an advantage in information operations held by a nation, the greater the probability of the nation achieving its geopolitical aims.<sup>166</sup> This emphasis on information operations, or information warfare, is reflected in the whole of government approach employed by the Russian Government.

The Russian Federation's information policy centers on strengthening the state, reconstructing the Russian sphere of influence, and mobilizing the public in support of government actions. In support of these goals Russia has constructed a narrative of two civilizations with two different ideologies locked in a struggle for dominance. On one side is the declining Atlantic civilization, which is led by the United States and is bent on maintaining a global hegemony. The other side, championed by the Russian Federation, is the Russian Eurasian civilization, which stands in opposition to the Atlantic society and represents the just future of global power balance.<sup>167</sup> This worldview has given rise to a

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>165</sup> Ulrik Franke, "War by Non-Military Means," FOI, March 12, 2015, accessed April 4, 2015, [http://www.foi.se/ReportFiles/foir\\_4065.pdf](http://www.foi.se/ReportFiles/foir_4065.pdf), 11.

<sup>166</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 17.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 7.

paranoia-like state where external influences are attributed to anti-Russian aggression, a continuation of the information campaign of the *perestroika* that ultimately hastened the demise of the Soviet Union.<sup>168</sup> Adherents of this worldview are not just fighting for market share in the information space, but also the very survival of their nation.

This narrative is present not just in Russia's external worldview, but also in their internal perspective. The Russian Federation discourages debate, discourse, and challenges to the ideological frame that they have created. This has led to a "for us or against us" dynamic, sometimes expressed as two distinct groups, the Russian Patriotic Camp and the liberal-West Camp. Within this construct, criticism or alternate perspectives are maligned as "subversive" and in opposition to the state. This serves to discourage all but the most ardent internal opposition, and provides a tremendous disincentive to alternate ideological viewpoints.<sup>169</sup> Moscow devotes significant efforts to concealing any gaps between the ideology that they espouse and the actions that they undertake. The goal is to continually reinforce the credibility of the Kremlin's policies and their right to actively arrange global affairs in the post Soviet era.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Franke, "War by Non-Military Means," 16.

<sup>169</sup> The Economist, "If You Can't Suppress Them, Squeeze Them," *The Economist*, July 21, 2012, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/node/21559362>.

<sup>170</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 5.

The Russian Federation's current information campaign and framing efforts are strongly reminiscent of their Cold War activities.<sup>171</sup> The theory of *spetsprogaganda* or special propaganda, which was first taught as a separate subject at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942, and was later removed from the curriculum in the 1990s. In 2000, the subject of special propaganda was again reintroduced to the institution, following a reorganization and name change. The institute is now known as the Military Information and Foreign Languages Department of the Military University of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.<sup>172</sup> This reincorporation of Cold War doctrine is a telling indicator of Russia's renewed emphasis on the soft elements of power. These elements and theories are once again active and widely distributed throughout Russia's government, military, and academia.<sup>173</sup>

Russia's recent success in information warfare stems from both their methodological approach and their integrated structure. The Russian Federation's system of government and centralized control allows a vertical integration of information operations that extends from the highest strategic levels to the tactical level and spans internal policy, foreign policy, military, diplomatic, economic, academic, and civil spheres. This has facilitated a truly "whole of government" approach that has achieved

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<sup>171</sup> Celestine Bohlen, "Cold War Media Tactics Fuel Ukraine Crisis," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/world/europe/cold-war-media-tactics-fuel-ukraine-crisis.html>.

<sup>172</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 9.

<sup>173</sup> Bridget Kendall, "Russian Propaganda Machine 'Worse than Soviet Union,'" *BBC News*, June 6, 2014, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27713847>.

mobilization both domestically and abroad.<sup>174</sup> Russia believes, and perhaps rightly so, that they operate with relative impunity in their conduct of information warfare.<sup>175</sup> This is an empowering belief for a nation that treats information as a weapons system, beliefs that culture and identity trump borders and territory.<sup>176</sup> Finally, the Russian Federation has a fundamentally different view of the role of truth in information operations. From the Russian perspective no true truth exists in information warfare. United States doctrine formerly lumped together the idea of inform and influence activities, which has the tendency to bias operations towards disseminating truthful information (inform) and leveraging truthful information (influence). This has continued to create confusion for US Information Operations professionals, with different Department of Defense descriptions of psychological operations, differing in the inclusion of the distinction of truthful information.<sup>177</sup> The Russian Federation's approach is focused almost solely on influence to achieve political aims and gain geopolitical advantage, and thus the objective truth plays a much smaller role.<sup>178</sup> As Russia squares off with the West, in what they view to be first a battle of ideology, their approach reflects the distinction that there is no truth, only winning.

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<sup>174</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 25.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>177</sup> James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>178</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 13.

## Russian Recruiting

As a state, with vast resources available the Russian Federation's recruitment goals and targets differ from those of non-state entities, or state-aspirants as in the case of ISIL. The Russian Federation seeks to recruit those who can effectively advance its cause, while possessing certain characteristics that are desirable to the state. One of the most prized characteristics is the recruitment targets perceived independence from the Russian Federation. The perception of non-governmental affiliation offers the Russian government measures of deniability and the appearance of non-involvement or non-influence. This is especially prized in the Russian Federation's recruitment of foreign born journalists to work for Russian Government owned media outlets.<sup>179</sup>

Two of the most visible tools of Russian information dissemination are the Russian Federation funded English, Spanish, and Arabic language television station RT (formerly Russia Today) and the Russian run media brand *Sputnik* which was established in 2014. Both these information platforms benefit from massive funding by the Russian Government. RT's 2015 budget alone is estimated to be \$330 million.<sup>180</sup> Russia's state owned media platforms have become cornerstones of their soft power approach to influence operations.<sup>181</sup> With echoes of Radio Moscow, the Russian Federation owned

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<sup>179</sup> Alex Altman and Jack Linshi, "Malaysia Airlines Ukraine Crash Tests Russian Propaganda Network," *Time*, July 24, 2014, accessed January 12, 2015, <http://time.com/3014822/malaysia-airlines-ukraine-crash-rt-russian-television/>.

<sup>180</sup> Stephen Ennis, "Kremlin's Global Media Operation Under the Spotlight," *BBC News*, November 16, 2014, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30040363>.

<sup>181</sup> Josh Halliday, "BBC World Service Fears Losing Information War as Russia Today Ramps up Pressure," *The Guardian*, December 21, 2014, accessed April 17, 2015,

news outlets ostensibly seeks to provide a Russian perspective and balance Western dominated media.

From RT's founding, non-Russian journalists who would appeal to foreign target audiences in their native language and lend an air of credibility to the news station were sought. RT actively recruited young, and largely inexperienced, journalism students to join the news organization. These recruits received compensation packages, which in some cases included health insurance, free housing, and low six figure salaries for relatively undemanding schedules. These recruitment tactics worked with 72 foreigners joining RT during the initial launch.<sup>182</sup>

Another area where the Russian Federation seeks to recruit, in order to bolster its information campaign, is armed contractors and "volunteers" to fight as proxies in conflict zones such as the Ukraine. Portrayed as patriotic volunteers, veterans of Russian conflicts such as Afghanistan and Chechnya are actively recruited by Russian veteran organizations to fight on behalf of Russian interests in the Ukraine. The use of non-official Russian Military forces provides the Kremlin a measure of deniability as to their official involvement and furthers the narrative of Ukrainian persecution of Russian citizens.<sup>183</sup>

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<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/dec/21/bbc-world-service-information-war-russia-today>.

<sup>182</sup> Julia Ioffe, "What Is Russia Today?," *Columbia Journalism Review* (September-October 2010), accessed December 18, 2014, [http://www.cjr.org/feature/what\\_is\\_russia\\_today.php](http://www.cjr.org/feature/what_is_russia_today.php).

<sup>183</sup> Mark Urban, "How Many Russians Are Fighting in Ukraine?," *BBC News*, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794523>.

Potential combatants, almost all with former Russian Military experience, are screened, recruited, organized, transported, and employed by recruiters who offer payments of \$1,000 to \$4,000 a month from unacknowledged sources. One scout, a former Russian Special Forces Officer, reported in a Russian publication that many fighters are motivated by the Russian propaganda they see in the media.<sup>184</sup> These “off the books” fighters advance the Russian Federation agenda without the risk of damaging the popular media narrative. Combatant numbers and casualties for volunteer fighters are not publicly tracked or reported giving the appearance of conflict without cost. Recruitment of “volunteer” fighters offers an advantageous blend of effectiveness and deniability without the corresponding public accountability.<sup>185</sup>

#### Russian Indoctrination

Russia’s millennial generation is often referred to as “*pokolenie Putina*,” the Putin generation. This name speaks not only to the dominant political figure of their generation but also to the self identity, worldview, and ideology that flourished under this tutelage in the Russian post-Communist Era and has become a hallmark of this group. Although the “Putin generation” had the advantages of coming to age during a time when access to technology, travel, the internet, and foreign goods was more prevalent, paradoxically they have evolved to embody less liberal and more traditional views. These future leaders of

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<sup>184</sup> James Rupert, “How Russians Are Sent to Fight in the Ukraine,” *Newsweek*, January 1, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/how-russians-are-sent-fight-ukraine-296937>.

<sup>185</sup> The Interpreter, “Provocations, Proxies and Plausible Deniability,” *The Interpreter*, June 24, 2014, accessed January 3, 2015. <http://www.interpretermag.com/provocations-proxies-and-plausible-deniability/>.



Russia are characterized by a general apathy towards the political process, little interest in social justice issues, xenophobia, and criticism of America and Western influences. Having grown up during a chaotic and transitional time in their country, many harbor nostalgia for the glory of past days and wish to see Russia regain its position as a dominant world power.<sup>186</sup>

This ideology has been cultivated in part by a program of youth movements organized and funded by the Kremlin. These groups, which include *Nashi* (which translates as “ours”), the Youth Guard, Locals (a group created by the Moscow region government), and *Grigorevtsy* (associated with the Russian Orthodox Church) have effectively contacted, engaged, and mobilized youth across Russia. Activities run the gamut from political education, martial arts, social media campaigns, street demonstrations, patriotic youth camps, and military drills.<sup>187</sup>

The formation of these youth groups by the government serve to exert a measure of control over the younger generations that pose the greatest potential threat to staging politically motivated uprisings, such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine that brought the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko to power in 2004.<sup>188</sup> By actively engaging the youth, organizing them into groups, and proactively messaging and reinforcing an ideology

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<sup>186</sup> Sarah E. Mendelson, “Generation Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2015, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142488/sarah-e-mendelson/generation-putin>.

<sup>187</sup> Steven Lee Myers, “Youth Groups Created by Kremlin Serve Putin’s Cause,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2007, sec. International/Europe, accessed January 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/world/europe/08moscow.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Adrian Karatnycky, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution.” *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2005). accessed June 4, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2005-03-01/ukraines-orange-revolution>.

complimentary with the governments agenda, Russia has not only mitigated a potential driving of internal instability but simultaneously built a class, inculcated with values and shared experiences that predispose them to supporting a nationalistic expansionist agenda.<sup>189</sup> The creation of state-sponsored politically indoctrinated corps of youth, like *Nashi*, have led some critics to draw parallels to the Hitler Youth and accuse the Putin Government of building a paramilitary force that could be used to harass and attack political opponents.<sup>190</sup>

Beyond merely passive acceptance of the state sponsored ideology, these groups have been successfully activated for a myriad of political purposes. Following the Estonian removal of a World War II statue depicting a Russian soldier, Estonia's government offices fell victim to cyber attacks while the Estonian Ambassador to Russia was targeted and harassed by Russia sponsored youth groups, who were only repelled after diplomatic security employed non-lethal crowd control measures. In another ominous demonstration, members of one youth group who were identified by jackets labeled "Putin communicators," took to the streets to disseminate 10,000 specially purposed mobile SIM cards which allowed users to text message directly to youth volunteers manning call stations at the Kremlin. These SIM cards were accompanied by instructions to report any signs of an Orange Revolution-like movement. In the event of

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<sup>189</sup> Democracy Digest, "Russian Youth Movement Now 'Putin's Private Army'," *Democracy Digest*, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.demdigest.net/russian-youth-movement-now-putins-private-army/>.

<sup>190</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Vladimir Putin: Ethnic Russian Nationalist," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2014, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/19/vladimir-putin-ethnic-russian-nationalist/>.

such an occurrence the SIM cards would also be used to transmit messages from the Kremlin to the user, with directions on where, when, and how to meet and confront the anti-government activity. Another youth group demonstrated one such response by staging a drill where the Youth Guard armed with baseball bats practiced defending a government building against 100 dissident role players, and smashing a simulated protester tent encampment.<sup>191</sup>

### Russian Mitigation

“Information warfare has a multitude of components, both in real life and in virtual reality, elements of blocking the opponent’s influence and elements of pressure (creating influence).”<sup>192</sup>

The Russian Federation developed its mitigation strategy in response to those elements of information warfare that the Kremlin deemed most threatening to the geopolitical aims of the Russian State.<sup>193</sup> Russia’s mitigation mechanisms could be best characterized as a well-constructed counter-influence system. The Russian Federation is primarily concerned with two distinct information threats. The first is the perceived deliberate campaign of anti-Russian propaganda perpetrated by Western nations. This perception stems from the Russian understanding that they are locked in a struggle to reestablish Russian world influence in a post Soviet era. This view portrays elements

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<sup>191</sup> Owen Matthews, “Putin’s Powerful Youth Guard,” *Newsweek*, May 27, 2007, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/putins-powerful-youth-guard-101029>.

<sup>192</sup> Darczewska, “The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study,” 24.

<sup>193</sup> Franke, “War by Non-Military Means,” 18.

outside of the Russian Federation and their close allies as, at best, rivals, and more likely adversaries.<sup>194</sup> The second threat is that of political uprisings both within the Russian Federation and within those territories where Russia maintains an active interest and equity, as in the case of the Ukraine.<sup>195</sup> In order to address these threats Russia is returning to many of the influence and counter influence techniques developed and perfected during the Cold War.

One of the primary tools of information warfare used against Russia, from the Russian perspective, is disinformation. The Russian Information Security Doctrine of 2000 lists among the key threats “the spread of disinformation about the policy of the Russian Federation, the activities of the federal bodies of state authority and events occurring in the country and abroad.”<sup>196</sup> Russia seeks to counter this with its own disinformation that is designed to attack its adversaries, sow confusion, and conceal Russian activities.<sup>197</sup> The rise of online media freedom and the proliferation of web-enabled devices both challenges and presents opportunities for the Russian State.<sup>198</sup> In particular, social media networks have allowed individual users to capture, create,

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<sup>194</sup> Darczewska, “The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study,” 17.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>196</sup> “MFA of Russia, Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” September 9, 2000, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/2deaa9ee15ddd24bc32575d9002c442b!OpenDocument>.

<sup>197</sup> Giles, “Russia’s Hybrid Warfare,” 4.

<sup>198</sup> N. Sharyl, “Russia and Countering Violent Extremism in the Internet and Social Media: Exploring Prospects for US-Russia Cooperation Beyond the ‘Reset,’” *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (2013): 4.

package, and distribute information in near real time. This has accelerated the sharing of information and challenged Russian propaganda by providing a “ground truth” and alternate opinions that are often in opposition to the official narrative.<sup>199</sup> The Russian Federation has attempted to counter this through the use of internet centric propaganda methods that include state sponsored internet activist (derogatively referred to as internet trolls) which can mass to drown out dissenting opinions and sophisticated automation tools, that can disseminate and promote Russian state-sponsored information on the same social medias at an accelerated rate and with an often wider reach.<sup>200</sup>

Russia’s approach to mitigation is tempered by their philosophy that losses or setbacks in individual information engagements are inconsequential if their grand aim is ultimately achieved.<sup>201</sup> This focus on the desired end-state vs the multitude of progressive milestones keeps the Russian Federation’s information machine tightly focused and constantly in motion. The defensive aspects of Russia’s influence are primarily centered on blocking the influence of the West and the United States in order to thwart the perceived threat of United States’ global hegemony. Recent Russian efforts in Crimea have been touted as a successful execution of this form of defensive warfare, using the full compliment of media, diplomatic, economic, and military tools.<sup>202</sup> This line of effort

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<sup>199</sup> Darczewska, “The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study,” 26.

<sup>200</sup> Olga Bugorkova, “Ukraine Conflict: Inside Russia’s ‘Kremlin Troll Army’,” *BBC News*, March 19, 2015, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31962644>.

<sup>201</sup> Darczewska, “The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study,” 25.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

is as grounded in a sense of self-protection as it is in rivalry. Russia's current ideology espouses the belief that the West not only wishes to control the balance of global power, but also desires to destroy Russian statehood in the process.<sup>203</sup>

Offensively, Russia seeks to keep the West off-balance and on the informational defensive. The Russian Federation tailors messaging to discrete target audiences within the United States in order to confirm pre-existing biases and fuel fears. These messages may include: the threat of war aimed at pacifist or threat adverse audiences; the prospect of uncertainty, unpredictability, or upheaval aimed at political groups and governmental institutions; the possibility of economic loss directed at entrepreneurs; or the prospect of United States undue influence or abandonment messaged to other nations.<sup>204</sup> These future threats may discourage active intervention and encourage the acceptance of the status quo, which is actively concealed by Russian defensive information operations.

### Russian Exploitation

Exploitation operations conducted by the Russian Federation are grounded in Russia's long history and well-formed theories of information warfare developed after World War II.<sup>205</sup> In an approach to achieving political and geopolitical aims, Russia has leveraged and coordinated academia in order to better understand, and influence, relevant

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<sup>203</sup> Walter Laqueur, "After the Fall: Russia in Search of a New Ideology," *World Affairs Journal* (March-April 2014), accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/after-fall-russia-search-new-ideology>.

<sup>204</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 36.

<sup>205</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, "Inside the Kremlin's Hall of Mirrors," *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015, accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology>.

populations. Institutions such as the Information and Analytical Centre for Studying Socio-Political Processes in the Post-Soviet Area, which was created as part of the Chair for Near Abroad History at Lomonsov University, provides in-depth research into both historical and current elements of key informational environments.<sup>206</sup> Such institutions provide not only research and analysis, but also training to a dedicated cadre of Russia's influence professionals. This approach is well articulated in the modern Russian information warfare thought leader Aleksandr Dugin's work "Post-Modern Geopolitics" where he advocates for a "Eurasian" netwar model that utilizes a "special group consisting of senior officials, the best mission oriented staff from the Russian secret services, intellectuals, scientists, political scientists and corps of patriotically-oriented journalists and culture activists."<sup>207</sup> The degree to which this vision has been realized is not yet known, however the impressive successes of information operations in the Ukraine suggests the adaptation of this approach.<sup>208</sup>

Russia's influence network seeks to leverage informational successes in order to advance external Russian influence, by reconstructing the Russian sphere of influence that has atrophied from the Soviet period, and internally mobilizing Russian society to adopt attitudes and beliefs and take actions favorable to Russian state objectives.<sup>209</sup> This

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<sup>206</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 11.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>208</sup> NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, "Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign Against Ukraine," 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, [http://www.stratcomcoe.org/~media/SCCE/NATO\\_PETIJUMS\\_PUBLISKS\\_29\\_10.ashx](http://www.stratcomcoe.org/~media/SCCE/NATO_PETIJUMS_PUBLISKS_29_10.ashx).

<sup>209</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 8.

dual approach of external and internal is both mutually supportive and mutually amplifying. The Russian Federation's information efforts are aided by the fact that many civilian (domestic and foreign) audiences do not recognize that they are in fact a target of information warfare. Although propaganda is often easily recognized by discerning consumers as biased or slanted, the extent of the deliberate campaign of influence conduct by a coordinated network of messengers is generally not recognized.<sup>210</sup>

Russia employs a variety of influence mechanisms to achieve its goals, these include: social control, the influencing of society; social maneuvering, the intentional control of the public aimed at gaining certain benefits; information manipulation, the employment of factual information in order to engender false beliefs; disinformation, the employment of information known to be false; fabrication of information, the deliberate creation of false information; and coercive techniques such as lobbying, blackmail, and extortion.<sup>211</sup> All of these mechanisms may be applied directly, through surrogate or proxy, or via technological means such as social media and the internet. For this purpose Russia has invested heavily in a network of dissemination platforms that are constructed to mutually reinforce each other while appearing to be independent. In this way, English language reports on RT reinforce Russian Federation's official statements that collaborate Russian television, which advanced ideas supported and echoed in the blogosphere, which are agreed upon by Russian academics, and appear to be confirmed by individual reports and popular sentiment.

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<sup>210</sup> Pomerantsev, "Inside the Kremlin's Hall of Mirrors."

<sup>211</sup> Darczewska, "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare. The Crimean Operation, a Case Study," 15.



The key tool of Russian influence, no matter the media, remains propaganda. This tool powerfully blends carefully curated information with powerful emotional cues in order to solicit predictable thought or action.<sup>212</sup> Russian propaganda lies at the heart of the countries information warfare and has become so intertwined within Russian Federation ideology and narrative that it is now difficult to distinguish government sponsored messages from the organic. Although often dismissed by foreign audiences, Russia's information campaigns resonate powerfully with the Russian Federations populace, Russian speaking audiences, ethnically Russian peoples, and the Russian diaspora. In this way much of the Russian Federation's propaganda has become their audience's truth.

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 34.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Conclusions

##### The New Information Environment

The successes and effective influence techniques employed by Al Qaeda, ISIL, and the Russian Federation all stem from a nuanced understanding and skillful exploitation of new media and today's information environment. Even the most casual observer of recent global affairs would be compelled to recognize that a new phenomenon is afoot. From the United States Presidential election of 2008,<sup>213</sup> to the Arab Spring movement that began in 2010, and spread to varying degrees throughout Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, to the political upheaval in Egypt in 2011, a new media environment, infused with compelling ideologies, has upset the balance of power in many countries around the world.

This information environment is characterized by a decentralization of content production that has allowed non-state actors, corporations, and individuals to effect, reach, and influence once only possible by state entities engaging in coordinated, and expensive strategic messaging campaigns.<sup>214</sup> The proliferation of a faster, more affordable, and largely ungoverned internet, has given rise to a host of new incarnations

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<sup>213</sup> Characterized as the “facebook” election, the 2008 Presidential election was notable for its extensive use of social media that succeeded in reaching and mobilizing young tech-savvy voters.

<sup>214</sup> Dennis M. Murphy, *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2008), accessed April 2, 2015, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA509047>.

of traditional medias including audio (in the form of web radio and podcasts), video (web streaming, internet TV, Vines, and viral video), and print (web journalism and blogs).

Developing equally as fast, with comparable impact, are the mobile technologies that have granted a wide portion of the population near constant access to real-time text, voice, and in some cases video based communication; a picture camera; a video camera; an audio recording device; internet access; and a broadcast platform. Combining the explosive growth of mobile technologies with new medias results in an unprecedented level of communications, where ideas and ideology freely flow.

It is within this shared media landscape that Al Qaeda, ISIL, and the Russian Federation seek to perform the very similar actions of framing, recruiting, indoctrinating, mitigating, and exploiting to achieve an informational advantage and further the groups agenda. Although the environment and activities are similar, the approaches developed by the various adversary actors are very different. Each has tailored these informational functions for their specific target audience, available resources, and cultural contexts.

### Al Qaeda Information Operations

Al Qaeda, long the dominant organization among Sunni extremist groups, has worked diligently over the last two decades to establish themselves as a recognizable and compelling global brand.<sup>215</sup> This has been achieved primarily through the group's integrated use of spectacular attacks aimed against the West, and the synchronized and coordinated use of accompanying messaging campaigns. These campaigns are designed

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<sup>215</sup> Tony Karon, "Al-Qaeda After Bin-Laden: Can the 'Brand' Survive?," *Time*, May 5, 2011, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://world.time.com/2011/05/05/al-qaeda-after-bin-laden-can-the-brand-survive/>.

to heighten the emotional and psychological toll and promote the act to the Muslim world. In this way, Al Qaeda portrays a world where Muslims are relentlessly under attack, and they cast themselves as the sole defenders of the Muslim faith.<sup>216</sup> Al Qaeda's narrative is spread through a wide variety of media products that are designed to appeal to audiences ranging from children, to educated adults. Al Qaeda leads the field in the production and dissemination of Islamist propaganda and has developed a sophisticated media apparatus that generates products ranging from high quality video productions to cyber mosques.

Although still the dominant player in Sunni extremist circles, Al Qaeda is in fierce competition with ISIL, formerly Al Qaeda in Iraq and its former franchise, who Al Qaeda disowned in 2014.<sup>217</sup> This battle for relevance among contested audiences is being fought largely in the groups competing media campaigns. ISIL has aggressively seized market share with its nearly non-stop stream of shockingly violent messages that seek to establish the group as not only the most effective defender of the faith but also the most effective counter to Western and Middle Eastern apostate government military power. In response, Al Qaeda publically has renounced ISIL and continues to condemn the groups more recent extreme acts, such as the public execution of a captured Jordanian pilot who was burned alive in early 2015 and the Yemen Shiite mosque attacks that claimed the

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<sup>216</sup> Tom Quiggin, "Understanding Al-Qaeda's Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (November 25, 2010), accessed January 12, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/67>.

<sup>217</sup> Aryn Baker and Claire Zillman, "Why Al-Qaeda Kicked Out Its Deadly Syria Franchise," *Time*, February 3, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://time.com/3469/why-al-qaeda-kicked-out-its-deadly-syria-franchise/>.

lives of 137 people and wounded another 357 in March 2015.<sup>218</sup> Al Qaeda instead has backed its affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, which many Muslims view as a more moderate alternative to the ISIL brand of Islamist ideology.<sup>219</sup>

Under pressure from ISIL's expansion into Yemen, Al Qaeda has gone so far as to challenge ISIL's claim of a Caliphate as illegitimate.<sup>220</sup> Al Qaeda's deliberate rejection of ISIL serves to position Al Qaeda as a more reasonable alternative to the violent extremist group and may serve to make Al Qaeda more palatable among moderate leaning Muslim populations.<sup>221</sup> As the rift between ISIL and Al Qaeda widens, both groups are adapting their messaging strategy to promote their groups legitimacy, clearly distinguishing themselves from one another, and competing for the support of the Ummah. To date, Al Qaeda appears to be slipping from its habitual top position, and may be in danger of being eclipsed by the emerging ISIL. As Clint Watts expressed in February 2015 on *Foreign Affairs'* website, "If al Qaeda were a corporation today, it

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<sup>218</sup> Hakim Almasmari and Jason Hanno, "Yemen Mosque Attacks: ISIS Purportedly Lays Claim," *CNN*, March 20, 2015, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/20/middleeast/yemen-violence/index.html>.

<sup>219</sup> Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, accessed January 14, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html).

<sup>220</sup> Paul Cruickshank, "Al Qaeda in Yemen Rebukes ISIS," *CNN*, November 21, 2014, accessed March 22, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/21/world/meast/al-qaeda-yemen-isis/index.html>.

<sup>221</sup> Lee Keath and Maggie Michael, "Competition with ISIS Is Transforming Al Qaeda," *Business Insider*, May 5, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/competition-with-isis-is-forcing-al-qaeda-to-adapt-and-grow-stronger-2015-5>.

would be roughly equivalent to Microsoft: A big name but an aging brand, one now strikingly out of touch with the eighteen through thirty-five year-old demographic.”<sup>222</sup> This sentiment may have Al Qaeda desperate to reassert itself and re-establish relevance. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s claim of involvement in the Charlie Hebdo attack may be such an effort. Giving rise to this speculation is the fact that Al Qaeda waited one week following the attack before publically claiming their involvement, and they could not produce any of the behind-the-scenes and insider photos or videos that have become a hallmark of their post attack media campaign.<sup>223</sup> As Al Qaeda, who rose to prominence in an age before social media, competes against ISIL for attention and relevance among contested target audiences the group must continue to evaluate and revise their messaging strategy to remain prominent.

### ISIL Information Operations

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has crafted strategic messaging platforms and campaigns that are as novel as the group itself. ISIL’s messaging strategy reflects the group’s fluid transition between the tactics of a terrorist group, non-state actor, and state entity. In many ways, ISIL has defined itself as a post-state actor, having rejected the conventions of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia and the Sykes-Picot Agreement.<sup>224</sup> This

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<sup>222</sup> Clint Watts, “Al Qaeda Loses Touch,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2015, accessed March 12, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-02-04/al-qaeda-loses-touch>.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ariel I. Ahrām, “The Middle East Quasi-State System,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/27/the-middle-east-quasi-state-system/>.

new amorphous self definition allows the group to utilize a hybrid of tactics, free of conventional restraints.<sup>225</sup> ISIL's media strategy is similarly as fluid, with the group pragmatically utilizing techniques that run the gamut, from those typical of an individual on social media, to corporate-like messaging campaigns.

In many ways ISIL offers a comprehensive offering to their adherents. They act simultaneously as religious group, ruling government, court system, military force, social movement, and business conglomerate. All these facets are tied together by a unifying narrative that is perceived to be both complete and compelling. Countless incidents of support for the group around the world (and actions inspired by the group's messages) demonstrate the effectiveness of their narrative. Notable terror events such as the 2014 Sydney hostage crises, the 2014 attack at the National War Memorial in Canada, the 2014 foiling of a terror attacks in London, threats to target US military personnel on and around US bases in 2014 and 2015, and the 2014 Jewish Museum shooting in Brussels, Belgium all stand testament to the persuasiveness of the ISIL narrative and call to action.<sup>226</sup> ISIL has offered an open invitation to radical Islamists around the globe, and thousands of citizens from dozens of nations have heeded the call of this new state.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Brian L. Steed, "Changing the Conversation: Conceptualizing the Fight against Non-State and Post-State Actors" (Lecture, Command and General Staff College, May 1, 2015), 12.

<sup>226</sup> Jessica McFate, Harleen Gambhir, and Evan Sterling, "ISIS's Global Messaging Strategy Fact Sheet," Institute for the Study of War, December 2014, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/GLOBAL%20ROLLUP%20Update.pdf>, 2.

<sup>227</sup> Jethro Mullen, "How Far Does ISIS' Global Reach Extend?," *CNN*, September 25, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/25/world/meast/isis-reach/index.html>.

Much can be learned from examining the tactics and techniques of ISIL messaging. The group has proven itself a sophisticated player on the world's media stage and has amassed an impressive market share. ISIL's information operations arguably have outperformed their tactical operations. Much of their success can be ascribed to their deft manipulation of emerging social media, which they have leveraged for tremendous effect. ISIL's social media approach is characterized by the use of personal accounts that are loosely networked together and mutually supporting<sup>228</sup> to effectively allow the group to crowdsource and disseminate large amounts of their propaganda. This strategy of a wide-ranging dispersed network also has the effect of being difficult to counter, as disruption to any small number of nodes can be mitigated by the robust network with little overall disruption to the overall efficiency of the effort, and disruption to the majority of the nodes is unlikely and is not incentivized due to the open nature of the internet.<sup>229</sup>

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has also demonstrated its skill at manipulating human networks. Having emerged from the Sunni culture of Iraq and Syria, the group understands the dynamics of the human terrain and has applied a sophisticated methodology to their interactions with the local populace in the areas they seek to govern. Before applying violent military tactics, they pursued an engagement strategy that preceded their military strategy by a year or more. Depending on the circumstances, ISIL courted target audiences with gifts, provided information and explanation, disseminated

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<sup>228</sup> Performing supporting actions such as retweeting each other's content.

<sup>229</sup> Lauren Walker, "Inside the ISIS Social Media Campaign," *Newsweek*, March 6, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/inside-isis-social-media-campaign-312062>.



information products, conducted key leader engagements, and provided assurances.<sup>230</sup>

This preparation of the battlefield aided the group during the expansion phase of their operations, and provided many visible indicators of widespread public acceptance that allowed the group to conserve combat power and fuelled their messaging campaigns. ISIL led with ideas and followed with violence.

A final aspect of ISIL's messaging is the resilience of their communications campaign. ISIL's message rests firmly on the bedrock of deeply held and widespread existing belief. Whether it is the inherent distrust and animosity between Sunni and Shia, or the perceived incompetence and corruption of Middle East governments, ISIL has woven their narrative deeply into the fabric of generally accepted truth. For this reason, attacks and attempt to undermine ISIL's narrative are met with tremendous resistance and often dismissed, as they appear to challenge beliefs that the target audience are often unwilling to re-evaluate. Efforts to counter ISIL combat forces have served only to strengthen the group's narrative. ISIL seeks to portray itself as the defender of Western aggression and has positioned itself well to capitalize on any efforts to engage it with force. If the military action is successful, ISIL's message of Western aggression is reinforced with ISIL portrayed as the valiant victim, and if military efforts against ISIL fall short, the group appears to be strong and capable of standing up to the world's military superpowers.

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<sup>230</sup> Steed, "Changing the Conversation," 10.

## Russian Federation Information Operations

Russia, with its formidable conventional military forces, has demonstrated a mastery of integrating information operations with military might.<sup>231</sup> Russia's approach to information operations and information warfare differs from that of the United States and China, in that Russia views information as a valuable commodity that requires protection both prior to, and during, conflict and also acknowledges the critical role it plays in influencing global perceptions of Russian operations.<sup>232</sup> The Russian Federation also sees information operations as a tool to sow confusion, disinformation, and demoralizing messages among adversary populaces and global audiences. The Russian Federation has achieved a weaponization of information that is now an integral component of their hybrid warfare model.<sup>233</sup> Information is combined with small scale military action (clandestine, covert, or conventional), in order to achieve desired effects, while being careful not to cross the threshold of conflict into conventional war.<sup>234</sup>

While United States information operations confines these activities primarily to the narrow area of Military Deception operations, aimed against specific adversary

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<sup>231</sup> Damien Sharkov, "Russia Engaging in 'Hybrid War' With Europe, Says Former Nato Chief," *Newsweek*, April 15, 2015, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/former-nato-chief-says-europe-hybrid-war-putin-322293>.

<sup>232</sup> Roland Heickerö, *Emerging Cyber Threats and Russian Views on Information Warfare and Information Operations* (FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency, Division of Defence Analysis, 2010), 4.

<sup>233</sup> Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," *The Interpreter*, accessed 7 December 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/the-menace-of-unreality-how-the-kremlin-weaponizes-information-culture-and-money/>.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

decision makers, Russia pursues a more aggressive policy of targeting general populaces in countries around the world.<sup>235</sup> This methodology appears to be effective, with many Russian propagated untruths being widely disseminated.<sup>236</sup> In response to Russian disinformation, the US Department of State has begun to list and publish Russian untruths (a document titled *President Putin's Fiction: 10 False Claims about the Ukraine*)<sup>237</sup> along with the StopFake Ukrainian website which refutes and corrects misinformation and disinformation propagated from Russian sources.<sup>238</sup> Although this practice may serve to set the record straight, it does little to influence the attitudes and beliefs of the Russian Federation's target audience.

The primary tools that Russia employs for the purposes of disinformation are state owned media platforms such as RT and *Sputnik*. The expansion of these platforms are being fueled by increased Kremlin funding with RT's annual budget estimated at over \$300 million and with plans to increase by 41 percent.<sup>239</sup> RT is widely viewed as a Russian success in information warfare. RT has been successful in planting the seeds of doubt that are the first steps in achieving effective persuasion, As David Remnick, editor

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<sup>235</sup> Edward Lucas, "Russia's Information Warfare," *POLITICO*, June 11, 2014, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.politico.eu/article/russias-information-warfare/>.

<sup>236</sup> Richard Stengel, "Russia Today's Disinformation Campaign," DipNote, April 29, 2014, accessed June 4, 2015, <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2014/04/29/russia-today-s-disinformation-campaign>.

<sup>237</sup> Department Of State, "President Putin's Fiction: 10 False Claims About Ukraine," Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, March 5, 2014, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/03/222988.htm>.

<sup>238</sup> Lucas, "Russia's Information Warfare."

<sup>239</sup> Pomerantsev and Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality."

from the *New Yorker*, observed “RT is darkly, nastily brilliant, so much more sophisticated than Soviet propaganda. It reflects Putinism’s resentment of Western superiority, resentment of Western moralism, and indulges in what-aboutism. RT urges in the audience the sense: the Russians have a point!”<sup>240</sup>

In a reversal of the Soviet practice of tightly controlling information, the Russian Federation ostensibly appears to embrace the notion of information freedom. Under the pretence of informing audiences, current Russian information doctrine is to disseminate disinformation, foment confusion, and spread conspiracy theories.<sup>241</sup> This offensive use of information operations has become a central tenant of the new hybrid, or non linear, as seen in the Ukraine conflict.<sup>242</sup> The effectiveness of these media ventures has been observed globally and are often viewed as a threat on par with Russian Federation conventional military forces. Lithuanian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Linas Linkevicius broadcast on Twitter, March 9, 2014 that “Russia Today’s propaganda machine is no less destructive than military marching in Crimea.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, “Inside Putin’s Information War,” *POLITICO Magazine*, accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/01/putin-russia-tv-113960.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Pomerantsev and Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality,” 6.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 14.

## Recommendations

### Personalize the Narrative

Both ISIL and the Russian Federation have found success by translating their corporate message through individuals culturally, linguistically, and ethnically similar to their target audience. For ISIL, this means encouraging their rank and file to advance the group's messages in their own voice, in their own words, and using their own personal social media accounts. Russia has pursued a similar strategy in its recruitment of foreign-born journalists who are hired by Russian Federation-run media stations to carry Russian generated messages back to their country on Russian owned and operated media platforms. The effect in both cases has been a personalization of the corporate message in a way that increases acceptance and engenders trust. The target audience is not being asked to believe the Russian Federation or ISIL, rather they are lending their time and attention to an individual who looks similar to them, speaks like them, and appears to communicate from a place of personal experience and conviction.

United State Information Operations professionals could replicate this strategy by emphasizing local and regional communicators who disseminate messages complimentary to United States interests and goals. The simplest form of this methodology would be the identification, amplification, and promotion of existing voices that advance messages advantageous to United States interests. This could be accomplished by leveraging social media tools to promote these messages to a wider audience. By leveraging social media promotion technologies, the role of the United States in promoting the content could be de-emphasized with the message propagated, with the quiet assistance of US Information Operations. A broad spectrum of voices

across all walks of life could be continuously promoted to provide a ground swell effect. In particular the voices of victims of VEOs could lend a human face to the issue and move the conversation from ideology to impact.<sup>244</sup>

A more sophisticated application of this approach would be the recruitment of more culturally and ethnically diverse media professionals who would be perceived as more credible in broadcasting to foreign markets in the native languages. The advancement of United States' media messages is undercut by the lack of diversity and foreign appeal represented in current US medias. For example, a July 2008 study by Media Matters for America examined four programs on each of the three cable news networks during prime time, and recorded the gender and ethnicity of every guest who appeared during the month of May 2008—nearly 1,700 guest appearances in all. Their findings included: “in total, 67 percent of the guests on these cable programs were men, while 84 percent were white; and a number of ethnic groups were shut out entirely, or nearly so, on some networks. During the month of May, Fox News and MSNBC each featured a single Asian-American guest. Across the three cable networks, there were only four appearances by guests of Middle Eastern descent, two on Fox and two on CNN.”<sup>245</sup>

A greater investment in the promotion of cultural diversity across the spectrum of US Information Operations products, as well as more culturally sensitive packaging, would

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<sup>244</sup> Adam Weinstein, “Here’s How the US Should Fight ISIS With Social Media,” *WIRED*, March 12, 2015, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.wired.com/2015/03/heres-us-fight-isis-social-media/>.

<sup>245</sup> Media Matters for America, “Gender and Ethnic Diversity in Prime-Time Cable News,” July 2008, accessed December 15, 2014, [http://mediamatters.org/research/diversity\\_report/](http://mediamatters.org/research/diversity_report/).

facilitate a greater acceptance and wider reach of information operations messages to foreign audiences.

### Offer Compelling Alternative Media in low Competition Areas

Al Qaeda, ISIL, and the Russian Federation have all moved aggressively to conduct messaging in areas where they have a competitive advantage. Al Qaeda and ISIL message heavily in the space of Islamic teaching and Islamic authority, while Russia has flooded the airwaves with Russian language television that ostensibly delivers the news and the “real facts” about current geopolitics. Attempting to counter these influential messages in a direct manner would not be advantageous for US Information Operations. The fact is that the United States is simply not a credible messenger to Muslim populations on the subject of Islam nor do United States news organizations appear credible to Russian speaking audiences when reporting world events, especially in competition with Russian state media.

A more effective and pragmatic approach would be to counter these messages indirectly by expanding into areas of the media environment where little adversary competition is active and target audience demand is present. Currently Russian media offers little reality TV programming and little in the way of television that seeks to address themes such as government corruption, social inequality, ethnic tension, or other challenging topics. As Peter Pomerantsev, a former producer for a Russian media entertainment channel, suggests in the *Foreign Affairs* article “Unplugging Putin TV: How to Beat Back the Kremlin Propaganda,” Russian language adaptations of Western television shows like *Big Brother* or *The Wire* could address sensitive issues in a way

that would be compelling and attractive to foreign audiences. Big Brother is a program where individuals from varied backgrounds and beliefs systems are forced to live in a house together and come to terms with each other. The drama *The Wire* is a powerful drama that deals with corruption, power, crime, the news media, and the reality of street life and would likely be very appealing and powerful methods for undermining Russian Federation propaganda.<sup>246</sup> By expanding the range of influence products into medias such as reality television and plot driven drama where the United States has a competitive advantage, influence products could be positioned to be attractive, and sought out medias that indirectly advance United States messaging equities.

#### Focus on the development of Influence Platforms not Products

The US Information Operations community, and psychological operations in particular, is stymied by the persistent paradigm of a product-based influence methodology. Within this construct, which is codified in current doctrine, psychological operations are grouped into series, which aim to elicit one discrete attitudinal or behavior change in one pre-defined target audience. This is accomplished through the use of individual products (each series comprised of a number of products), which present and advance the line of persuasion. Approval, funding, and execution of the series are tied to the individual products, which must be reviewed, tested, approved, and tracked. In this manner, a hypothetical series designed to reduce a target audience's vulnerability to extremist recruiting would often be reduced to a discrete array of products (for example,

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<sup>246</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, "Unplugging Putin TV," *Foreign Affairs*, February 19, 2015, accessed March 12, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2015-02-18/unplugging-putin-tv>.



posters, handbills, and radio messages). At the conclusion of the production, distribution, and dissemination of these products, the series would be concluded. This method makes little or no attempt to attract and retain the target audience for any length of time. The audience is approached as a “one time sale” (treating product-audience exposure as a one-time or short duration event), instead of seeking to build a persistent audience base that could be repeatedly exposed to messaging or leveraged for alternative influence purposes. This approach also fails to exploit the peer-to-peer dynamic that is prevalent throughout Web 2.0 communication.

Information and influence professionals from both foreign governments, as well as VEOs, have aggressively moved to leverage emerging technologies for the purpose of disseminating their ideology, recruiting supporters, and soliciting funding. Near-peer competitors like the Russian Federation and adversary groups like ISIL have taken a very different approach from that of the United States. In an example of platform-based influence, the Russian Federation has aggressively moved into the broadcast platforms space with the Russian Federation funded English, Spanish, and Arabic language television station RT and the Russian run media brand *Sputnik* which was established in 2014. Russia’s state owned media platforms have become cornerstones of their soft power approach to influence operations. With echoes of Radio Moscow, the Russian Federation owned news outlets ostensibly seeks to provide a Russian perspective and counter Western dominated media. Both have successfully built and maintained an audience primed to accept influence messages crafted by the Russian Federation.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant provides another example of an adversary group that has managed to establish a platform infrastructure, while

maintaining the illusion of peer-to-peer interaction.<sup>247</sup> ISIL has exploded on to the social media scene, clearly differentiating themselves from other VEOs through their use of social media.<sup>248</sup> ISIL is notable for its extensive and skilled use of social media and its direct and personal approach to messaging. Unlike other VEOs that message predominantly at a corporate or group level, publishing official statements and releasing publications, ISIL encourages its members to message from personal social media accounts. In this way, potential ISIL recruits are able to interact with the extremist organization as a social media friend or contact on the virtual communities that they frequent.

The US Information Operations community should evolve the methodological approach, relevant authorities, and doctrine in order to allow the establishment of persistent broadcast platforms and ostensible peer-to-peer engagement. This could take a variety of forms, depending on target audience consumption patterns and influence goals. Several examples would be radio call-in shows, social media groups, and news-entertainment aggregator websites, all tailored for specific local audiences. Once established, the audience could be messaged with influence products supporting a multitude of psychological operations series or information operations efforts. These platforms could also serve as a venue in which select “peer” engagements are promoted.

The US Department of Defense Information Operations community is well positioned to take advantage of new communications technologies and emerging

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<sup>247</sup> Johnson, “ISIL’s Sophisticated Recruiting Campaign Poses Persistent Threat in U.S.”

<sup>248</sup> Ryan, “Al-Qaida and ISIS Use Twitter Differently. Here’s How and Why.”

communications techniques. The first imperative is the recognition that the landscape has fundamentally changed, and with it the practices of near-peer competitors and adversaries alike. The new messaging practices and influence techniques that are currently being applied by Al Qaeda, ISIL, and the Russian Federation hold many lessons for the Department of Defense Information Operations community. Unnecessary delay in implementation will only hinder the effectiveness of future influence operations. The adaptation of a more personal and culturally nuanced approach, the expansion into medias of high demand and low competition, and the shift away from product-based influence and towards platform-based influence, represent important first steps in confronting and assuming a dominant position in the new information environment.

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