Communication Breakdown:
Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts

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October 2016

Cover Photo: Image taken from Islamic State propaganda release

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Executive Summary

Despite the destruction and chaos sown on the battlefield by the group that calls itself the Islamic State, one could argue that its propaganda efforts toward supporters, sympathizers, and enemies have also had disruptive results. Whether online or on the ground, the group has sought to use propaganda to magnify the effects of its battlefield successes, minimize the consequences of its failures, recruit new adherents, and increase awareness of its ultimate goals.

Given the focus that the Islamic State places on its media activities, it is important for those fighting the group to have a level of familiarity with the breadth, content, and nature of these activities. The goal of this report is twofold. First, it attempts to examine declassified documents captured from the group's predecessors to provide a baseline understanding of its present-day media structure and operations. Second, through an examination of over 9,000 Islamic State official media products, this report offers detailed insight into what the group is saying and what a study of its propaganda can tell us about its strengths, weaknesses, and struggles.

Key Findings

The Islamic State's media savvy only became apparent to the broader public following its successful seizure of Mosul and the subsequent beheadings and executions of Westerners and others the group saw as its enemies. Unsurprising to those who have followed this group closely is the fact that it has been cultivating its media capabilities for well over a decade. The Islamic State's present-day acumen in the production and distribution of media is an outgrowth of its historical successes and failures in propaganda.

One main difference between the media activities of the Islamic State's predecessor organizations and the current iteration of the group is the control of territory. The fact that the group since 2014 has had control of a large swath of territory gave it, for a period of time, a nearly uncontested ability to speak directly to a large population. Though this aspect of its media is less studied and visible to the outside world, the long-term impact that such activities will have on individuals living under the control of the group is an important area of consideration, particularly as it applies to the most vulnerable subset of this population: children. The psychological effects of the group's control over what people read, watched, and heard will likely outlast its physical control of the territory.

Of course, the group's propaganda is not just distributed on the ground in Iraq and Syria, but around the world through its satellite branches and online through the internet. However, despite a heavy focus in western media on the most extreme violence perpetrated by the group, of the more than 9,000 Islamic State visual media releases coded for this project, more than 50 percent focus on themes *outside* of the battlefield, such as governance, justice, the importance of religious practices, and life in the caliphate. Moreover, only a small percentage of releases, approximately nine percent, specifically show the commission or aftermath of executions or battlefield killings.

Beyond the diversity of content put out by the group, it has also produced a large quantity of products. However, despite releasing more than 700 products in a single month at its peak in August 2015, the overall number of official Islamic State visual media releases has declined since late 2015 to the point where less than 200 products were released in August 2016. What is more, the relative number of governance releases has declined over this same period of time. Assuming that the Islamic State values demonstrating its governance capabilities, this decline suggests that the group is struggling to maintain the outward appearance of a functioning state.

It is also important to recognize that the official content put out by the Islamic State is an amalgamation of products from a number of separate, geographically centered media bureaus spread across the

group's territory. The themes produced by these bureaus differ greatly. Some focus more heavily on military releases, while others focus on governance. In short, the monolithic image of the caliphate is an illusion. Understanding this nuance is important for counter-messaging to both internal and external audiences.

Countering the Islamic State's online propaganda efforts is no easy task. The group has managed to leverage a combination of official and unofficial actors in support of its propaganda mission. An analysis of a small number of Islamic State official media releases and social media accounts shows that while removing these products and accounts from the web appears to be more effective currently than it has been in previous months, improvements can still be made when it comes to the timing of the removals. In short, when it comes to limiting the appeal of the Islamic State on the internet, both comprehensiveness *and* speed are important.

Finally, the emerging array of counter-messaging efforts needs not only to be endowed with sufficient resources and, where appropriate, political support, but also must have a sufficient amount of flexibility and innovative spirit. The need for both resources and flexibility suggests the importance of a public-private partnership in attacking the Islamic State's propaganda activities.

Author's Note

In every major report put forward by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), the general aim is that the product be enduring in terms of what it teaches us at the strategic level about terrorist organizations, but also relevant and timely in terms of the current day-to-day challenges. This report is the result of a very lengthy data collection, analysis, and writing process undertaken by various individuals at the CTC into the Islamic State's media activities. One of the main challenges in writing this report was the dynamic nature of the group's media environment, which changed on what at times seemed like a daily basis. Although an effort has been made to include the most recent data in some places in this report, simply updating other parts of the report (particularly some of the analysis on Twitter account suspensions and justpaste.it page removals) at the moment before publication was impracticable. Consequently, readers should be cautious in making conclusive connections about how the group's media network currently works based on analysis that, in some places, may have been dated soon after the data was collected. Giving such a disclaimer feels like the analytically responsible thing to do, but it does not in any way undermine the authors' confidence that the analysis and findings of this report will be useful for academics, practitioners, and policymakers who are trying to identify, understand, and counter the Islamic State's propaganda activities.

Introduction

"We are in a battle, and…more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."[1]

Many are familiar with the above referenced piece of counsel given by al-Qa'ida Deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri to then al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI)[2] head Abu Musab al-Zarqawi regarding the nature of the conflict in which they found themselves. While the wisdom in al-Zawahiri's advice seems self-evident in the conflicts raging around the world, it is hard to imagine that al-Zawahiri could have contemplated a scenario in which his organization, then the crown jewel of the global jihadist movement, would be thoroughly outperformed in the media space by subsequent iterations of al-Zarqawi's organization.

Over the past three years, the Islamic State has leveraged an effective combination of technology, language expertise, and centralized management to create a media organization that enables the group to project an image of power, order, and sophistication. This image has acted as a force multiplier, allowing the group to punch above its weight as it seeks to cultivate new followers, threaten enemies, and strengthen the will of its current cadre of fighters and administrators.

However, all of these media successes have not eliminated challenges and setbacks faced by the Islamic State as a terrorist organization, nor is the image the group portrays necessarily an accurate representation of reality. In fact, one major risk the group runs is that, by having such a public presence, its media activities reveal more derogatory information about the organization than would otherwise be known. In addition to this concern, the group also faces the prospect of increasing dissonance between what is happening on the ground and what it projects through its media campaign. The more this gap widens, the harder it may become to boost morale and attract new recruits. Finally, though the group initially had first-mover (or most innovative-mover) advantage in the media realm, governments, NGOs, and other insurgent groups have learned from and adapted to the group's media strategy. Although the final outcome on the media front is far from known, it is clear that, at the very least, other actors are engaging more in the fight, forcing the group to adapt in order to maintain its edge.

This report is an effort to highlight the Islamic State's media activities over the past two years, with a particular focus on what can be learned about the group and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Through this examination, we show that, though the group's media activities have diminished, it is still able to leverage its experience to produce a concerning amount of propaganda. Furthermore, the study finds that the themes portrayed by the group in its propaganda are diverse and differ according to the location producing the content. Finally, the analysis yields some insights into the group's ability to leverage technology to spread its message.

This report proceeds as follows. First, it begins with an analysis of a small number of documents that were captured by U.S. government forces in Iraq from 2006-2008 to demonstrate how AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) saw the media and attempted to organize itself to fully exploit its far-reaching potential. The documents utilized for this analysis, which were previously declassified through the Combating Terrorism Center's (CTC) Harmony Program, provide an inside look at the group's early efforts to provide structure and guidance to the emerging media apparatus. The report then turns to an examination of over 8,000 pieces of visual propaganda products created by official branches of the Islamic State's media organization. In an effort to understand the group's overall media products from a holistic perspective, we examine a number of different facets of the data, including themes, timing, and geo-attributes. Finally, the report closes by briefly exploring several reasons for the Islamic State's media successes and pointing out future avenues for research.

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1   Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi*, 2005, CTC Library.

2   AQI is the name used by most Western analysts and media. However, the organization referred to itself as Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Bilad al-Rafidin (al-Qa`ida Organization in the Mesopotamia).

Examining Declassified Historial Media Documents by Zach Schenk

During the Iraq War from 2003-2011, U.S. military forces captured numerous documents produced by enemy forces in missions conducted against operatives of AQI/ISI. Upon declassification, some of these documents have been used to analyze AQI/ISI's use of foreign fighters, financial practices, and communications with other groups, leading to an increased understanding of the group, its tendencies, and its weaknesses.[3] These previous analyses have not only informed collective understanding of the group during the 2003-2011 time period, but have also provided a baseline against which the reemergence of these groups and transformation into the Islamic State can be analyzed, given that AQI/ISI were antecedent organizations to the Islamic State.

However, despite the critical role of the Islamic State's current media organization in attracting foreign fighters and disseminating the group's message across the globe, there has not been a similar focus on what captured documents reveal about the group's earlier efforts to establish, adapt, and utilize the media as it fought against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq from 2003-2011. This section of the report offers a look at 14 internal AQI/ISI media documents that are used here to provide insight into the group's nascent media apparatus.[4]

Before beginning the analysis, there are several limitations of such a study. The media organization of the Islamic State itself has changed over time. The number of bureaus it operates, the venues in which it produces products, the frequency of products it releases, and the number of people involved in it have all increased dramatically since the time period covered by these documents. We are not suggesting that these 14 documents written several years ago provide an unobstructed view into the group's current media operations. Rather, we believe that these documents provide a unique look at the organization's media tendencies, as well as a look into the world of clandestine propaganda management and production. Despite the changes the group has undertaken, it has shown that it builds on and learns from the past.[5] And, even though it is likely that new individuals have contributed their media expertise to the organization, individuals who fought with AQI/ISI during the time that these documents were authored remained in prominent positions in the reinvigorated organization, such as the late Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani.[6] Although we have no indication that such individuals authored these documents, the legacy knowledge that those individuals bring to their current positions is, at the very least, reflected in some measure by these documents.

Another limitation beyond the historical nature of the documents is the small number that we examine here. The group likely wrote hundreds, if not thousands of documents on its media organization. To be clear, the documents included in this report are not being portrayed as an exhaustive collection or a representative sample. However, they do represent some of the only public documents available that explore the group's media organization. In addition, our deep analysis of these documents provides important insight into the internal structure and functioning of the group's media organization. Such

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3 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007); Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009); Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Danielle F. Jung, Pat Ryan, Jacob N. Shapiro, and Jon Wallace, *Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq's "Paper Trail," 2005-2010* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2014); Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick K. Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

4 Although there are 14 separate documents, a small number of the documents appear to be (with small variations) duplicates of some of the other documents.

5 Even in the midst of the conflict, AQI/ISI in 2007-2008 undertook a lessons-learned analysis to figure out why things were going so badly for the group. See "Analysis of the State of ISI," Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449. An examination of the group's current activities suggest that many of the recommendations from this report have been implemented.

6 Tara John, "Everything We Know About ISIS Spy Chief Abu Mohammad al-Adnani," *Time*, August 4, 2016.

deep analysis can often highlight nuances and subtle points that would otherwise go unnoticed. Although it cannot offer decisive conclusions, it can point out interesting observations.

The rest of the section proceeds by discussing four overarching themes that the documents highlight, demonstrating how AQI/ISI thought about the media organization and its purpose. Four areas of emphasis arise from this examination: (1) the important role of the media wing in appealing to the people; (2) the organization of the media bureaucracy; (3) an emphasis on organizational learning; and (4) the importance of operational security. Each of these larger themes is discussed in this section. The section concludes by highlighting other noteworthy items that did not fit into these four larger themes.

The Media Organization's Goal: Appeal to the People

When AQI changed its name to ISI, it also established the Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, which officially released its first product on October 31, 2006.[7] Despite the name change, al-Zarqawi's organization had been active on the media front long before the publication of this first message.[8] From this early stage, it is clear the organization understood the necessity of using its media branch to cultivate some level of popular support.[9] AQI/ISI recognized that while the military side of the war effort was essential, the ability to justify its actions to the people of Iraq was crucial. Successful communication to the public, to either generate support or fear, would allow the organization more operating room.

As early as 2005, the documents show that the group was reaching out to the population and working on "…(P)ublic awareness for the purpose of gaining support … according to a well-researched plan."[10] In one instance, the group sought to avoid inflaming local opinion by issuing a public apology for killing the wrong individual, although it did suggested that such an outcome "was God's fate for him."[11]

Overall, these documents suggest that the group implemented a multi-phased strategy to appeal to the public. The stages of this process were (1) emphasizing the proper way to live one's life, (2) describing the cruelty being imposed on Sunnis that demanded a violent response, and (3) that AQI/ISI is the best group to fight against this cruelty.

Phase One: The Proper Way. The first phase of AQI/ISI's multi-phased strategy is illustrated through the instructions to both its "audio section" and "local magazine." AQI/ISI focused first on setting an ideological groundwork, which consisted of two elements: "publishing the true faith" and "explaining the jihadi system and what is needed from the people of Iraq." In this phase, the group attempted to present its audience with the way that the people should live their lives. The group argued that from this understanding of the appropriate way to live, the public would embrace the necessity for waging jihad.

Phase Two: Highlighting the Need. In an effort to persuade the public of the relevance and value of the proposed lifestyle, AQI/ISI instructed its writers to discuss all aspects of life in the context of "issues

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7   Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2009).

8   AQI and the Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin (Mujahideen Shura Council) all released media products prior to this point. Despite the often grainy nature of some of the products, it is clear that these precursor organizations were attempting to learn the trade. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

9   This would not be popular support in the Western sense of the word, which would imply a desire for broad-based acceptance and support. This is not what the organization has ever sought. Nevertheless, the organization does recognize the importance of communication with the public, if not for "public support," then at least for public acquiescence to the group.

10   NMEC-2007-633857.

11   NMEC-2008-614331.

and local problems," which included raids by coalition forces or attacks by Shiite militias.[12] In another example, the Media Office was tasked with "creating and implementing a plan to gain support of the public for the benefit of the *Mujahidin*, inciting them against the enemy through general publications and others."[13] Focusing on events such as militia attacks and airstrikes likely stoked anger amongst the local Sunni population and pushed them toward a desire to respond to the assault that their community experienced.

Phrase Three: The Group as the Solution. After laying the initial groundwork of illustrating the people's grievances, the authors of the local magazine were instructed to emphasize the strength of the organization as a means of redressing these grievances.[14] Indeed, AQI went to some length to legitimize the actions that its members carried out in hopes of attracting others to the cause. By advertising how strong the organization was at the time, it provided itself as an outlet for people who wanted to fight back. AQI/ISI highlighted attacks against coalition and Iraqi forces to provide such evidence.

The nuts and bolts of appealing to the public required that the group consider various aspects of how it conducted its media activities. This was apparent in three areas: the group's focus on the quality of the production itself, its consideration of the types of operations that would appeal to the people, and the need to incorporate religion into the products themselves.

First, one emphasis that stood out in these documents was that which the group placed on quality production as a means of appealing to public. Indeed, while Islamic State media products today are known for their high-quality production value, such attention to production quality started with AQI/ISI's efforts. An example of this can be found in the "Publishing and Copying Division," one of the sub-entities of the media apparatus, which existed even before Al-Furqan was officially established in 2006. Its job was to publish the materials that were selected for production by the "Print Publication Department." As stated in the documents, this was to be done by being "creative, innovative, and economical and to attempt at attracting people to such products." This suggests that AQI/ISI recognized that the content by itself was not sufficient to carry its message to the widest possible audience.[15] They recognized there had to be some efforts to make the products visually attractive to both the casual observer and the less-religiously inclined. While recognizing the importance of reaching a broad audience, AQI/ISI also emphasized an economical approach, whereby it did not put too much money into the products.[16]

It is probably worth noting that the group did not just emphasize quality of production, but also diversity in terms of the mediums used to publicize the group's priorities and activities. In a monthly report of one media bureau's activities, the bureau distributed information via PowerPoints, CDs, DVDs, flash drives, and letters.[17] In addition to production quality and medium diversity, this same report highlighted the importance of quantity when it noted that the group had purchased almost 500,000 CDs.

Second, another way that AQI/ISI may have attempted to appeal to people was by prioritizing certain types of operations over others. In May 2007, media officials for the areas in Salah al-Din were told to film suicide operations, the downing of planes, high-level assassinations, and raids rather than other events like detonation of explosive devices, engagements, sniper operations, missile launches, mortar

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12   NMEC-2007-631544.

13   NMEC-2007-631617.

14   NMEC-2007-631544.

15   NMEC-2007-633857.

16   Ibid. Another possibility is that this economic approach was not a choice, but something the organization was forced to do out of necessity.

17   The document referred to here was previously declassified and released by the CTC previously. NMEC-2010-175512.

and rocket launches, and assassinations that were deemed less important.[18] The fact that AQI/ISI members were aware that different products might receive different levels of interest suggests that at the very least media members discussed, if not researched, how to craft certain products for maximum exposure and relevancy to its target audience.

Third, the group's media productions emphasized its religious worldview as a method of appealing to the public. To ensure that products met the group's religious expectations, the sharia legal department was tasked with reviewing article subjects, titles, and writing style.[19] Despite this oversight, however, religious figures within AQI/ISI emphasized the need for internal processes that allowed media operatives to quickly raise and get answers to religious questions as it related to production and content of publications.[20]

AQI/ISI also included a religious element in its instruction to photographers and videographers in the field. The instructions repeatedly insisted that photographers take religious law into account and be wary of what might get out to the public. Videographers were explicitly instructed only to film activities that followed the rules contained in Islamic law.[21] In addition the group also told the films' videographers to avoid filming people who seemed to be joking around because then the group might be seen as wasting the money of the people.[22] These actions indicate that the group was focused on maintaining the ideological purity of the organization, or at least the outward appearance of ideological purity.

Before leaving this section, it is important to recognize that the group's media activities were not just directed externally to the public. They were also directed internally in an effort to motivate, educate, and further radicalize those who had already joined the organization. One document highlighted this when the regional media office asked the group's local commanders and media officials to remember to let the regional office know if more propaganda products were needed for those who pledged allegiance to the group.[23]

To carry out its main mission of appealing to the people (and its own fighters), the group could not rely on an ad hoc assortment of individuals working independently. Instead, it created a bureaucracy that would rival that of most conventional businesses. In the next section, the examination of the documents discusses how AQI/ISI organized its media operations.

The Organization of the Media Bureaucracy

The documents reveal an organization that had a multi-level internal structure, with each stratum having clear responsibilities. Such a rigid organizational structure and the amount of sophistication it demonstrates often runs contrary to how many perceive terrorist organizations.

The multi-level media structure can be thought of as a pyramid, with (from top to bottom) "states," "sectors," "areas," and "sections," creating a coherent, bureaucratic structure to accomplish its media goals effectively. The "states," or emirates, were at the top. This included provinces such as Salah al-Din. The next level down was the "sectors," which were then broken down into smaller "areas." These "areas," which consisted of individual cities or towns, were further broken down into "sections" denoting neighborhoods inside of cities or individual villages. This, as one document described, allowed

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18   NMEC-2007-637094.

19   NMEC-2007-631544; NMEC-2007-631617.

20   NMEC-2007-637116.

21   JDECB-2007-002124.

22   NMEC-2007-637094.

23   The document referred to here was previously declassified and released by the CTC. The English translation is available on the CTC's Harmony Program page as "ISI Letter to the Emirs Sectors and Media Personals."

the clear devolution of responsibility and different levels of jurisdiction within the organization.[24] As far as leadership, "state" was governed by a Wali, who in turn appointed the Wilayah's media official. The Wilayah media official appointed a media official for each "sector," who then appointed media representatives for every "area."

The same document designates different responsibilities for officials at different levels of the media structure. For example, at the state level, the Wilayah media official was tasked with implementing plans to manage the work of the media apparatus and monitoring the performance of other media officials. The media official for the sector allocated resources based on requests by the representatives and found ways to learn from previous mistakes. The media official for the area was tasked with completing and implementing schedules of operations as well as videotaping all military operations. These documents outline the distribution of power throughout the media structure to distribute media effectively to the public in all areas the group wanted to influence.

Furthermore, AQI/ISI created a rigid structure of separation and cooperation within the media offices. In one document that described the internal organization of the "Western region," the "production department" devolved power further down into "audio," "video," and "print" production sections.[25] Even though this particular document only shows the organizational make-up of the Western region (of Iraq), it seems likely that a similar structure existed in other regions as well.[26]

The same structured relationship within the media section can be seen from a document written in 2005.[27] This document illustrates how each branch played a small part in the creation of media releases and publications, whether they were print publications, videos, or other online postings. This suggests a clear separation of power between sub-entities that follow their own mandates, but also that AQI/ISI sought to maintain some level of streamlined efficiency through the upper echelons of the bureaucratic structure.

Another example of inter-bureaucracy relationships appeared between the different regional offices and AQI/ISI as a whole. The media officials for the separate regional offices were tasked with making sure that there was limited separation between the activities of their respective offices and Al-Furqan (the main production arm of central media office).[28] The high level of communication between the central media office and the satellite offices illustrates the tension that existed in the media organization: to get products out quickly but to do so in a manner consistent with the organization's overall goals and narrative.

All of this suggests that when it came to their internal functions, AQI did not shy away from bureaucratizing its media organization.[29] And, lest it be suggested that such a bureaucratic approach applied only to the internal workings of the media, it seems clear that this centralized approach governed how the media branches dealt with other functional areas within the broader group as well. For example, embedded in the relationship between the military and media branch was the idea of mutual support (give-and-take). This was particularly apparent in one document, highlighted in Figure 1, which specified exactly what the media office needed from every other functional branch and vice versa.[30]

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24   NMEC-2007-637094. Note that the terms Wali and Wilayah are used in the report, which differs from the translated version of the document. The use of Emir and Emirate in the translated document was in error.

25   NMEC-2007-633658.

26   The "note" that appears over the "media office" and "photography department" says that each region (not just the Western region) had its own office and department.

27   NMEC-2007-633857.

28   NMEC-2007-637094.

29   Although the fact that a terrorist organization would have a large amount of bureaucracy is surprising to some, the use of bureaucracy by terrorist organizations has been the subject of important research. See Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

30   NMEC-2007-637116.

Figure 1: Mutual Expectations of the Media and Military Branches (English Translation)

1- <u>**The relationship of the media with the commander:**</u>

<u># The media requests the following of the commander:</u>

1- A house [office,] a car with an assigned driver.
2- Continuous financial support to ensure the success of media implementation.
3- To forward all materials received by him from (al-Furqan) establishment until [such a time when] direct link can established.
4- To forward any recommendation from the brothers (from any field.)

<u># The commander requests the following of the media:</u>
1- Forward periodic reports and explanations of work and expenses.
2- Provide him with current news, as they become available (audio, video and print.)

This is not to suggest that the relationship between different parts of the organization was always smooth. There is some indication of concerns about the development of internal frictions among the rank-and-file members. While soliciting feedback was something the organization wanted to do, it also stressed that these complaints should be dealt with in an expedient manner, otherwise it could "… cause a big problem."[31]

More specifically, it appears that some internal tension may have existed between members of the media team and those in the fighting force who may not have understood why photography (and perhaps the larger media effort) was necessary at all.[32] Attempts to quell these tensions were necessary to ensure that every member agreed on the broader strategic goals of the organization and that internal disputes did not create dissatisfaction and disunity in the ranks.

There is also some indication that media members felt left out of the more exciting side of the group's activities. Consequently, the military field was asked to try and provide some level of training to the media members who "…(d)id not have the opportunity to experience military life."[33] However, pushing media personnel into the field from time to time was not without risk. In fact, it may have been the risk of members of the media team potentially dying while filming that led the group to ensure that there were always multiple people trained in photography during missions.[34] For an organization that depended on media production to win over support of the population, it had to have contingencies in place to maintain this media presence.

The media bureaus appear to have served an important function by maintaining a detailed archive of media activities and military operations. For example, one document reminds photographers that the goal of photography is not just to take pictures but to help create an archive of the group's activities.[35] The document also provided instructions to those publishing a local magazine on how to archive their work. The first stated goal was to "create (an) archive for the articles."[36] The second goal was to actually write the articles. Further, the author of the local magazine was tasked with collecting data from the

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31   NMEC-2007-637094.

32   NMEC-2007-631544; NMEC-2007-637094.

33   NMEC-2007-637116.

34   NMEC-2007-631544.

35   Ibid.

36   Ibid.

media office and compiling a comprehensive archive of military operations and sharia statements.[37] While this record-keeping activity could have served the group in propagating knowledge of its activities externally, it also may have helped create baselines for internal assessments of the group's activities.

If accurate, this hints at the possibility that part of the rationale behind the media arm's structure and operating procedures related to concerns about corruption. For example, the photography manager was tasked with submitting weekly reports, most likely to the "Media Center Internal Committee" or someone higher in the chain of command, on the different military operations conducted.[38] As shown in Figure 2, the chart includes sections on where the photographer is doing work and what kind of actions they were filming, such as missile or mortar launches, ambushes, and executions. There is also a section for what equipment is necessary for the activity to be recorded, including the number of cameras, tripods, additional lighting machines, etc.

Figure 2: Weekly Photographer Report Requirements (Translated)

Specify the needed requirements of photographers at each district. The following table will explain:

Districts	Requirements	Locations of recording				Remarks	
		Ambushes	Attacks	Investigations, Execution	Missiles, Mortar	Additional Supplies	DSHK (Russian machinegun)

It may be that AQI/ISI simply wanted to track how many photography missions people conducted. The military operations archives described above, however, allude to an ulterior motive. Just like other organizations, terror groups have problems with corruption.[39] For example, media operatives could underreport the number of cameras they took out and sell the surplus on the black market, or fighters could overreport the number of mortars they launched and sell the ones they did not launch on the black market. In either case, clearly the corrupt individual would gain financially.

However, in both cases the organization would have to spend money to replenish its stocks. Not only would this hurt the group's bottom line, but it would also damage its public image. A rational organizational response to such a problem could be to create an archive to keep track of military operations, allowing whomever is tasked with internal audit responsibility to compare both the media and military wings to see if there are resources that go missing. While there is no explicit evidence in the documents to suggest that AQI/ISI utilized these weekly reports for internal audits, it remains a possibility.

Beyond tracking operations (for whatever purpose), media officials were also in charge of allocating resources to photographers. For example, one document revealed a directive to media officials to obtain physical verification of purchases in the form of bills of sale. This same directive also sought to apply spiritual pressure to this requirement by reminding media officials that any Muslim money spent is subject to review by God.[40] This warning was likely aimed toward both the officials who were allocating resources and those receiving the equipment as an effort to ensure honesty. To further encourage this, the group spelled out who was responsible for what at what time.[41]

In sum, the bureaucratic organization of the group's media operation, both internal to the media arm and in terms of the media arm's relationships with other part of the group, demonstrates a level of complexity that belies portrayals of the group as unsophisticated. Beyond the bureaucracy of the group

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37   Ibid.

38   Ibid.

39   Jacob N. Shapiro and David A. Siegel, "Moral Hazard, Discipline, and the Management of Terrorist Organizations," *World Politics* 64:1 (January 2012), pp. 39-78.

40   NMEC-2007-637094.

41   NMEC-2007-63167.

itself, the documents also portray a media organization that is constantly engaged in adaptation and learning, which is further discussed in the next section.

Learning from Mistakes: Tracking Progress, Identifying Best Practices

The ability to learn and adapt is critical to any organization's success. One document explicitly stated that, "(I)n order not to repeat the same mistakes of the past, we have decided to set up this structure."[42] AQI/ISI demonstrated a willingness and ability to learn and improve from mistakes. It designed a means to track its process and identify the best practices moving forward.

To learn from mistakes the problem must first be identified. To assist in identifying organizational shortcomings, AQI/ISI set production goals as a metric of success. As early as 2005, AQI tasked its photography supervisors with creating "monthly work plans" that included creating advertisements, media networks in different geographic areas, and training photographers for their specific tasks.[43] These "monthly plans" are discussed in another document that make them one of two primary responsibilities of the photography supervisor, thus reinforcing the notion that these plans were important for the organization's success.[44]

To ensure that production goals were met, the supervisors were tasked to train more people in photography based on previously proven successful methods. These individuals were trained using a list of 16 specific instructions, including the best time of day to shoot, the number of cameras to use for different operations, and the best angles to film.[45]

These outlined production efforts were developed and perfected through the early/mid-2000s, allowing the group to track its progress and identify the best practices going forward, which has likely resulted in increased capacity and understanding of how to use production techniques to maximize the appeal of its media releases. This historical context explains the sophistication of the Islamic State's media effort. It is an outgrowth of AQI/ISI's continued development and evolution to track progress and identify best practices.

Another illustration of AQI/ISI's effort to learn is its campaign to increase internal efficiency.[46] In August 2007, the group published a memo titled "Work Consolidation Drive," which dealt with the group's self-identified need to consolidate its organization. Outlined in this memo, the Ministry of Information sought not only to track media personnel activity, but also to obtain "general suggestions about media work."[47] This is an example of the media arm's interest in learning and developing from those engaged in the day-to-day tasks at lower levels of the organization.

The "Work Consolidation Drive" memo could have also been adopted for different reasons, namely for security or financial purposes. Pertaining to security, centralization could decrease the number of people who have access to content that is produced. Consolidating different components of the organization would likely increase efficiency by decreasing the number of required steps and approvals that must be taken within the bureaucracy, which would then allow for faster movement up and down the chain of communication. Similarly, reducing steps would have meant less resources and personnel, making the process more financially sustainable. While the consolidation of work ultimately facilitated an increase in internal efficiency, the initial intention of this action is unknown.

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42   NMEC-2007-637116.

43   NMEC-2007-633857.

44   NMEC-2007-631544.

45   Ibid.

46   NMEC-2008-614498.

47   Ibid.

Given that these instructions came from AQI/ISI's central authority, it can be assumed that similar efforts were undertaken in other arms of the group, such as the administration field, the security field, or the military field. This pattern of experimentation in shifting the size and scope of different types of bureaucracy will serve the organization well in the future, whether large or small.

The documents also highlight some of the challenges that the organization faced. One document stressed to members that they should accept whatever limitations that existed despite the difficulties they created.[48] Further, the document issued a warning about trying to stretch the group's capabilities too far because doing so would amplify the group's weaknesses to outside enemies. Instead, AQI/ISI only took actions in areas it knew it could succeed, with one document specifically stating that "a wise man knows his limitations."

This warning suggests two possibilities. First, there may have been a push within the organization to conduct more operations and engage in more activities than the group was capable of doing well. Along these same lines, the first sentence of the same document mentions how the media plan for the month depended on "the efforts of the media person, his patience, and not complaining." The second possibility is not that there was a push to conduct more operations, but that the media arm was portraying the group as being more active and capable than it actually was. If this were true, then these lines would suggest a tension between the portrayal of the group and the actuality on the ground.[49]

Overall, the documents illustrate that AQI/ISI searched for and acknowledged shortcomings. It is evident that the group's media bureaucracy undertook restructuring when necessary, tracked progress for purposes of accountability, and identified best production practices to increase the public appeal of releases. They ultimately illustrate the dynamic nature of the media organization and provide a small amount of historical context through which to understand the Islamic State's adaptive and prolific media wing.

The Importance of Operational Security

Although the output of the media arm was inherently public, the fact remains that it was part of a clandestine terrorist organization.[50] Consequently, although the media organization encourages people to send suggestions to them "by any means," they also limit the time that certain branches were allowed to be on the internet.[51] This illustrates the tension between transparency and security. Because the organization wanted (1) to appeal to the public and (2) to remain open internally to suggestions, it had to balance its public operations with maintaining operational security.

In an effort to balance these competing priorities, AQI/ISI mandated strict guidelines to protect operational security. To make sure that accountability existed, the group assigned clear lines of responsibility to ensure that couriers and media operatives took ownership over the safety of materials. One document highlighted instructions regarding when and to whom the media materials were to be delivered.[52] Carelessness was not the only concern; spies and subterfuge were also prominent organizational worries. One of the documents noted that AQI/ISI was concerned about its documents falling into the hands of the enemy through means of "agents."[53]

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48   NMEC-2007-637094.

49   The possible existence of such a tension is strengthened by another declassified document in which the author notes that the propaganda of the group sometimes gives incoming recruits unrealistic expectations about the actual daily life of a fighter. "Analysis of the State of ISI," Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449.

50   See Shapiro.

51   NMEC-2007-637116.

52   NMEC-2007-631544; NMEC-2007-637116.

53   NMEC-2007-637094.

While these examples show that the organization was concerned about how their people maintained operational security, AQI/ISI also sought to encourage good operational security in the media publications. This could be seen in the instructions that were given to photographers reminding them that, while it was still important to record detailed biographies of the mujahideen conducting missions, they should take care not to expose sensitive information.[54] Likewise, when "severe interrogations" took place and were recorded, AQI/ISI was careful not to let valuable information leak out from the person who was being interrogated.[55] To prevent this, media officials were instructed to have security services review the audio and video recordings and note information that should be edited out.

As expected from a terrorist organization, security concerns were an integral part of how AQI/ISI operated. However, the fact that tension existed between the main goals of the media arm and the need to maintain security is not something that could have been solved by even the most meticulous planning. That was true in the time of AQI/ISI, and it remains true in the case of its descendant organization, the Islamic State. The need to have a public face leads to vulnerabilities that can be exploited by any group's enemy.

Overall, these documents reveal a number of different things about the media organization of AQI/ISI. They also explain, in part, several reasons for the propaganda and media success that the group, renamed the Islamic State, has experienced of late. Indeed, these documents suggest that the widely discussed success of the group's present-day media activities had much earlier origins. Having examined, in small measure, historical evidence of the group's media activities, this report now turns to an examination of some of the group's present-day media efforts.

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54   NMEC-2007-631544.

55   NMEC-2007-637116.

An Analysis of the Islamic State's Current Media Efforts

As shown in the section analyzing declassified documents from the AQI/ISI time period, a significant amount of organizational time, energy, and resources were invested in its media operations. Indeed, even at that early stage, AQI/ISI's media wing appears to have been very heavily bureaucratized. Since the time period covered by the declassified documents, the latest of which appears to have been written in 2008, the organization has undergone a significant amount of change and adaptation. The media activities of the Islamic State suggest that the organization has built on the previously established media foundation of AQI/ISI.

This section examines the output of the Islamic State's current media organization in more detail. Before getting into the data analysis, it begins by discussing the current organizational structure of the Islamic State's media arm. This discussion touches on how the media organization has changed recently, as well as some misconceptions regarding the group's media activities. This discussion provides important context to the data analysis that follows, which examines over 9,000 official visual media releases put out by the Islamic State from January 2015 – August 2016.

The Current Organizational Structure of the Islamic State's Media Arm

The actual organizational structure of the Islamic State's media organization has only received small amounts of attention in various studies.[56] Such a structure undoubtedly exists, although it is difficult to describe clearly without access to internal documents. As discussed in the above section, as well as the Combating Terrorism Center's (CTC) 2014 report on the Islamic State, the group has a very hierarchical structure for the media branch of its organization. Taken together, these organizational charts convey a sense of bureaucracy and organization that rivals that of a multinational corporation or government agency, not a group of backwoods fighters.

There is little doubt, given its current activities, that the group has continued to operate and evolve since these charts were created, rendering them dated. Despite this evolution, no similar line-and-block charts have publicly emerged to show how the structure of the group's current internal media organization has evolved or at least how analysts understanding of the media organization have changed. Nevertheless, there is still a good deal that can be learned about the group's general structure by observing its activities. Previously, CTC researchers attempted to provide a very general view of the landscape in which the Islamic State's media arm operated by creating an overarching graphic that depicted the various elements of the group's media activities, as shown in Figure 3.

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56   Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, and Bryan Price, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State*, (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2014); Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *Qulliam Foundation*, July 2015; Charlie Winter, "Documenting the 'Virtual Caliphate,'" *Quilliam Foundation*, October 2015; Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, "Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2015; Haroro J. Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 69:6 (2015): pp. 729-752; S. Benjamin, "Understanding The ISIS Media Apparatus: Distribution Networks And Practices," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, February 19, 2016; Harleen Gambhir, "Why ISIS is So Successful," *Cipher Brief*, March 11, 2016; Brandon I. Koerner, "Why ISIS is Winning the Social Media War," *Wired*, March 29, 2016.

Figure 3: The Islamic State's Media Landscape (Late 2014 Representation)
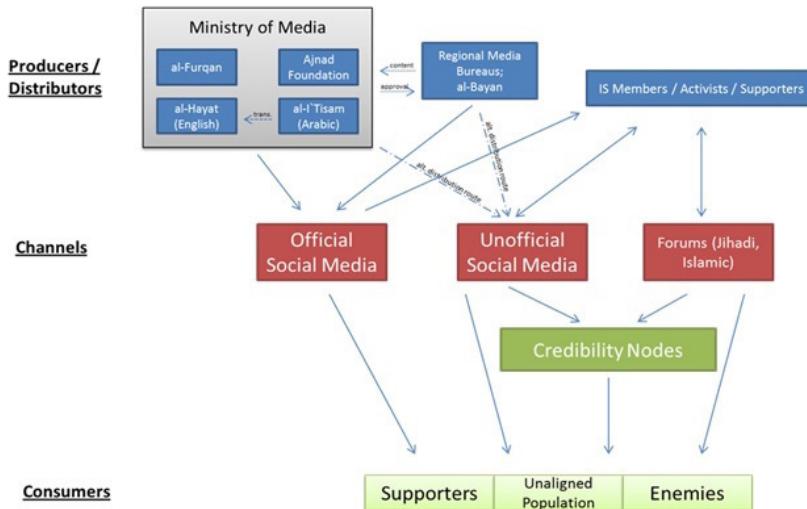
With the benefit of hindsight, there are certainly some aspects of Figure 3 that do not need to be revised. The central media organization of the Islamic State, the Ministry of Media, still appears to wield a great amount of control on the production and distribution of media products. Such centralization of media efforts, as was shown through the analysis of declassified document above, had its roots early on in the organization's history.

That said, Figure 3 contained some omissions that continued observation and learning have suggested should be included to offer a more complete picture of the group's activities. One of the most notable omissions is that the chart above does not contain any reference to the extensive and important media distribution activities of the group that occur within the territories that they control, which is discussed in more detail below. While the simplicity of the above chart conveyed certain elements of the group's media organization effectively, it left out some of the nuance that was apparent to most analysts, including CTC researchers.

On the other hand, there are some things in Figure 3 that required more explanation. For example, even though the previous CTC report noted that the regional media bureaus of the Islamic State existed, it did not name those bureaus one by one or attempt to demonstrate more appropriately the scale of activities carried out by these regional media organizations. While this report discusses the activities of the individual media bureaus in more detail below, it is worth noting that the box in Figure 3 labeled "Regional Media Bureaus" could have easily been broken into more than 30 separate boxes, with each representing one officially recognized media bureau of the Islamic State. Had this been the approach, the expansive geographic nature of the Islamic State's media enterprise would have been more readily apparent. In the data collected for this report, researchers identified 33 individual media bureaus under which the group released visual media products.[57] Each of these bureaus is listed in Table 1.

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57   There are four additional bureaus that released text statements or other products not captured in the dataset of visual releases used for this report. They can be found in three different countries: Syria (al-Sahil), Yemen (al-Bayda'), Yemen (al-Liwa' al-Akhdar), Saudi Arabia (al-Bahrayn). This brings the total to 37. Beyond this number, there are also a number of nascent and seeming ad-hoc announcements that emerge from different parts of the world in the name of the Islamic State, but without a formal regional media bureau. Examples include products releases under the name of Libya, Egypt, Bangladesh, Tunisia, France, Belgium, and others.

Table 1: Names of Islamic State Regional Media Bureaus

Bureau	Country	Bureau	Country
Barqah	Libya	Khurasan	Afghanistan/Pakistan
Fezzan	Libya	Sinai	Egypt
Tripoli	Libya	Al-Anbar	Iraq
Al-Barakah	Syria	Al-Fallujah	Iraq
Aleppo	Syria	Al-Janub	Iraq
Al-Khayr	Syria	Al-Jazirah	Iraq
Al-Raqqah	Syria	Baghdad	Iraq
Damascus	Syria	Dijilah	Iraq
Hamah	Syria	Diyala	Iraq
Homs	Syria	Kirkuk	Iraq
Al-Furat	Syria/Iraq	Ninawa	Iraq
Caucasus	Various	Northern Baghdad	Iraq
`Adan Abyan	Yemen	Salah ad Din	Iraq
Hadramawt	Yemen	West Africa	Nigeria
Lahij	Yemen	Al-Hijaz	Saudi Arabia
Sanaa	Yemen	Najd	Saudi Arabia
Shabwah	Yemen		

Another challenge for any analyst of the Islamic State's media organization is to try to account for its dynamism. In the case of the CTC's effort to describe the group's media organization in late 2014, circumstances have since changed that make some aspects upon which we had only speculated then more concrete at this later stage. For example, the 2014 report did not mention A`maq News Agency. Its omission from the report at the time reflected an assessment that A`maq was not a part of the official media apparatus of the group, in large measure because it was not recognized as an official arm of the organization. However, since that point in time, its activities have confirmed its official status within the organization, despite the fact that it continues to refer to itself as an "unofficial" outlet.[58] Two quick examples illustrate this point. First, A`maq posts claims of responsibility on behalf of the Islamic State for operations that later are claimed by more established Islamic State media bureaus.[59] Second, its media reports often quote officials within the Islamic State's official governance structure and report on Islamic State military activities. To put it simply, A`maq could not do what it does without the support of the official media wing of the group.

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[58]   For discussion on the status of A`maq, see Rukmini Callimachi, "A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity," *New York Times*, January 14, 2016.

[59]   Such was the case with the San Bernardino, Brussels, and Orlando attacks. For the San Bernardino attacks, see Michael Schmidt and Richard Perez-Pena, "F.B.I. Treating San Bernardino Attacks As Terrorism Case," *New York Times*, December 4, 2015. For the Brussels attacks, see Natalia Drozdiak, Gabriele Steinhauser, and Matthias Verbergt, "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Brussels Attacks; More Than 30 Dead," *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2016. For the Orlando attack, see "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Orlando Nightclub Shooting," Reuters, June 12, 2016.

Figure 4: Updated Version of Islamic State Media Landscape
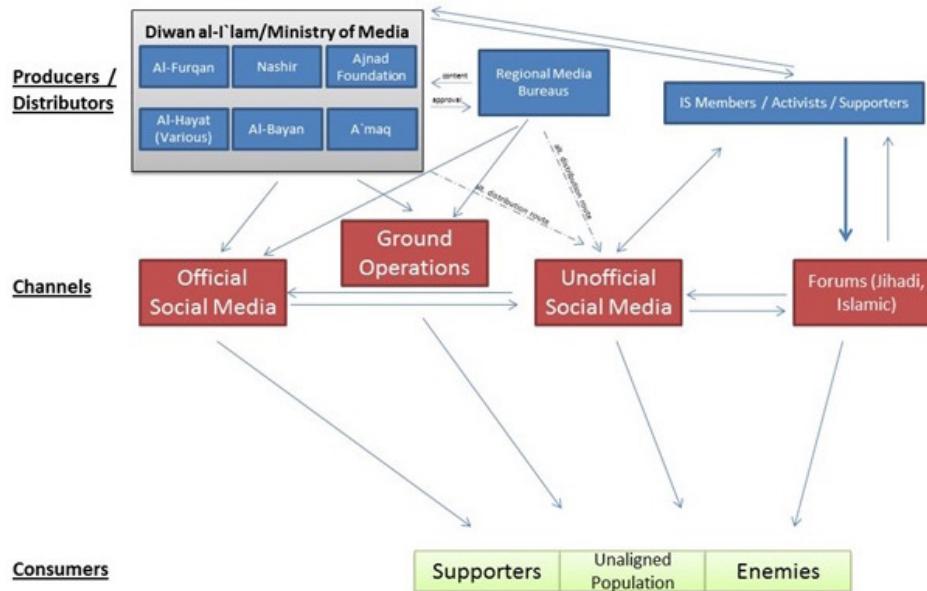
In an effort to better reflect these changes and previous omissions, CTC researchers updated the previous chart, which appears in Figure 4. The following changes, as discussed above, are reflected:

Ministry of Media – As can be seen, one key addition is an expanded Ministry of Media box, which now includes Al-Bayan radio service and A`maq News Agency. The previous note of Al-Hayat as the branch responsible for English translations was correct but incomplete. Al-Hayat is responsible for all official non-Arabic language translations carried out by the group, as well as for the production of non-Arabic language magazines such as Dabiq, Rumiyah, and others.

Ground Operations – This was added to the channels of distribution section to captures the group's extensive media activities within the territory of the caliphate. Its effort to distribute content domestically is one piece of evidence of the long fight in which the group sees itself.

Credibility Nodes – The only box removed from the previous version represented the "Credibility Nodes" that exist within the online space. This term was used to refer to individuals who served to identify false and misleading content that painted the Islamic State in a poor light. These individuals still exist, but it seemed redundant to list them separate from the box of "IS Members/Activists/ Supporters."

Connections – There is also a greater number of connective arrows in Figure 4 than appeared in the previous CTC report. This reflects the fact that researchers' understanding of the connections between these distinct entities has evolved since that point in time. Despite appearing at some points to be more or less autonomous entities, there is more direction and coordination taking place between various actors. In addition to this, there is a clear relationship between what the group puts out on the ground and what then appears online.

Overall, Figure 4 represents a more complete and nuanced understanding of the media activities of the Islamic State than what appeared in the CTC's December 2014 report on the group. However, beyond an examination of what has changed with regard to the Islamic State's media activities since that point in time, it has also become apparent that, over the past few years, beliefs seem to have developed regarding the Islamic State's media organization despite being based on questionable premises. The next section discusses some of these misconceptions in an effort to stimulate critical analyses of the group's media activities.

Misconceptions about the Islamic State's Media Activities

The Islamic State's media efforts are decentralized. It is to some degree misleading to describe the group's media bureaucracy as decentralized. While it is true that there are many different regional bureaus scattered around the territory controlled by the Islamic State, as described above, the word decentralization suggests that each of these regional groups is able to set its own agenda under limited or no oversight from the central Ministry of Media. This claim is unfounded, if not inaccurate. Mere geographic distance does not indicate the lack of a long, constraining bureaucratic leash. According to the group itself, the Diwan of Media is "responsible for any content released by the Islamic State."[60] A number of leaked documents from the Islamic State deal specifically with centralized control of media policies, with one specifying that control of contact with "satellite channels and international or local media foundations" is the responsibility of the "central media Diwan in the Islamic State."[61] Indeed, some evidence suggests that, while Islamic State media bureaus exist in different parts of the caliphate, they are certainly not autonomous from the central headquarters.

There is evidence that suggests centralized control within the organization. Consider the fact that numerous coordinated campaigns have been released among the disparate media bureaus of the caliphate. On several occasions, it is evident that there has been coordination, and most likely central direction, for media bureaus to produce content on a particular topic or to target a specific audience. For example, about two weeks after images surfaced of a young Syrian child who had drowned as his family fled the region, 13 separate bureaus of the Islamic State released videos over a two-day period addressing refugees and lauding the caliphate as a place to which they should immigrate. Similarly, following the fall of Ramadi to the Islamic State on May 17, 2015, nine media bureaus released products celebrating the group's victory over a one-week period. These releases may have been the product of independent collaboration among various media bureaus. However, it seems more likely that they were the result of central media bureau directives, geared to present a unified message on a subject that the group saw as a propaganda opportunity.[62]

To say that the group's media effort is currently not decentralized does not indicate that it will never be so. Indeed, this centralized control is likely to come under increasing stress as the group continues to face pressure and lose territory. It may eventually be the case that more decentralization occurs, but as suggested in some of the declassified documents discussed above, this would cut against the organization's long-standing penchant for centralization and be a result of necessity rather than choice.

The Islamic State's media activities are effective. The challenge with labeling the group's activities as "effective" is that such a claim is contingent on how one defines efficacy and in which areas such an evaluation is made. Without such a definition or metric, public discussions of the group's media capabilities may present the organization as far more capable and successful in its media efforts than it actually is. Some have defined efficacy by the group's skill in using social media and the quantity of products that it releases. While these measures may be a component of what make an entity "effective" in terms of its media presence, the core of what the group is trying to achieve through its media campaign is to attract people to its vision and intimidate opponents.

If the efficacy of the Islamic State media organization is measured by the group's skill in using social

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60   The claim was made in a video titled "Structure of the Caliphate." It was released by Al-Furqan Establishment of Media Production on July 6, 2016. See Jack Moore, "ISIS Releases New Video Outlining 'Structure of the Caliphate,'" *Newsweek*, July 7, 2016.

61   These leaked documents can be found on Aymenn al-Tamimi's archive of Islamic State administrative documents at http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents. The quote above comes from Specimen 11Q. Others documents showing centralized control of media procedures are Specimens 6W and 11P.

62   One cannot exclude the possibility that such a coordinated release may have been produced by one media bureau (or the central bureau) and marketed as having appeared from several in order to inflate outsiders' estimation of the group's media capability. To the best of the author's knowledge, no evidence exists to support this possibility.

media and the quantity of products that it releases, it appears to have had some success. According to the U.S. State Department's acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, more than 40,000 individuals from all over the world have traveled to fight in Iraq and Syria.[63] While not all have gone to join the Islamic State, it has garnered a significant portion of the incoming foreign fighters, which many analysts attribute to its media adeptness. Does this mean that its media campaign is successful? If so, then how does one explain the defections of current fighters and the reduced flow of incoming fighters?[64]

To be clear, the suggestion here is not that the group's media activities can be dismissed. Nor is the point that its media is not effective at all. Rather, it is that the question of efficacy remains untested and largely anecdotal. Though the group has been able to attract foreign fighters, inspire individuals to commit attacks around the world, and create fear in the hearts of some, the specific impact that its social media has had in this process remains under-examined. Would fighters have come in the absence of social media outreach? Probably not at the levels seen. Would they have come if the group only posted 1,000 images since January 2015 as opposed to over 9,000? Uncertain. And, regardless of the group's social media activities, the reality of the situation on the ground matters much more. If the group were not advancing and taking over city after city in the summer of 2014, all the social media posts they could have mustered might not have mattered. While the purpose of the report is not to resolve this question, it is an important one worthy of discussion and research.

The Islamic State's media activities are exclusively online. Although much of the focus is on the group's online distribution of products through social media, it would be incorrect to suggest that all that the group does in the propaganda arena is online. While it is evident that the group's control of territory has given its media narratives a different content flavor than they would otherwise have had, not as many analysts have noted that the control of territory also provides the group with nearly uncontested access to a local population that it wishes to influence and control. As noted above in the examination of the historical declassified documents, AQI/ISI spent a significant amount of time distributing products to local audiences as well as members of its own organization. The Islamic State is no different. This ability of the group to speak directly to the population with much less competition than it faces in the social media space, though less visible to the outside world, is potentially more important when it comes to thinking about the long-term challenges posed by the group. Ever since it took over territory, the group has made significant efforts to exploit its ability to flood the local population with its message. Figure 5 contains a few selected images of the internal media activities carried out by the Islamic State's media bureaus.

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63   Justin Siberell, "Country Reports on Terrorism," Special Briefing at the State Department, June 2, 2016.

64   There are many articles that cover these topics. A few examples are noted here. Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment," *New York Times*, September 20, 2015; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Number of Foreign Fighters Entering Iraq and Syria Drops by 90 percent, Pentagon Says," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2016; Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS 'Sets Up Office To Manage Relations with Foreign Fighters' to Stop Infighting and Defections in Syria," *Independent*, May 12, 2016.

Figure 5: The Media Efforts of the Islamic State Inside the Caliphate

Upper left: A mobile media van of the Islamic state making a public presentation (Ninawa - March 2015); Upper right: individuals coming to a media station of the Islamic State to obtain flash drives, CDs, and other products (Aleppo – February 2015); Lower left: A public screening of Islamic State propaganda outside of a media kiosk (Barqah - May 2015); Lower right: British hostage John Cantlie standing in the ruins of a media kiosk allegedly destroyed by an airstrike (Ninawa – March 2016). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

While it is clear that the group engages in internal propaganda activities, it is also important to consider what the group thinks it will get from doing so. One can only speculate regarding the group's motivations and intentions. Nonetheless, if the declassified documents examined above are any indication, the likely goal of the Islamic State's internal media distribution is to appeal to and change the minds of the population. Ideally (from the group's perspective), the population will become more supportive of the Islamic State, and, at worst, they will oppose alternative groups. Of course, the efficacy of this effort to change hearts, minds, and actions is difficult to assess. The success of these efforts likely depends on a range of factors, including the group's ability to back up what the propaganda purports to offer in the form of security, justice, and social services.

One other factor is the age of the recipients of this internal propaganda effort.[65] Screenings of Islamic State propaganda videos and executions routinely target children as the main audience. While a number of analysts have discussed the group's use of child soldiers, the fact that children appear to be a target population of the group's media efforts raises additional long-term concerns about deradicalization and the possibility of future threats.[66] Forcing children to the front-lines is reprehensible and rightly classified as a war crime. Forcing those same children to watch horrific videos and be exposed

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65 The direct appeal to children and youth is not a new innovation. The Nazis targeted youth in their propaganda and recruitment efforts. Adolf Hitler, as noted by one scholar, "…understood that young people could be a powerful political force that could help shape [the] future. In his quest for power, Hitler harnessed their enthusiasm and loyalty." Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Scholastic, 2005).

66 Cole Pinheiro, "The Role of Child Soldiers in a Multigenerational Movement," *CTC Sentinel* 8:2 (2015); Mia Bloom, "Cubs of the Caliphate," *Foreign Affairs*, July 21, 2015; Mia Bloom, John Horgan, and Charlie Winter, "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9:2 (2016).

constantly to one worldview, which may lead them in the future to walk themselves to a frontline, is something that receives less scrutiny in counterterrorism efforts. This is an area that should be monitored by policymakers and studied further by researchers.

This section has discussed the current organizational structure of the Islamic State media organization, as well as some of areas where understanding of second- and third-order effects of the group's media effort may still be unclear. Next, this report outlines the data collected for this study, which undergirds the subsequent analysis and discussion of the group's official media effort.

Data Description

One takeaway that emerges from the above organizational charts and discussion is that the Islamic State's media network engages in a number of different activities: creating, disseminating, and amplifying the group's media products; engaging online with potential recruits as well as detractors; and serving the internal needs of the overall organization. This report focuses specifically on the creation and dissemination of the group's media products, specifically its visual official media products. More specifically, it examines a collection of official Islamic State visual media products released on social media accounts beginning in January 2015 and continuing until August 2016.[67] It is not an exhaustive analysis of every tweet that has been released by the group or in support of it. There are three reasons for this narrower focus on official visual media products released by the Islamic State.

First, focusing on the official media releases of the group, as opposed to including the products and activity of unofficial supporters and sympathizers, can provide insight into how the group itself thinks of its own strengths and weaknesses, how it addresses different audiences, and how the various geographic media bureaus differ from one another (if at all). Such an examination cannot answer the same questions about the activities of the broader network of supporters and activists who create and disseminate their own, unofficial content. However, narrowing the study to official media releases of the group helps to get rid of the tremendous amount of noise that exists in attempting to analyze all of the output related to the group.

Second, with few exceptions, there have not been many attempts to conduct a large-*n* assessment of what the group's official media releases as a whole tell us about the organization's messaging and its overall public appeal.[68] Indeed, most public discussion of the Islamic State's media output privileges products that revolve around the depictions of violence and battlefield activities. Such a myopic focus may have deleterious effects on public perception of the nature of the threat posed by the group, as well as prevent a more holistic understanding of how the organization is viewed by fence-sitters, actual supporters, and sympathizers.

Finally, one practical reason for focusing only on the official media output of the organization is that it makes the analysis more manageable given the approach taken here. Consider that fact that, according to a study by J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, at one point pro-Islamic State supporters on Twitter

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67   While every effort was made to ensure consistency in both collection and coding, there is a bit more uncertainty surrounding the completeness of the collection effort during the earlier stages of the group's releases, particularly from July 2014 – December 2014. Consequently, some of the subsequent analyses contain information from a more limited time period. When this is the case, a note will accompany the analysis to indicate it.

68   Two exceptions are Charlie Winter's work cited above and Aaron Zelin's article, which both analyzed one month of Islamic State releases. Aaron Zelin, "A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015). Zelin has also used his research on Islamic State media over a longer period of time (but with a little less detail) to illustrate trends in governance and organizational health. Aaron Zelin, *ICSR Insight: The Decline in Islamic State Media Output* (London: International Center for the Study of Radicalization, 2015); Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Research Notes* no. 29 (2016).

posted an estimated 133,442 messages on social media every day.[69] Although the group's public social media activity has likely diminished since that time due to increased counterterrorism pressure, there is a tremendously large amount of information available. Big data analysis techniques can deal with massive amounts of information, but the data used in this report was collected using human coders, as the ability to see, understand, and code the individual releases in detail was necessary. This does not mean this report is better than those compiled using larger amounts of social media data or big data analysis techniques, just different.

However, not all of those messages contain original content or originate from official Islamic State media channels. Some are simply retweets by supporters; others are negative tweets by opposition groups. Supporters, activists, antagonists, and others may post items in the name of the Islamic State, but this does not indicate that they are official products. Nevertheless, an analysis of this larger body of content, while important, is not within the purview of this report.

This report contains an analysis only of those products that carry one of the official logos of many different media bureaus of the Islamic State or was distributed on an official Islamic State social media account. This emphasis is not intended to suggest that the larger body of unofficial content is not influential or useful for study. The focus on official products comes from a recognition that these official products likely set the tone for many of the other products that follow, but also allows for a relatively clearly defined population of products that can be manageably coded and analyzed given the methods employed in this report.

The emphasis on visual products excludes text-only tweets or other products that do not contain an image or video file. This would include single-line Tweets about the status of a battle or audio files that contain chants/songs or Koranic recitations. Part of the reason for the focus on visual content is that, regardless of the language spoken by the receiver, the visual content can be consumed and understood on a certain level even if the underlying language is not understood.[70] The other reason for limiting the scope of the project to visual content was simply an effort to make the collection and coding process more manageable.

Islamic State media releases were collected and identified through various open-source avenues. The group uses various social media accounts to post releases, but these accounts change quickly. Those who follow the group's media network closely are able to identify these accounts quickly and identify official media releases. Additionally, it is not uncommon for Islamic State supporters to collect all media products and post them individually or as a daily collection on various websites and online forums Using these sources, CTC researchers attempted to add media products to the dataset on as close to a daily basis as possible. If products had been removed, researchers were able to identify and collect missing products from other online sources, including extremist web forums.

In sum, while it would be inaccurate to claim that the data used in this report captures all media releases, the authors have confidence that the vast majority of officially released Islamic State visual media products were collected and coded during the period of time covered in this study. At the very least, there is not any reason to suspect a systematic under-coding of certain types of events or certain time periods.

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69   J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015).

70   In addition, many products are also translated and redistributed outside of the group's official media organization, a point we discuss below in the report.

An Aggregate Picture of the Islamic State's Media Output

From January 2015 – August 2016, this data collection effort resulted in the collection and coding of just over 9,000 videos, picture reports, and photographs embedded in Twitter posts. Within the picture reports and photos embedded on Twitter, there were no fewer than 52,000 photographs. The videos collected as part of the dataset contained approximately 140 hours of video clips. The sheer volume of official content released by the organization is massive and impressive for an organization operating out of a very active conflict zone. The frequency of these releases, however, was not consistent over the duration of this study.

Figure 6: Number of Official Islamic State Visual Media Products, by Month
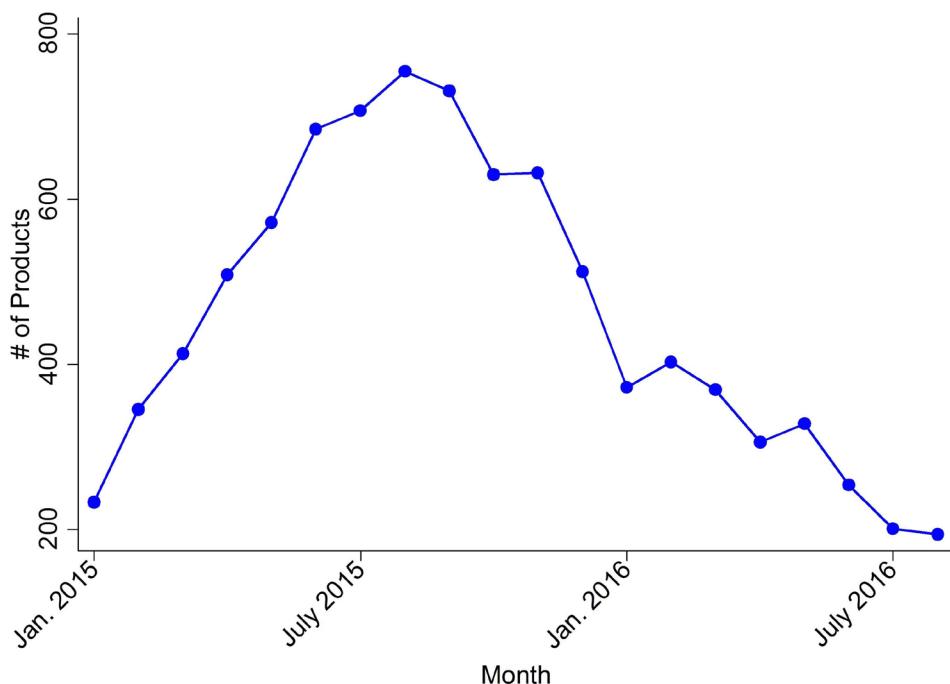
As shown in Figure 6, while the average number of monthly releases is approximately 458, there is actually a large amount of variability in the monthly number of releases. In January 2015, the organization released 249 products. This number climbed to its highest point of 761 in August 2015 before dropping off quite steadily over the next several months. By August 2016, the number of releases was down to 194, which was the lowest number recorded in the dataset.

Two insights emerge from Figure 6. First, the organization clearly puts a large emphasis on its media organization and, accordingly, is likely to have invested a significant amount of resources into it for most of 2015. Second, despite this investment in the media, it is clear that the organization has been forced to cut back these activities in response to the increasing amount of counterterrorism pressure brought to bear against the organization. As time has progressed, more nations have joined the fight against the Islamic State. For example, September 2015 marked the beginning of French airstrikes in Syria, which was in part a response to a perception of the increasing global threat posed by the Islamic State.[71] To be clear, the argument is not that the airstrikes alone were a cause in the decline of media output, but rather a recognition that the global efforts to counter the Islamic State are yielding some dividends.

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71   Angelique Chrisafis, "France Launches First Airstrikes Against ISIS in Syria," *Guardian*, September 27, 2015.

Beyond the frequency of releases, there is also some distinction in the type of products released. Most individuals are familiar with the video releases of the Islamic State.[72] However, as shown by Figure 7, it important to note that videos represent a minority of the Islamic State's official media content in terms of the number of releases. Instead, approximately 90 percent of the official releases of the Islamic State come in the form of pictures embedded in tweets or through "Picture Reports," which are a series of related photos posted online using anonymous file-sharing sites.

Figure 7: Islamic State Media Releases January 2015 – August 2016, by Type
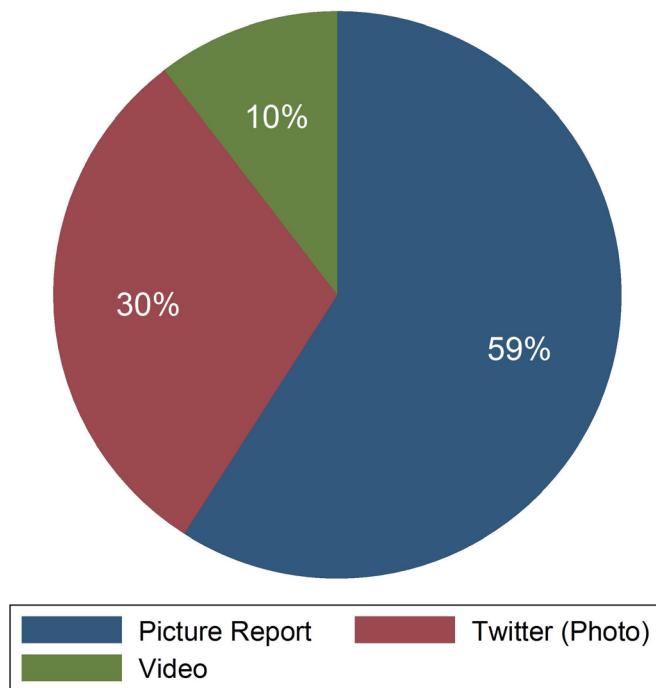
Within each of these product categories, there was a fair amount of variation in terms of the length and detail of each product. For example, of the 875 videos in the dataset, the average length of each video was 8 minutes and 37 seconds. The longest, a video documenting the Islamic State's efforts to take over Ramadi, clocked in at 58 minutes and 4 seconds. The shortest video in the dataset, 55 seconds in length, was the trailer for *The Flames of War*. When it comes to the picture reports posted on websites, the average number of photos that appears in these products is eight, with considerable variation around this average. There are picture reports that consist of only one image, but the longest, a photo tour of the Ma'dan marketplace, included a total of 68 images. Finally, when individuals would tweet out individual images, the average they would tweet on one subject was three images. Again, some variability occurred, with most of the tweets containing one or two images, but the largest was a series of 55 images highlighting an ongoing conflict in Kirkuk province.[73]

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72   Another Islamic State product that is familiar to most is the English-language magazine Dabiq. Those magazines were collected, but ultimately not coded in the data due to the fact that each magazine does not necessarily focus on one theme, but on a wide number of themes. At the time of this writing, the group has released 15 issues of Dabiq. It is worth noting that their inclusion would not alter the point being made here. Despite the high level of public familiarity with these magazines (and their counterparts in other languages), they actually represent a very small portion of the overall number of releases put out by the organization. For a content analysis of Dabiq, see Brandon Colas, "What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within Dabiq Magazine," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016).

73   Some photos that end up being posted on Twitter are screen grabs from other IS media products, including picture reports and videos.

This section has presented a surface-level look at the Islamic State's official media production. However, most of the interesting details about the organization's media operations will come from a detailed assessment of the different facets of its activities. What follows for the remainder of this chapter is an examination of the content, geography, language, and technical aspects of the group's media activities.

The Content of Official Islamic State Media Products, January 2015 - August 2016

In an effort to provide a more complete picture of the group's media activities, each of the releases was examined and coded according to a primary theme.[74] Focusing on the primary theme of a release is not without limitations. One of these is that, on some level, all of the Islamic State's products have religious undertones. A product that focuses on traditional military activities (soldiers fighting enemies, the aftermath of battles, etc.) still has a religious meaning for the group as it fights to establish the caliphate and hasten an apocalyptic confrontation with its adversaries. The same could be said for a product showing a construction crew paving a street. Are they paving a street or building (literally) a religious state? The authors are not ignorant of this possibility. Nevertheless, researchers were asked to code releases based on what they saw, not necessarily on the underlying meaning.

Another limitation is that there is a tremendous amount of variety in Islamic State media releases. Six thematic categories are unlikely to capture all of this nuance. Consequently, coders were asked to assign each release a short description as well to capture more specifically what the release was about. For instance, a release showing Islamic State fighters launching mortars would be coded in the primary theme category as "Military," but would then be coded as "Firing of Mortars" in its short description. The short description category has more variation than can easily be presented in graphical or table format, but the subsequent analysis will reference the short descriptive category where appropriate.[75]

It is the authors' belief that there is still value in distilling the complexity of all that the organization may have been trying to convey in its media products into an analysis of the macro-level trends in the data. That is what we attempt do here.

Researchers were asked to code each release into one of six possible themes. The different categories of themes are as follows:

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74 It was seldom the case that products touched on more than one of the themes outlined in this report. Even in those cases, researchers were asked to code what they saw as the primary theme of the release.

75 To be clear, this short description was not coded with a tremendous amount of uniformity, as the short description varied by coder. In cases where the report references a short descriptive category, a note explaining how the data was treated to ensure consistency is included.

Military – This category identifies releases that emphasize the battlefield exploits of the Islamic State and its attempt to destroy its enemies. Examples, some of which are included in Figure 8, include images of soldiers on the battlefield, executions of enemies/spies, and images of post-battle spoils and destruction.

Figure 8: Examples of Items in the "Military" Coding Category

Upper left: An Islamic State fighter mans his machine gun post (Aleppo - August 2015); Upper right: a group of Islamic State fighters engages in sniper training exercises (Kirkuk – November 2015); Lower left: A truck-mounted gun, part of the group's "Air Defense" unit, fires against enemy aircraft (Ninawa - March 2016); Lower right: A number of guns and other military equipment are displayed as "war spoils" following capture by the Islamic State (Northern Baghdad – October 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

Governance – This category captures efforts the Islamic State is undertaking in the area of state-building, the provision of social services, and facets of population control. Examples include images of the distribution of food and money, the maintenance of public infrastructure (roads, utilities, etc.), and the implementation of law and order (including punishment of individuals other than enemies/spies). Some examples of items included in this coding category can be found in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Examples of Items in the "Governance" Coding Category

Upper left: An individual reads a book at the opening of a new public library (Al-Khayr - March 2015); Upper right: an individual is punished for alcohol consumption by whipping in a public location (Barqah – February 2015); Lower left: A picture of equipment at a tour of a water purification station (Anbar - November 2015); Lower right: A technician works on repairing telephone wires (Dijilah – September 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

Commercial – This category is distinct from that of "Governance Activities" in that it focuses on the economic activities of individuals, as opposed to those of the Islamic State. As show in Figure 10, examples include images of shops, grocery stores, and marketplaces.

Figure 10: Examples of Items in the "Commercial" Coding Category
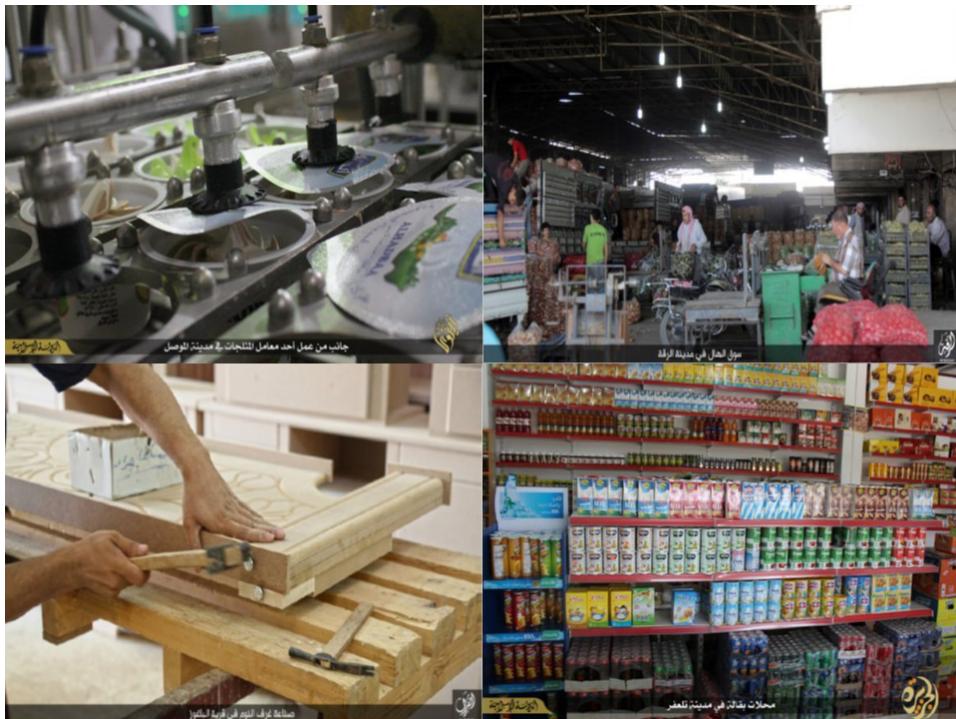
Upper left: The final stage in the production of ice cream at a factory (Ninawa - June 2015); Upper right: vendors set up their shops in a local marketplace (Al-Raqqah – September 2015); Lower left: An individual works on a piece of hand-crafted furniture at a furniture store (Al-Furat - August 2015); Lower right: The fully-stocked shelves of a local grocery store (Al-Jazirah – July 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

Religious – This category focuses on explicit performances and expressions of religious worship or attempts to implement religious principles found in media products. Examples include images of mosques, Friday sermons, *dawa* (outreach) activities, and destruction of the buildings/shrines of other religions. Items that had underlying religious themes (executions, fights against Shi`a, etc.) were not coded in the religious category absent one of these explicit references to a religious activity. A selection of these images can be found in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Examples of Items in the "Religious" Coding Category

Upper left: Public prayers during `Id (Tripoli - July 2015); Upper right: individuals gather for religious instruction classes inside a mosque (Aleppo – January 2015); Lower left: An explosion destroys a religious building that the Islamic State deems heretical (Al-Fallujah – August 2015); Lower right: A religious official speaks to an assembled crowd at a Da'wa event (Homs – July 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

Lifestyle – Products in this category show citizens in normal (and often pleasant) circumstances, such as children playing at a playground, individuals swimming in a river, or other activities that show individuals "enjoying" life in Islamic State territory. Some of the images included in this coding category can be seen in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Examples of Items in the "Lifestyle" Coding Category
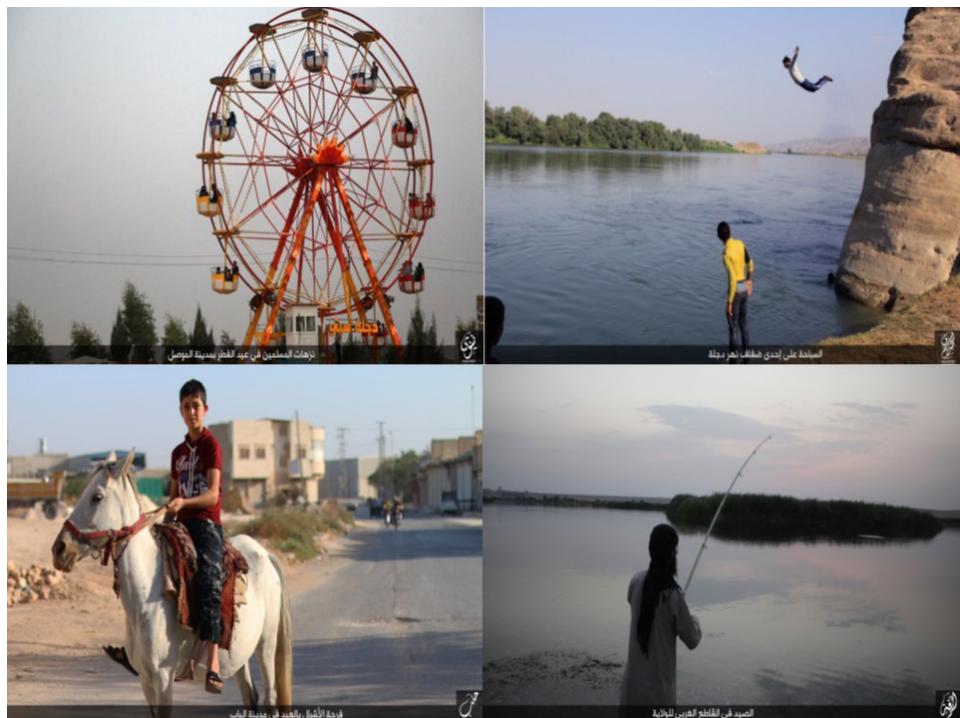
Upper left: A Ferris wheel at an amusement park (Ninawa - July 2015); Upper right: several individuals swimming and diving in a river (Salah ad Din – July 2015); Lower left: A child rides a horse down a local street (Aleppo - September 2015); Lower right: A man fishing in a river (Al-Raqqah – August 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

Other – This category captures activities, outside of those discussed above, that the Islamic State undertakes to shape public opinion regarding the group's history, viability, necessity, and correctness. As shown in Figure 13, examples include images of media kiosks, screening of propaganda, the aftermath of enemy airstrikes, the natural/historical beauty of territory under the group's control, interviews with locals about conditions, and statements against specific enemies or in favor of specific groups.

Figure 13: Examples of Items in the "Other" Coding Category
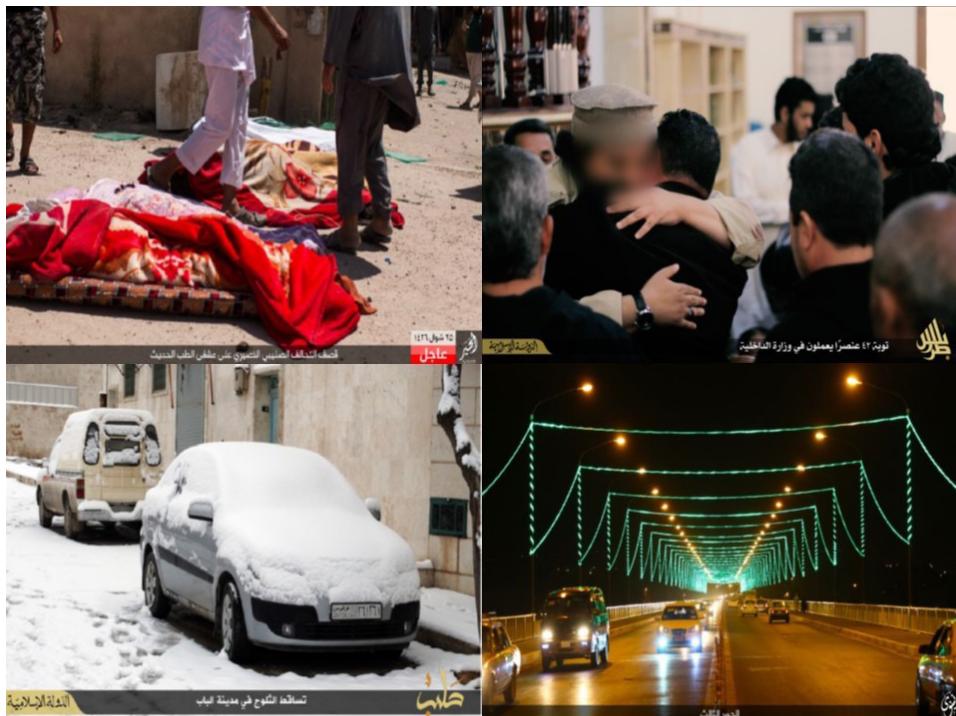
Upper left: Casualties of an airstrike lie covered in the street (Al-Khayr - August 2015); Upper right: Two individuals embrace following the repentance of a number of individuals who had previously been considered enemies of the Islamic State (Tripoli – February 2015); Lower left: Images of snow-covered cars (Aleppo - January 2015); Lower right: Image of a bridge illuminated at nighttime in a report on bridges (Ninawa – August 2015). Sources: Various Islamic State publications and posts

In order to ensure consistency among the coders when it came to these themes, the primary author of the report (who did a large portion of the coding) created a codebook that was the basis for subsequent coding of the Islamic State's media releases. Each new coder was trained, coded data, and then submitted her work to the primary author. If there appeared to be inconsistency in the coding, the codebook was revisited. After this process, a sample of 300 releases was coded independently by each coder. The Krippendorff's alpha and the Cohen's kappa assessing intercoder reliability on the thematic coding were both slightly above 0.96. The percent agreement came in at 97.31%.[76] These numbers indicate a high level of consistency among coders and are likely due to the fact that most Islamic State media releases are relatively unambiguous regarding their primary theme (among the themes outlined above).

The first and simplest question that can be answered using this coded data is what the overall thematic portfolio of the Islamic State looks like from January 2015 to August 2016. Figure 14 contains a breakdown of the themes over this time period. Before discussing what can be learned from this

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76   More information, including a helpful bibliography on intercoder reliability, can be found at Matthew Lombard's website: http://matthewlombard.com/reliability/.

content breakdown, it is worth noting that the "Lifestyle" category is not included in this chart, as only 35 releases (less than half of 1 percent) fell into this category.

Figure 14: Thematic Breakdown of Islamic State Releases, January 2015 - August 2016
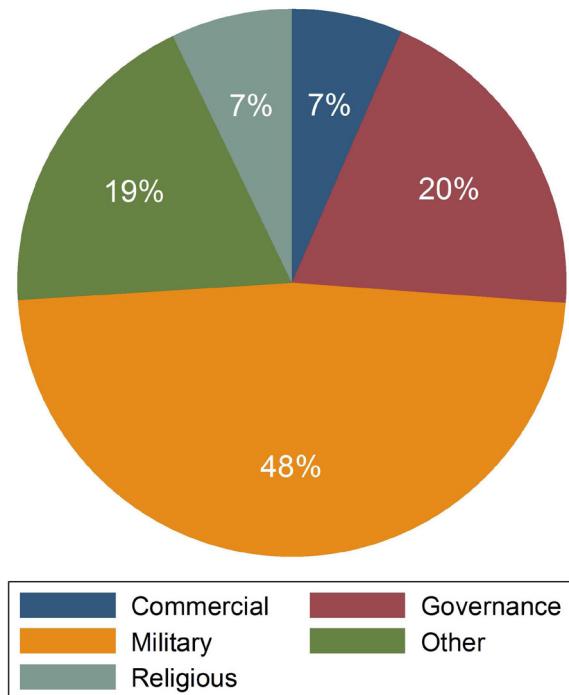
From the breakdown in Figure 14, several interesting insights emerge. First, media releases of the Islamic State are relatively diverse in nature. Although Western media is attracted to and routinely portrays the violent media products by the group that feature battle scenes and executions of enemies, over 50 percent of the releases during this timeframe had nothing to do with the military side of the Islamic State's operations. This finding is even starker if one only accounts for media products that show an actual execution or the body of a dead enemy fighter. When we coded all releases according to whether or not they contained an Islamic State execution or images of the dead bodies of Islamic State enemies, we found that, of over 8,500 products, only slightly more than nine percent contain a graphic image of violence or its aftermath.

It is worth noting that this diverse array of themes portrayed by the group provides a likely explanation for the Islamic State's ability to attract such a diverse group of fighters and supporters from around the world.[77] The fact that a majority of the group's propaganda releases do not deal directly with violence or military matters offers an important counterpoint to a belief that the group's primary mechanism for attracting fighters is the violence they carry out that is so prominently displayed and discussed by the mass media. Those products are likely important to the group's recruitment efforts, but clearly it is trying to portray itself as something more than just a fighting organization.

The second takeaway from Figure 14 is the relatively small portion of releases that focus on religious activities within the caliphate. Although, as noted earlier, an argument can be made that many or all of these releases have religious undertones, the group is going to great lengths to paint a picture of a

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77   This diverse group of recruits was one of the primary findings from a recent CTC report examining over 4,000 Islamic State personnel records. Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

caliphate that is not just a military and religious entity, but one that engages in the diverse range of activities a citizen might expect from a state.

Another interesting takeaway from the data is that the frequency with which certain themes are employed has varied across time, as can been seen in Figure 15. The products with a military theme are the most frequent over the time period covered by this data. Products with a military theme have also continued to be produced at a relatively high level over the last few months this data covers, even when products of all the other themes have declined significantly in their frequency. This decline of products with governance, religious, commercial, and other themes further supports the public belief that (1) the group is under significant pressure and (2) that it is willing to sacrifice these areas to maintain a focus on the military side of the organization, at least in the production of media content.

Figure 15: Number of Islamic State Media Products over Time, by Theme
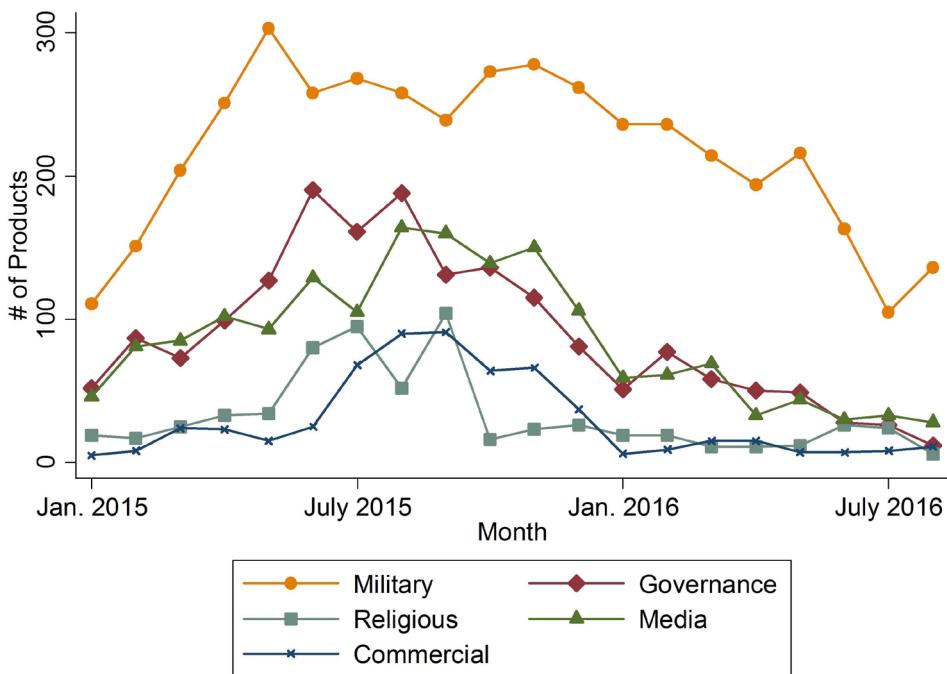
One insight from the analysis of the variation in themes over time is hard to visualize from Figure 15. While the Islamic State does have the opportunity to choose which themes it portrays, it does so under a number of constraints. For example, while it might like to portray governance activities as being omnipresent and consistent, it cannot do so if those activities are not, in fact, happening. Thus, it is interesting to compare the frequency of the release of governance products to that of military products. If the group hopes to establish a caliphate, increasing the proportion of governance releases in relation to its military content, or at least portraying a rise in governance activities, would demonstrate more success in this venture to establish a thriving society. Such portrayals may help motivate more individuals and families to move to the caliphate.

To facilitate this comparison, we introduce the idea of the "military-governance gap." The gap represents the difference between the number of military and governance releases put out by the organization. As described above, the smaller this gap becomes, the more the group is able to emphasize its governance activities over its military activities. Using the data collected for this report, we calculate two versions of the gap. In one, the gap is calculated using the difference between the number of military and governance releases alone. In the other version of this calculation, the line represents the

difference between the number of military releases on one side and the number of governance and commercially themed releases on the other. Including commercial releases accounts for the possibility that the group's attempt to portray a working caliphate might be emphasized through more than just the governance activities of the group.

The result of these two calculations appear in Figure 16, which shows how the gap changes over time. For purposes of clarity, as the black line in Figure 16 rises, the number of military releases is rising relative to the number of governance (and, in the case of the red line, commercial) releases. As the line lowers, the opposite is true. In this latter case, when the line is approaching zero, one interpretation is that the Islamic State is potentially coming closer in actuality to its goal of establishing a state, however viable, because the number of governance and governance/commercial press releases are increasing at a greater rate than military releases.[78] Again, this assumes that the number of governance releases would rise relative to the number of military releases if the group was closer to achieving that goal.

Figure 16: Gap between Military and Governance Releases
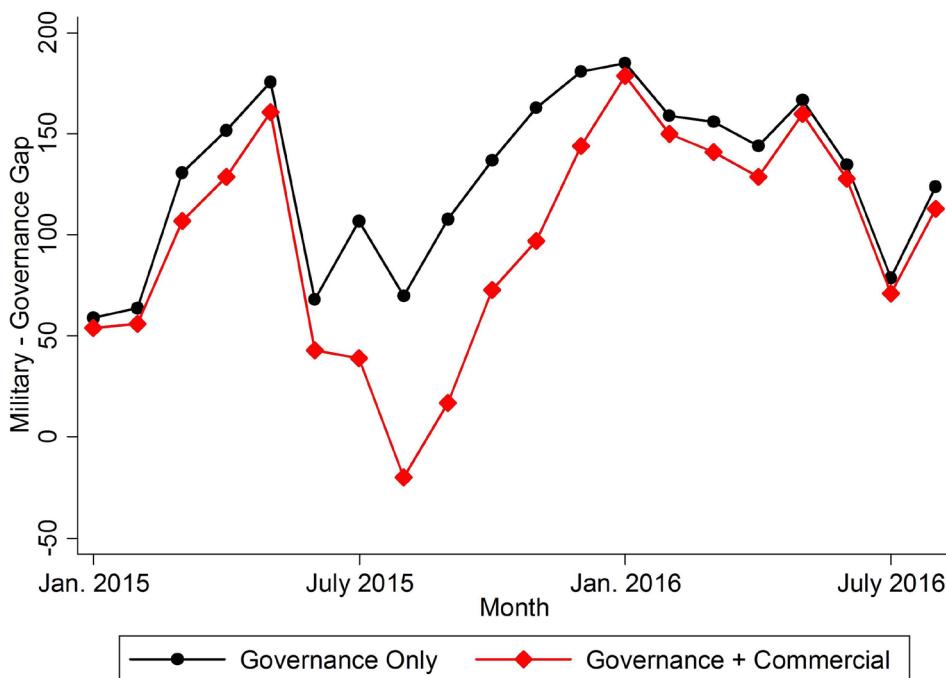
As can be seen from Figure 16, the number of military releases almost always outnumbers the number of governance releases.[79] This is true even when releases about commercial activities in the caliphate are taken into account. Overall, the average size of this gap over the course of the data is 130 media products when comparing military releases to only governance releases. The average gap drops to 97 products when commercial releases are included in the calculation. In other words, while the Islamic State pushes a diverse range of themes, there is clearly an emphasis on military activities. Despite the

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78   Such an increase could mean that there are more governance- and commercial- related activities. But it could also mean that there are, momentarily, fewer military ones. Either way, the closing of this gap illustrates an increased emphasis on the governance side of the organization as opposed to the military side.

79   The governance and government + commercial lines are very highly correlated (r = 0.87). Both lines were included to show how the gap closed even more tightly when adding in the commercial releases, which may arguably be relevant to include when considering the Islamic State's presentation of its ability to govern. However, the high level of correlation suggests that, for analyzing general trends, it may have been sufficient to only include one of the lines in Figure 16.

effort made from June – August 2015 to highlight more governance activities, the ability to sustain those particular themes in its products has certainly faltered over the last several months of the time period the data covers.

It is important to note that the lack of governance stories comes at a time when many reports are emerging regarding the group's financial and governance difficulties.[80] The inability to promote its governance activities may be creating pressure on the group to find a way to demonstrate that it is still capable of governing. Indeed, in only one month (August 2015) did the Islamic State manage to produce more governance and commercial releases than it did military releases. This may explain, in part, the timing behind the release of the "Structure of the Caliphate" video, which was released on July 6, 2016. While the release of a video highlighting the group's governance structure and ability to govern may seem oddly timed given the fact that the group had experienced significant setbacks in its efforts to highlight governance as shown in Figure 16, the release of the video could be seen as one part of a concerted effort by the group to convince potential and actual followers that the Islamic State is a multifaceted organization. However, this does not hide the fact that, even according to the group's own propaganda, the Islamic State is unable to support its own governance aspirations. Even though the military-governance gap decreased in July 2016, it was short lived, as August 2016 did not maintain this trend.

The increasing counterterrorism pressure on the organization appears to also have had some other effects that are evidenced in its media releases. One example is a type of executions that the group shows in its propaganda. An effort was made in the data to distinguish between executions of enemies and spies, which are more military in nature, as opposed to executions for crimes related to sharia law and order (as defined by the Islamic State). The former category offers one way to measure how the Islamic State attempts to communicate to external enemies and potential collaborators, while the latter category might be seen as an effort to communicate more to an internal audience.

Figure 17 contains a comparison of the media releases of the Islamic State that contain images of executions against the group's perceived external enemies (Kurds, Syrian Army, Iraqi Army, etc.) with those that contain images of executions against alleged internal collaborators and spies (individuals that the group alleges help its enemies to conduct airstrikes and otherwise report on the group). The line represents the number of monthly releases of each of these types of products per 100 releases.

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80   For a great analysis on the governance issues being experienced inside the caliphate, see Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "A Caliphate Under Strain: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 9:4 (2016). It is important to note that many of the primary source document supporting Al-Tamimi's argument are dated as having been created between late September 2015 to early 2016. For press stories discussing the group's governance and financial difficulties, see "Islamic State 'Hit by Cash Crisis in its Capital Raqqa,'" Associated Press, February 16, 2016; Andrew Blake, "Pentagon: ISIS Suffering from Money Shortage, Low Morale," *Washington Times*, April 27, 2016.

Figure 17: Number of Releases, per 100 Releases, of "Fighter" vs. "Spy" Executions
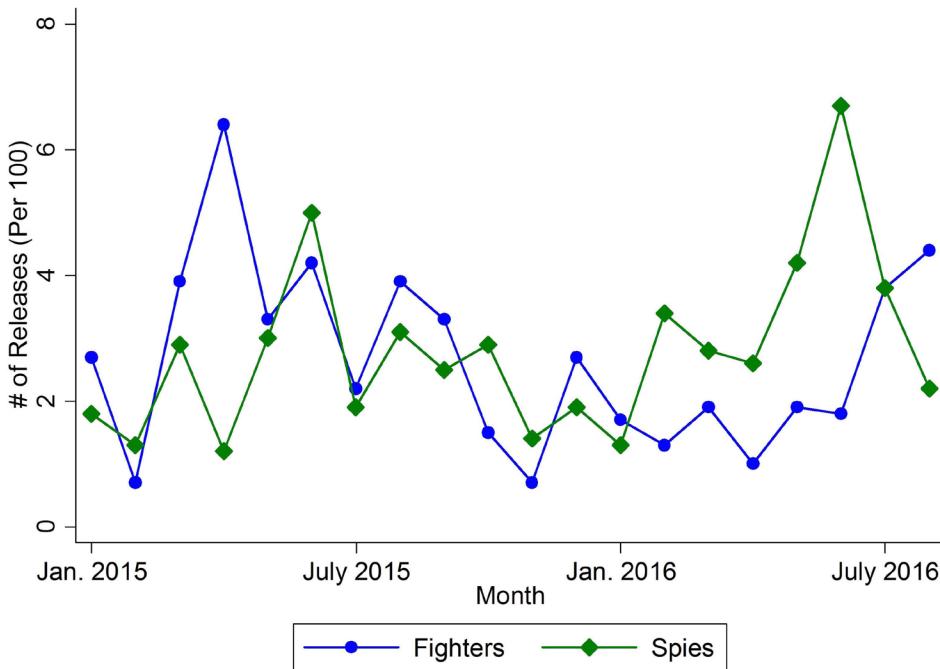
Over the period of time covered by the data used in this report, a total of 200 releases that fit one of these two categories was released, an average of almost 12 per month. However, as seen from Figure 17, there is variation in the monthly breakdown between releases targeting fighters and spies. The release of propaganda pieces in which fighters are executed appears to have reached a peak of 6.4 in April 2015, but declines thereafter. Conversely, pieces showing the execution of spies or collaborators appear to have increased, albeit with some fluctuation, since January 2015. Most starkly, the pace of releases targeting spies has grown steadily since January 2016, greatly outpacing releases targeting fighters.

This data suggests a couple of possibilities. First is that rising pressure has potentially led to paranoia among the Islamic State regarding the ability of enemy spies and sympathizers within Islamic State-controlled territory to assist external forces in the execution of airstrikes, raids, etc. The second possibility is that this data shows that the organization, despite the image of control that it would like to project, is facing severe enough challenges to its legitimacy and authority internally that it feels the need to respond publicly with brutality and then showcase that brutality in its releases. The reason for more execution videos may be that there are simply more spies in its territory, which undermines the image that the group wants to project of a unified caliphate.

This section has examined official media releases of the Islamic State to identify trends in timing and content. It has shown that the media themes of the Islamic State are relatively diverse when it comes to the content of the releases. Although military releases play a prominent role, so too do releases highlighting the group's ability to govern and establish a state. When it comes to the timing of releases, there has been a marked downturn in the number of overall media releases, especially those related to governance. In the next section, this analysis breaks down the data further down by examining how the media releases differ contingent on geography.

Geographic Distinctions

Within the governing structure of the Islamic State, it has created administrative entities around the region known as *wilayah* (provinces). As the Islamic State has expanded its control, these provinces

have increased in number. While some of the provinces seem to exist in name only, many of them perform a number of military and governance functions at some level. One of these functions is the collection, production, and release of various types of internal and external media products. These provincial-level media organizations operate as a supplement and force multiplier for the Islamic State's central media bureau, which includes Al-Hayat, Ajnad Foundation, etc.[81]

As noted above, in the dataset utilized for this report, there were 37 regional Islamic State media bureaus,[82] not including the group's central media bureaus.[83] They cover a wide ranging geographical area from Nigeria to Afghanistan. The geographic scope of these media bureaus is illustrated in Figure 18, which shows each of the media bureaus centered in its province or area of operation.

Figure 18: Geographic Spread of Islamic State Media Bureaus
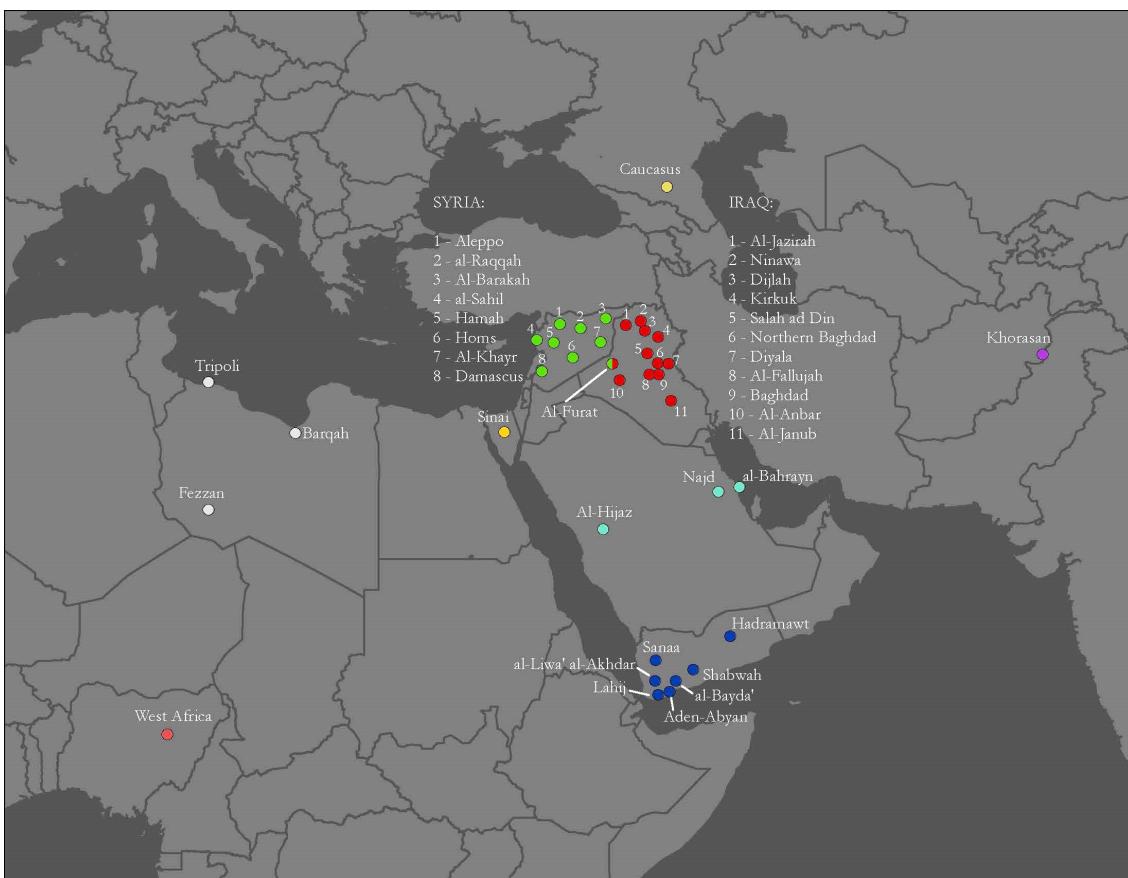
Despite the geographic breadth of these media bureaus, one should not mistake presence with activity. Not all of the media bureaus are equally prolific in the frequency and quantity of media releases. As

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81   It is worth noting that the mere fact that an official release comes out under a geographic name does not mean that an official province and media bureau has been established there. For instance, a September 2015 release under the name of "Egypt" that reported military activities in western Egypt should not be seen as an indicator of a formal administrative province or media bureau in western Egypt, but rather as the group's way of claiming an attack that occurred outside of its only formal province in Egypt, Wilayah Sinai.

82   As noted in footnote 57, four media bureaus were not captured as part of the dataset. Despite not being in the data, they are plotted in Figure 18.

83   The bureaus can be identified in the products by a number of cues, including the name of the bureau or its symbol (each bureau has its own symbol).

can be seen from Figure 19, some of these media bureaus are very active, while others appear to be little more than a name on a few scattered propaganda products.

Figure 19: Number of Media Releases from January 2015 – August 2016, by Media Bureau
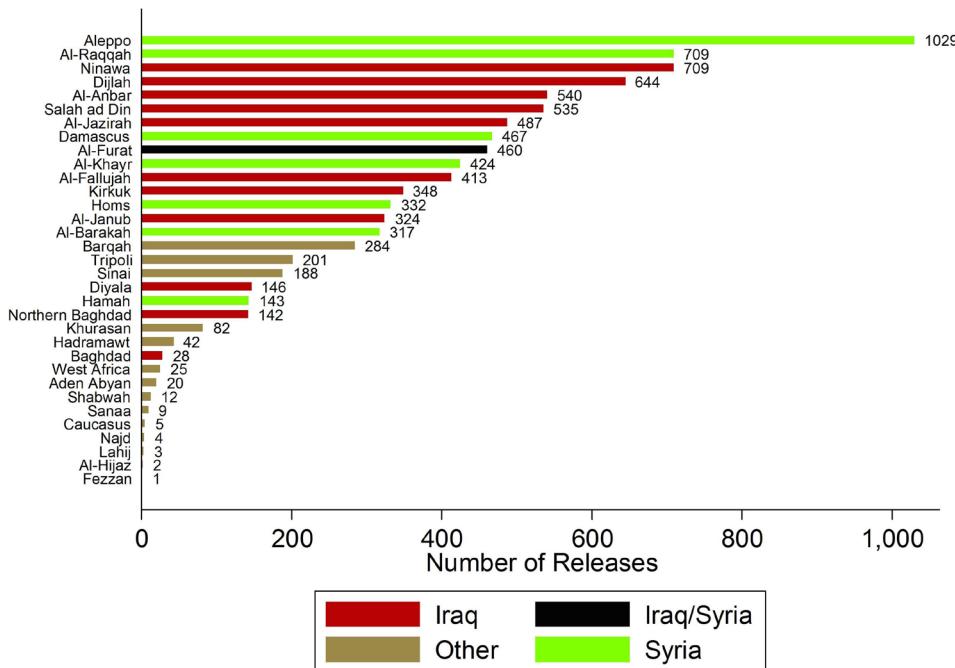
Several insights emerge from Figure 19. First, the top 15 media bureaus are in Iraq and Syria, illustrating that the Islamic State has focused its effort on these two countries. Second, there are also signals in this data of strongly developing media capabilities in Libya and Egypt, as bureaus from each of these countries occupy positions 16, 17, and 18 in terms of the frequency of releases. Third, while much has been made of the Islamic State's expansion in places like Nigeria and the Caucasus region, it is clear that the media capabilities are only at a nascent stage in these areas.

The variation that exists at the macro level between Iraq, Syria, and other areas where the Islamic State carries out media activities only becomes more informative at the province level. There is considerable variation within each of the provinces when it comes to the type of content produced. One way to see this variance is by considering how the group presents its military activities. As illustrated in Figure 20, the most prominent theme associated with the group differs in terms of the frequency with which it is presented across the group's territory as compared to governance and other themes.

Figure 20: Percentage Breakdown of Themes from January 2015 – August 2016, by Media Bureau
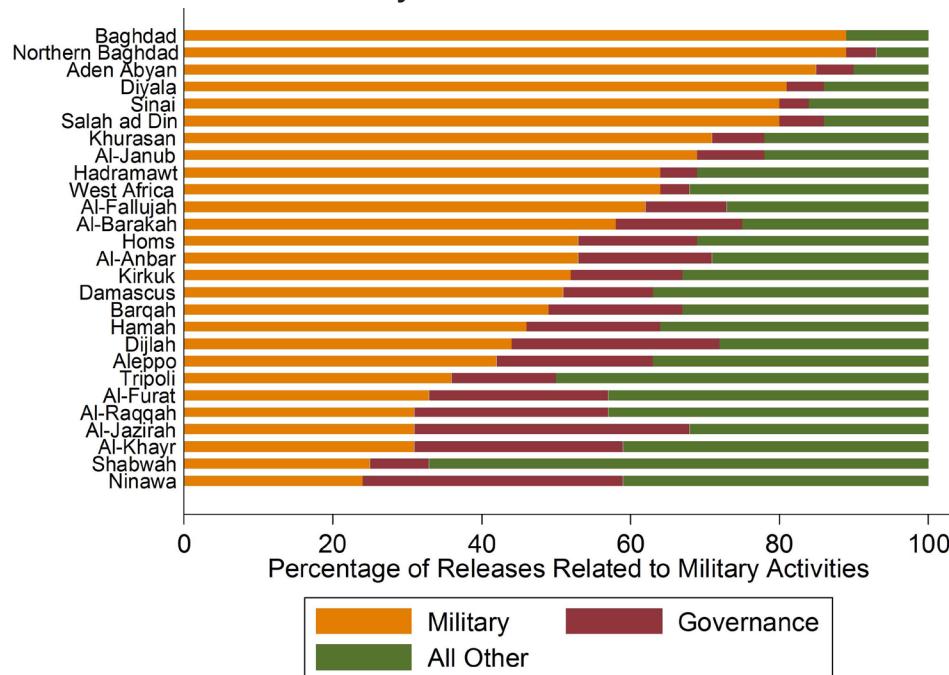
Figure 20 shows this calculation for the Islamic State media bureaus with at least 10 media releases. For the sake of presentation, only three categories are presented: Military Activities, Governance Activities, and All Other, which contains products that fall under any of the other themes described above. Within these 27 media bureaus, the average percentage of releases that fall within the "Military Activities" theme is 54%. The average of "Governance Activities" and "All Other" releases is 15% and 30%, respectively. As illustrated in Figure 20, while a few media bureaus are relatively close to these averages, a fair number of them differ substantially from this mean.

Understanding the data from this thematic perspective has important implications for countering the propaganda and appeal of the Islamic State. Assuming that these differences represent, at some level, what life in these territories is actually like under the Islamic State, it suggests a nuanced approach is needed in efforts to counter the group's influence.[84] In some places, a military solution may be an important component in terms of policy. For example, the releases related to the Baghdad province of the group are almost exclusively focused on military activities. Providing security, removing operational and logistical networks, and rolling back Islamic State forces will be important first steps to success in these areas. At the very least, these differences suggest potential themes for some of the internal counter-messaging in these areas. If the Islamic State is using propaganda to emphasize its ability to provide security in a given area, then anti-Islamic State groups might find it valuable to emphasize any available evidence to the contrary in its counter-messaging.

A quick note of caution to this finding is in order. Even though the group emphasizes its military activities in a location like Baghdad, counter-messaging that ignores the political and governance aspects of the group's appeal in these areas is unlikely to be successful. One of the lessons from the declassified documents discussed above is that part of the reason the group emphasizes its military capabilities is

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84   Of course, it may also be the case that this propaganda content does not represent what life is actually like but what the Islamic State sees as its predominant weakness in that particular area. In this case, propaganda is used to shore up flagging support rather than amplify true narratives. We cannot adjudicate between these two possibilities here (or the possibility that both are used to some extent). Either way, the differences in propaganda are important to recognize for policy purposes.

to offer disaffected Sunnis an image of the group as their protector. Undermining the security appeal of the group is not just about military messaging, but developing political and governance solutions and broadcasting those solutions.

In contrast to Baghdad province, the releases produced in Ninawa province focus more on governance than on military operations. The fact that the group has chosen to highlight governance activities suggests both that it has more governance to highlight in this region, but also a recognition on the part of the group that governance is key to maintaining power in the area in the long-term. The lesson for countering Islamic State forces is that while the military solution may be necessary, ultimate success may lie in the ability to provide an alternate form of governance to the people living in these areas.

At the macro-level, this view of the Islamic State helps counter the image of a viable, working caliphate. This can also be seen in Figures 21 and 22, which present a geographic visualization of the Islamic State's media products for both Iraq and Syria by content category. To do this, CTC researchers affixed geo-coordinates to each Islamic State media release in the dataset that referenced a specific geographic location.[85] For some locations, the coordinates for the small villages referenced were not present in current mapping software. In these cases, we asked individuals familiar with the region for their assistance in plotting these locations.

Researchers were able to assign geo-coordinates to approximately 55% of the media releases, or about 4,700 overall releases. Due to the way that the data were collected and coded, the geocoding of releases is not available across the entire date range of the dataset, but instead goes from July 25, 2014 to May 13, 2015. In addition, because it would be impossible to see the individual bubbles for each media release in high frequency areas, the bubbles are dispersed around high frequency areas.[86]

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85   The temporal range of the data plotted in the geographic charts varies slightly from that used for the rest of the analyses in this report. While the geo-coding and plotting of data was done over a different time period, the overall visualization does not change much because of these differences.

86   In both figures, this dispersion around cities with a large number of releases leads to bubbles being dispersed across the Lebanese and Turkish borders. This is simply because of the high number of releases at border locations, not because the releases covered events that were across borders.

As can be seen in Figure 21, the content of the Islamic State's visual media releases is spread across Iraq.[87] However, despite the wide variety of releases across the country, there are pockets of certain types of releases. From a propaganda perspective, the Islamic State clearly viewed Mosul, Ramadi, and Rutba as key parts of its governance image in Iraq.

Figure 21: Plot of Islamic State Media Releases in Iraq, by Content Type

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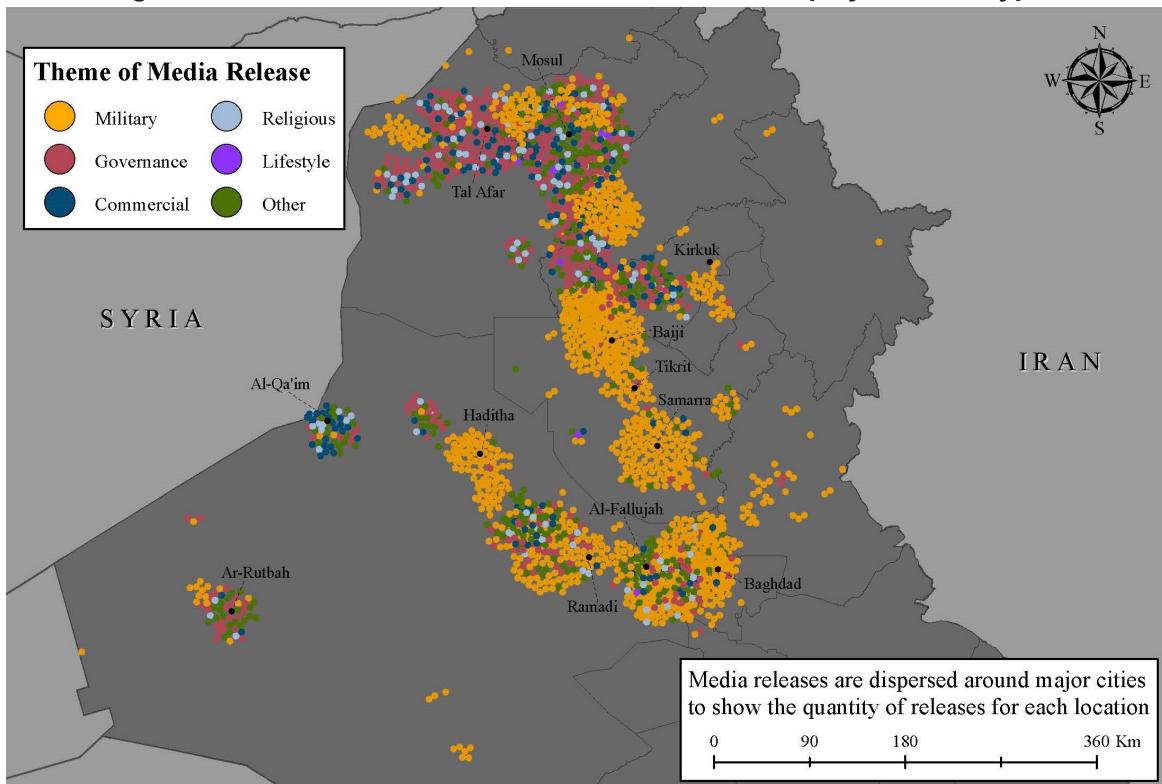
87   It should be noted that even in places where one particular color of release is shown most prominently, this does not mean that other types of releases were not present. For example, the abundance of maroon- and blue-shaded releases over Mosul does not mean that yellow-shaded military products were not released at all.

As illustrated in Figure 22, this emphasis on governance also appears in Aleppo and al-Raqqa in Syria. When examining both of these geographic plots, the emphasis the group places on the al-Bukamal/al-Qa'im border crossing, which is prominently featured in the group's media releases, becomes evident.

Figure 22: Plot of Islamic State Media Releases in Syria, by Content Type
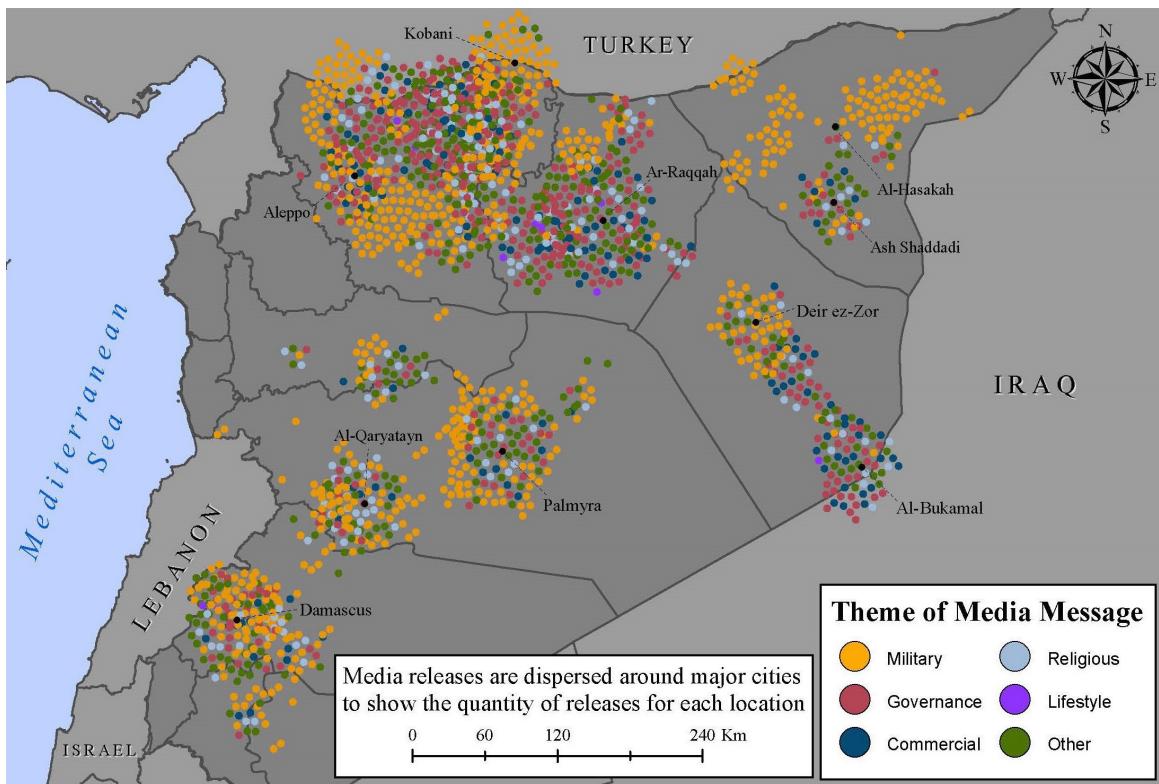
While the organization has managed to launch a number of new media bureaus, these separate bureaus do not operate uniformly. Different themes appear to be more prominent in some areas than others. Despite the holistic image that the group is trying to present about its ability to govern the caliphate, it is clear from this section that such a narrative is misleading. The truth is, based on the group's own media releases, the governing caliphate is much smaller than the caliphate itself, to say nothing of the quality of governance offered in any of these areas.[88] Continuing to understand what the geographic nature of the group's media activities says about its own view of the caliphate is an important avenue for future study and analysis.

The Online Distribution of Islamic State Media Products

The purpose of this section is to illuminate, using a combination of anecdotes and large-n data, a number of practices of the Islamic State as they relate to its online media activities. This section focuses on the overt side of its media activities. An in-depth examination of the use of the "dark web" and other hidden venues (Telegram, Whatsapp, Kik, etc.) is beyond the purview of this report. The purpose of this section is not to conduct an examination of the technical capabilities of the Islamic State in the media realm. Other scholars have examined this subject in some detail.[89]

While there is tremendous interest in some of the hidden activities of the Islamic State's media arm,

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88   Al-Tamimi.

89   Aaron Brantly and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "Extremist Forums Provide Digital OpSec Training," *CTC Sentinel* 8:5 (2015).

the intent of this research is to gain a better understanding of the group's capabilities and tendencies by examining its public practices. Such an understanding is critical to designing effective strategies and programs to counter the group's activities and influence, regardless of whether they happen overtly or covertly.

This section begins by examining the types of products collected in this report through which the group publicly distributes its message. The use of websites such as justpaste.it, which allow users to upload pictures and text without any registration and share a link for others to access the content, has increasingly become a key component of the Islamic State's official distribution portfolio. Figure 23 shows this change over time, with July 2015 serving as the inflection point when the posting of individual photos on Twitter was eclipsed by the use of these websites.

Figure 23: Types of Products Distributed by the Islamic State, over Time
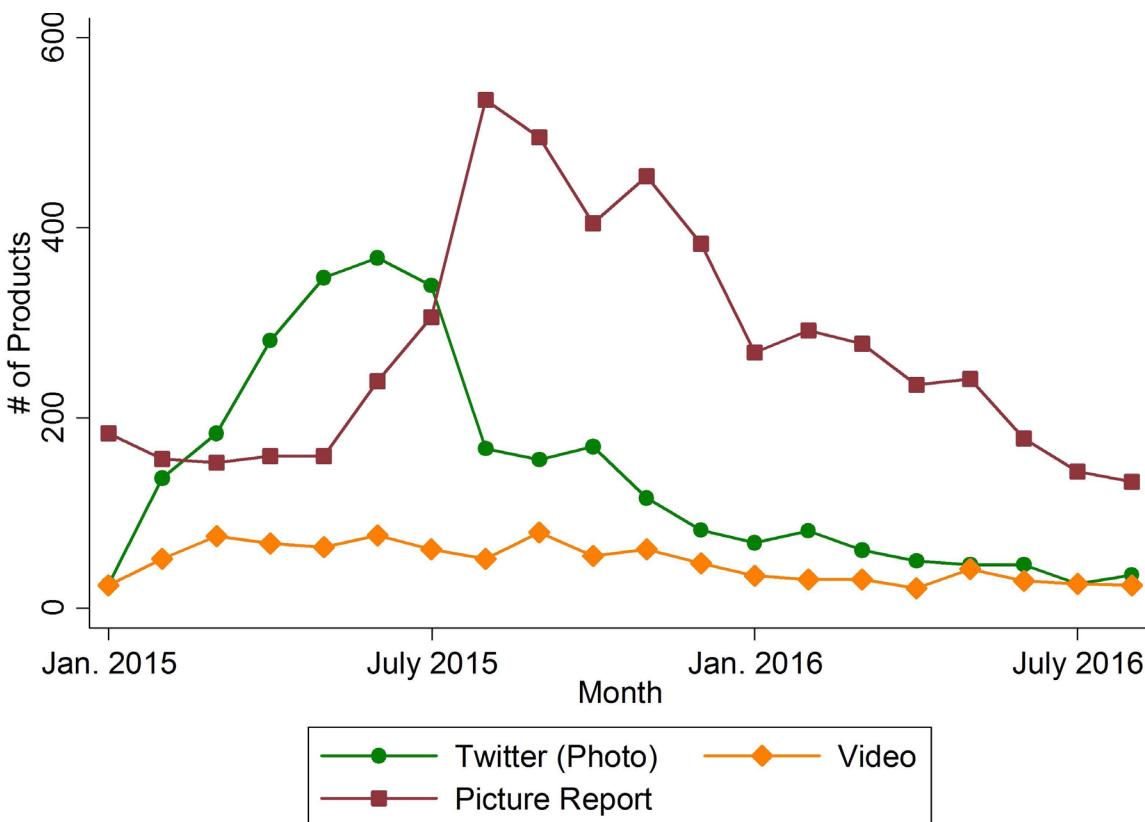
One possibility for why this inflection point occurred in July 2015 is that the effects of account suspensions led the Islamic State's online distributors to change their standard operating procedures. As a result of the susceptibility of Twitter products to removal, they most likely shifted toward the use of anonymous websites such as justpaste.it, which the group may have seen as more resilient to content removal efforts. Twitter, for example, has employed a relatively proactive strategy to remove Islamic State accounts. The strategy relies not only on reporting of suspicious accounts from users and government officials, but also on the proactive efforts of Twitter employees and technology to identify and remove offensive content.[90] While these types of measures have not driven Islamic State supporters off of Twitter, it has made using Twitter more time consuming for them than it would be otherwise. This

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90   Rick Gladstone, "Twitter Says It Suspended 10,000 ISIS-linked Accounts in One day," *New York Times*, April 9, 2015; Danny Yadron, "Twitter Deletes 125,000 ISIS Accounts and Expands Anti-Terror Teams," *Guardian*, February 5, 2016.

has likely led to the increased use of anonymous websites, which have far fewer staff and resources to conduct similar resource-intensive operations to remove offensive content, regardless of the intentions of the owners of such sites.[91] Beyond the role of resource constraints, the decreased freedom of movement on Twitter and other public sites has created a market for anonymous communications websites and applications, such as Telegram and WhatsApp. While such websites and applications can serve legitimate functions, consider the attraction for Islamic State propagandists to sites with an opening page like the one depicted in Figure 24.

Figure 24: Screenshot of Opening Page from Shortwiki.org

The argument here is not one in favor of draconian limits to internet freedom, rather it is to illustrate the fact that such venues provide extremists with a low-cost method for publishing their message and that their use of these sites is very hard to prevent, especially without infringing on other interests, such as the ability of human rights activists to use similar sites to publish accounts of atrocities. Even if one particular site were removed, there are likely dozens of already existing alternatives and another dozen that may emerge in the near future to meet the demand. Trying to eliminate the ability of extremists, such as the Islamic State's media operatives, to use the internet is unlikely to be successful and could potentially lead to unintended negative consequences.[92]

Nonetheless, there is value in pursuing some of these removal strategies. There are two types of removal strategies that have been used fairly prominently against the Islamic State. These strategies have not necessarily been conducted by any specific government, but they have just been observable throughout the data and are worth noting.

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91   Carmen Fishwick, "How a Polish Student's Website Became an ISIS Propaganda Tool," *Guardian*, August 15, 2014.

92   For example, it is unlikely that Islamic State supporters online can be identified with 100 percent certainty. Consequently, some individuals who have no connection to the Islamic State may have their accounts suspended. Is the "collateral damage" of removing innocent accounts costly enough to forego the attempt to wipe extremism completely from the internet? The answers to such questions are far beyond the scope of this report, but they are worth considering.

The first is to remove an entire hosting service from the internet. For instance, the Islamic State has, at some periods of time since January 2015, relied on alternatives to justpaste.it such as makalem.me or daow.in. From June to July 2015, makalem.me and daow.in were host to 73 Islamic State releases each. However, both have since been removed from the internet and justpaste.it has again become the main distribution node for Islamic State media releases. In this dataset alone, there are at least 15 different sites that have hosted Islamic State media content.[93] Even though justpaste.it is easily the preferred venue during the period of time covered by the data (over 70 percent of products were posted on the site), the group has shown itself to be resilient to efforts by others to remove such sites from the internet. However, there is an argument in favor of such a policy. Although jihadis have undertaken efforts to find alternative sites or create them internally, it likely raises the cost of business for the organization when it comes to online media distribution efforts. This may explain why, even though the group has tested various alternatives, justpaste.it, a venue that is not controlled by it but remains open to its products, remains a main hub for distribution of Islamic State propaganda.

The second strategy does not focus on removing entire sites, but rather on removing individual pieces of content from these file-sharing sites, as well as individual distribution nodes from sites such as Twitter.

Even if attempts to remove individual products have become more effective recently, what can be said about such efforts over the course of this dataset? To answer this question, we took a random sample of 25 official products per month from January 2015 – May 2016 that had been posted on justpaste.it and looked to see if they were still accessible online.[94] We then identified if the product was removed, summed the number of removals, and divided the total number of removals by the total number of products for that month. This gives us an estimate of a "monthly removal rate." Of the 354 products we checked, 35 percent had been removed. That means that a large amount of Islamic State propaganda remains available online. To offer more detail, Figure 25 shows the monthly removal rate for products.

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93   The evolving nature of jihadist use of such sites has been recognized by others. See Steven Stalinksy and R. Sosnow, "The Jihadi Cycle On Content-Sharing Web Services 2009-2016 And The Case Of Justpaste.it: Favored By ISIS, al-Qaeda, And Other Jihadis For Posting Content And Sharing It On Twitter – Jihadis Move To Their Own Platforms (Manbar, Nashir, Alors.Ninja) But Then Return To Justpaste.it," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, June 7, 2016.

94   In some months, there were no more than 25 products posted on JustPaste.it. In these cases, we have included the removal rate for purposes of the graph, but provide a list here of the months with fewer than 25 products, with that number in parentheses: February 2015 (2), March 2015 (1), June 2015 (2), May 2016 (24).

Figure 25: Monthly Removal Rate of Islamic State Products
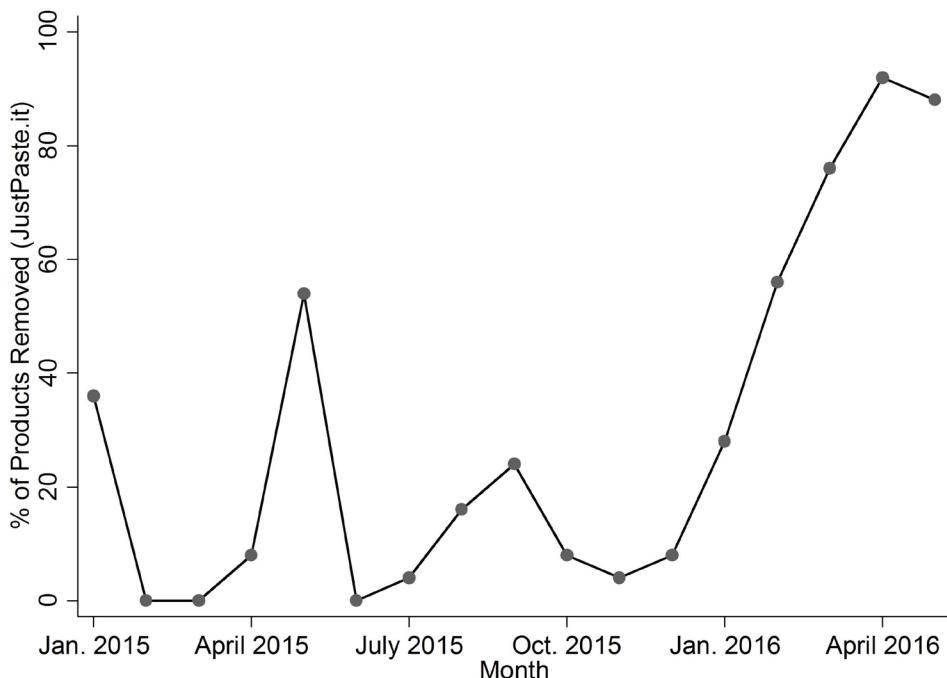
As can be seen from Figure 25, removal of individual picture reports on justpaste.it has not been done consistently over the time period covered by this data. At some points in time, the products have not been removed at all. A positive development illustrated by the data is that the removal of Islamic State items has been more complete on the site since the beginning of 2016.

Another interesting fact revealed by this data has to do with the type of products most likely to be removed. For example, while only 15 of the 354 (four percent) products contained images of an execution, all 15 of these products were removed from justpaste.it. However, it seems clear from the data that violence alone was not sufficient to remove products from the site. In the case of products that showed dead bodies of anti-Islamic State fighters (but not their execution), the removal rate dropped as compared to those that featured executions alone. While approximately four percent of the products contained images of dead bodies, only half of them were removed from justpaste.it. One final point of comparison is the Islamic State releases that feature dead and wounded civilians (presumably at the hand of anti-Islamic State forces). Only six of these products appeared in the random sample, but of those six, only two had been removed (33 percent). While the small number of products in these categories should encourage caution in interpreting the results too rigidly, the possibility that service providers are less likely to remove certain types of content may provide incentives for groups to produce content that exploits this gap.

For more granular focus on the removal of Islamic State products and accounts from the internet, researchers observed a smaller number of products and accounts more closely to see if they were removed from the web and, if they were, how long it took for such a removal to occur.

For example, we observed 23 justpaste.it pages created by Islamic State followers on Twitter on June 15-16, 2016.[95] We found that, of those 23 pages, 13 (57 percent) had been removed within two days of

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95   We made every effort to ensure that the content on these pages was related to the Islamic State. Even if we have accidentally included content in error, only the removal rate would be impacted. Consequently, we recommend that individuals focus less on the specific removal rate as a noteworthy finding.

their posting.[96] While a 57 percent removal rate is a substantive achievement, there are other considerations that might suggest that more advancement is needed in this area. For instance, one observation is that most of the visits that come to these pages occur within the first few hours of the page's creation. It is difficult to put an exact number on the timeframe, but the largest increase of hits to these pages comes within the first two hours. After about six hours, the number of new hits drops off significantly. From this perspective, even though 57 percent were removed within the first two days, the fact that none of the 23 releases was removed within the first three hours suggests that much of the damage has already been done by the time they are removed. To be clear, removal is likely better than leaving these releases active on the internet, but the process is not fast enough to significantly undercut their distribution. In the effort to remove Islamic State content from the web, both comprehensiveness and speed are important. According to the above analysis, counter-Islamic State entities have become better at the former, but still have work to do on the latter.

Turning to the removal of individual accounts from social media sites, the findings are similar. To examine account suspensions, researchers first identified Islamic State media products and then tracked accounts that were posting this material. Some of these older pages included content that was typical of someone who supported the fight against the Syrian regime or "oppression," but it was not easy to detect if the individual was an Islamic State supporter or not. There is also a possibility that some of the accounts posting this material were either hacked or innocent re-posters of content. Consequently, the older accounts are harder to identify conclusively as Islamic State accounts. Of the 51 accounts we identified as tweeting out Islamic State content, 17 fell into this category and had been on Twitter for more than two days. In the discussion that follows, researchers included information on all accounts and the smaller sample of accounts that were created within the 48 hours prior to the posting of Islamic State content.

Of the 51 accounts identified as tweeting content on behalf of the Islamic State on June 15-16, 2016, over 80 percent of them had been removed within two days of posting the Islamic State-related content. Some of these accounts had been active for more than two days, but it was the posting of the content that we were following that led to the suspension of the account. If we exclude the older accounts to focus only on those that were created within two days prior to the posting of the content that we were tracing, we are left with 34 accounts. Of those 34 accounts, 32 (94 percent) were removed within two days of posting the Islamic State-related content.

It is worth noting that those behind Islamic State social media accounts that have been taken down do not give up, but instead continue to reemerge on social media platforms under different usernames. These individuals recognize that while they have been suspended for the content they posted, they will not be prevented from rejoining these networks. And, lest one think that the tradecraft of Islamic State members to rejoin these networks is complicated, an example will show that it is not.

Consider the fictional Twitter handle @ISISmember. If this individual posts content that results in a suspension, he/she does not have to make dramatic changes to his/her handle in order to register anew. He/she could make his/her handle @ISISmember_1, @1ISISmember, or @ISISm3mber and be back online in minutes.[97] Any one of these variations will work as often as the Islamic State member wishes to keep reemerging. Unfortunately, this is not the *modus operandi* of an isolated account, but appears increasingly to be standard practice. One Islamic State individual (@ISISmember_1) who used one of these strategies for his naming convention recently reemerged for the 206th time (@ISISmember_206).[98] Even though this account has been repeatedly taken down, the fact that the individual can come back online with such little variation to his handle makes him easy to find and

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96   We cannot say anything about the removal rate of these specific products after this point in time, as we stopped observing these particular products as closely.

97   Relatively similar and predictable patterns seem to be used by Islamic State media officials for assigning links on JustPaste.it.

98   This number has undoubtedly increased since the time this report was written.

his overall cost of the suspension relatively lower. In other cases, account handles change completely, but the underlying user ID remains the same.

Blacklisting certain handles (or future variations of some handles), user IDs, or pursuing other methods of preventing the reemergence of such individuals may seem futile to some. To be clear, such efforts will not eliminate the presence of Islamic State propagandists online. The complete elimination of the Islamic State's online presence is an unrealistic expectation. However, efforts to remove accounts and force changes in what members must do to remain online will raise the organizational costs of engaging in such behavior online and presumably force those interested in following the propaganda to work harder to find it. These benefits may seem small, but they could pay dividends over time.

A cautionary note should be added to the finding that efforts to remove official Islamic State media products appear to have been more successful recently. As mentioned above, the media network of the Islamic State can be loosely divided into two general parts: official and unofficial. The official media entities, which include (among others) Al-Hayat Media Center and the provincial media bureaus, are the main focus of most efforts to remove content. This focus is appropriate, as these organizations represent the primary tier of the group's media activities. These media bureaus have direct connections with other administrative bureaus, the group's military entities, and the unofficial media entities and networks. This study has focused on the visual media products created and distributed by these primary tier entities.

The counterterrorism focus of governments and private companies towards these official and more public-facing entities has forced them to adapt. One way they have done this is through the utilization of anonymous messaging services such as Telegram. For example, the Islamic State has created an official news distribution channel on Telegram. Media products are distributed on Telegram first, but are then quickly posted to public and open venues such as Twitter and websites. Despite the effort of Telegram to shut these distribution channels down, the very nature of the service they offer makes the goal of complete removal of accounts impossible to achieve. What is more, recreating a suspended channel and distributing the new link through a signal Telegram account is easier than creating a new Twitter account.

However, these officially-linked channels are only one component of the Islamic State's media network. The other part is the unofficial side, which boasts a number of groups, such as the Al-Battar Media Foundation and Islamic News Agency - Haqq. These types of unofficial entities provide support in three areas: (1) production of their own media releases, (2) dissemination of their own releases as well as official releases, and (3) translation of their own as well as official media products. Unofficial entities participate in all or some of these three tasks to differing degrees and at various points in time. For instance, Al-Battar's English language section, which at one point provided translations of documents, has not released such a translation over the past several months. The reasoning for this translation pause is unclear. On the other hand, the main Al-Battar group, which operates in Arabic, continues to produce its own products and disseminate both its own material and that of the official Islamic State media outlets.

Taken together, these unofficial organizations might be considered the second tier of the Islamic State media network. Naming these as "secondary" might lead some to underestimate their value and connectivity to the central organization. This would be a mistake. These groups magnify the reach of the group into languages and venues beyond what would otherwise be possible. Although they may not have as many connections to the official media network, they certainly have a sufficient number of connections to ensure that they are in synch with the group and that their activities fulfill the group's needs.

Despite this critical role, these unofficial media arms are less well known outside the small circle of experts and practitioners that follow the group closely. It is hard to offer a useful snapshot of these groups because they change in their roles so frequently. That said, while a close empirical study of

these unofficial arms is outside the purview of this study, anecdotally it appears that products posted by some of these groups stay online longer and are less likely to be taken down. Given the perceived success of the Islamic State's social media efforts, future research should seek to address some of the questions raised in this section as they specific apply to these secondary actors.

What Has Allowed the Islamic State's Media Activities to be "Successful"?

In conclusion, the various findings in this section suggest a range of answers to the above question. Indeed, there are several hints regarding what the organization itself believes to be effective and important parts of its media activities. Some of these points have been covered in the preceding pages of this report: the diverse nature of the content of its products, the geographic breadth of its media activities, and the simple and not-so-simple technological innovations made by the group to distribute its content online. However, there are a few additional points worth raising about why the group is successful that did not fit into the previously discussed themes.

As discussed above, success and efficacy are subjective terms that should not be given more weight than they deserve. The Islamic State has not won the war of ideas or successfully monopolized the media market (at least not over the long-term). However, it has achieved some success in the production, dissemination, and consumption of its products.

First, the Islamic State has shown itself to be willing to adapt and adjust its use of technology in response to new opportunities, as well as in response to increased counterterrorism efforts by governments and private corporations. This was seen both in the examination of the 14 declassified documents from the AQI/ISI experience and in some of the more recent developments that the group has undertaken to evade counterterrorism pressure on Twitter and other online platforms.

The willingness of the organization to learn and adapt should not come as a surprise. In the wake of the group's setbacks in Iraq in 2006-2007, U.S. forces captured a "lessons learned" document written by ISI in 2008 that explored the reasons for the group's failures.[99] This document, which offers dozens of recommendations for improvement, specifically addresses several failures in the realm of the media. When discussing what the needs of the group were, one line noted the importance of "exploit[ing] the internet as a media outlet…to target audiences overseas." Subsequent events proved the internet to be an area where the group made significant strides.

Governments and non-government organizations have been slow to catch up to the strides made by the Islamic State in this realm. The nascent efforts of many actors to counter the group online, including the much maligned effort of the United States government, need to not only be endowed with sufficient resources and political support, but a similar level of the flexibility and innovative spirit that has characterized the efforts of groups like the Islamic State. However, as highlighted here, the Islamic State's ability to operate as it does now is a product of trial and error that has been going on for several years. It is likely that actors desiring to counter the group will have a similar learning curve, but may be able to shorten the curve by stealing a few pages from the Islamic State's handbook.

A second observation regarding the group's success is what CTC researchers refer to as the "relatability" of the group's message. This is most easily seen by first considering what the typical propaganda video produced by al-Qa'ida after 9/11 looked like. For the most part, these videos were speeches by leadership-level figures in the organization that lasted for long periods of time. In other words, they contained long-winded speeches by Usama bin Ladin or other senior figures lecturing the audience about the virtue of jihad or the evils of the West. Without a doubt, these messages carried significant rhetorical weight to those who understood them and stuck around until the end. However, the audience willing to do that was likely small.

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99   "Analysis of the State of ISI," Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449.

Contrast this with the types of individuals that frequently appear in the propaganda products of the Islamic State. Of the over 9,000 products coded for this report, less than 1 percent contain images or speeches of leadership level figures. Instead, Islamic State releases contain lots of "average" fighters conveying the group's message. They may be Iraqi and Syrian locals speaking in Arabic or recently arrived foreigners from abroad. Regardless of the individual, it seems that the group has decided that its message will be better received if those conveying it look more like the intended target audience. This gives the whole Islamic State enterprise an aura of inclusiveness and breadth. In other words, the group has recognized that it is not just the content of the message that matters, but the messenger himself.

Counter-messaging efforts often ignore this pattern, instead focusing on the messages and speeches of high-level politicians or religious figures. To be fair, some efforts have been made to collect stories of defected Islamic State fighters and use those in an attempt to counter the group's message, but such efforts need to be made in conjunction with other lessons pointed out in this report to maximize distribution and consumption.

Third, while the relatability of the messenger and diverse nature of the content of messages certainly play a role in explaining why the group has a broader appeal than jihadist groups of the past, these factors do not necessarily explain how this broad appeal has actually been parlayed to reach a broader audience. The distribution techniques that the group has relied on, as discussed above, have helped. However, another example of the group's desire and efforts to reach a broader audience are the number of languages in which it publishes official releases. This information is shown in Figure 26, which shows a breakdown of the different languages (other than Arabic) in which official Islamic State media releases have appeared.[100] It is important to note that Arabic was the dominate language used in official releases, accounting for 97% of all language uses, or slightly more than 9,100 times. Also, there were ten languages excluded from the chart that each had one product in the dataset.[101]

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100 The count used here reflects the number of times a language was used in a product, whether through subtitles or the actual language in which the product was produced. If the spoken language of a product was Arabic and the subtitles were in English, this was reflected in each language category. Thus, the numbers presented in Figure 26 are not the number of products that appeared in any given language, but the number of times a language was used in official media products.

101 The languages with one product each in the dataset are as follows: Albanian, Bambara, Dutch, Farsi, Kyrgyz, Mauritanian Creole, Persian, Somali, Tajik, Tubu.

Figure 26: Official Islamic State Visual Product Languages, January 2015 – August 2016
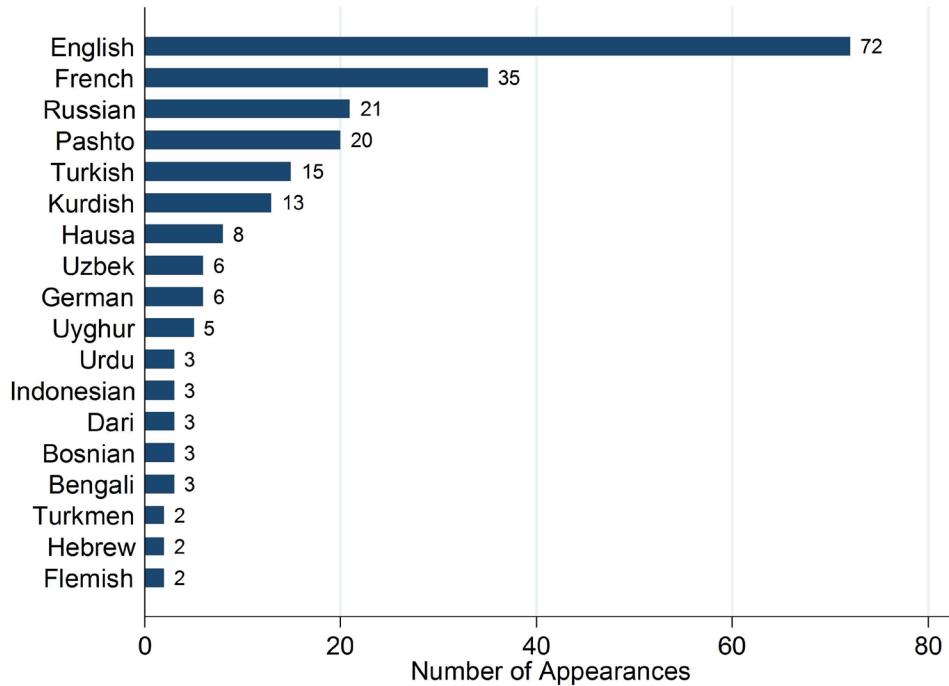
Three insights emerge from Figure 26. First, it is important to note that the group itself has made a consistent effort in publishing official products in different languages. Islamic State products in the dataset appear in 28 languages. This is also the case in other ways not captured by the study. For instance, although not a part of this study, the group's well-known English language magazine, Dabiq, is matched by similar publications in Turkish, French, and Russian. Second, the overwhelming majority of Islamic State content in the dataset appears in Arabic. This may, at first glance, seem to undercut the group's ability to appeal to potential supporters who do not speak Arabic. However, because most of the group's widely publicized materials are visual in nature, this allows non-Arabic audiences to still consume the group's products even if they cannot understand the language in which it is conveyed. Third, the group has managed to use supporters and sympathizers worldwide as a force multiplier for translating official products into many different languages. While the Islamic State releases most of its products in Arabic, it also is able to rely on a network of sympathetic individuals and groups around the world who work to translate official releases into many languages. These individuals act as a force multiplier to the group's own internal capability to translate and distribute products.

Each of these points offers a criticism and path forward for counter-messaging efforts. Coordinated action to create products in many different languages is key, as is relying on visual content that can be easily consumed regardless of literacy or language capability. And, to repeat the oft-used phrase from General McChrystal, "it takes a network to defeat a network." The Islamic State has not just created a media *organization* but a media *network* that relies on a geographically diverse group of individuals around the world to push out its messages. Defeating it is not the job of any one organization or country, and it will likely require a multilateral effort.

Conclusion

There is no question that the Islamic State as an organization is changing and adapting. This change, broadly speaking, is the result of both counterterrorism pressure as well as the organization's own evaluation of its processes, policies, and products. However, despite whatever changes it might undergo, the Islamic State has organizational tendencies, weaknesses, and strengths. The goal of this report was to provide insight into the Islamic State's media arm by examining two types of primary source documents. The first was an analysis of 14 previously declassified documents written during the group's early existence in Iraq from 2003-2011. The second type of primary source document was a large-n dataset of Islamic State official media releases collected by the CTC for this report.

Although the 14 declassified documents are only a small piece of the media bureau's overall historical organization and activities, they give important insight into how the media organization thought about its role within the larger terrorist organization. Despite the small number of documents, taken together these declassified documents demonstrate that during an earlier time period, the Islamic State's predecessor organizations (AQI/ISI) were clearly focused on utilizing the media organization to appeal to the people and keep track of their burgeoning activities. The documents also show that AQI/ISI were savvy to operational security concerns, but in some cases struggled to balance these concerns with the need for a bureaucratized organization that could better appeal to the public. Finally, one of the most salient points that arose from these documents was of an organization that saw the media as an important area of emphasis. AQI/ISI clearly adapted its practices to better position itself in this regard.

After examining the declassified documents, the report shifted to a discussion of the present-day media activities of the Islamic State. The Islamic State, building upon its earlier organization, has maintained centralized control while also expanding into the social media space and new geographic areas of operation. While widely credited as successful in the media realm, the Islamic State's media machine has also experienced setbacks. These setbacks suggest that the efficacy of the media arm is not a foregone conclusion, but a subjective reality contingent on a wide array of other factors such as counterterrorism pressure, battlefield conditions, and personnel availability.

The report then transitioned to the analysis of over 9,000 visual propaganda releases of the Islamic State's various official media bureaus. This analysis showed that the number of releases has declined since the late summer of 2015, which can be seen as the high-water mark of the group's public online distribution activities. Despite this decline, most likely a function of the increased amount of counterterrorism pressure faced by the group across the territory it claims for its caliphate, the group still produces a sizable number of monthly propaganda releases. The analysis also demonstrated that though a plurality of its releases show military activities such as fighting and other battlefield activities, the group has attempted to portray a diverse amount of themes related to its governance and religious activities. In other words, this report pushes back against the idea that the group's appeal is solely based on violence. The diverse number of themes likely speaks to a wider audience and explains how the group has been able to attract such a diverse group of fighters and supporters.

The Islamic State portrays itself as a functioning, expanding caliphate. What is important to note is that this portrayal is not consistent across the entire caliphate. By geo-tagging as many of the visual propaganda products of the group as possible, the report showed that the unified caliphate is actually a grouping of a number of geographic locations that function (or are portrayed to function) very differently from one another in terms of the type and amount of military activity, governance available, etc. This fractured image is likely not the one that the group would choose to show if it had the underlying functioning state that it claims to have in each of these areas.

Finally, the analysis section of the report concluded by examining the online distribution practices of the group, as well as some of the successes and shortcomings of nations and private companies

in trying to limit the group's ability to distribute its media products. Among the successes is the fact that posts on anonymous file-sharing sites and distribution accounts on Twitter are being removed in greater numbers and quicker than ever before. However, two main challenges persist. First, the media operatives of the group continue to evolve and adapt their standard operating procedures to maintain an online presence. The availability of more secure and anonymous applications such as Telegram allow the group to continue its media activities, albeit with less public visibility. Second, by the time most accounts or content are taken down, the damage has already been done. The account has distributed a product that has already been seen by a sizable number of individuals. These challenges are not insurmountable, but require that nations and companies engaged in the fight against the Islamic State continue to learn and evolve in their counterterrorism methodologies as well.

This report is not without its limitations. The sources utilized for this paper, official visual media releases of the Islamic State, are not the only sources of data about the Islamic State's media activities. Increasingly, the group is relying on anonymous messaging services and posting information to the dark web. Future analyses may profitably compare the content of these anonymous networks and the practices of those who run them to what has been found in this report. Anecdotal evidence, not explored here, suggests that there may be a fair amount of overlap between these two realms.

In addition, this paper has not given insight into a critical component of understanding the efficacy of the Islamic State's media success. This component is that of the audience of Islamic State media products. Although practitioners and policymakers broadly assume to know which products are attractive to potential sympathizers, to the author's knowledge no rigorous work has shown that individuals focus on certain types of products as opposed to others. This is certainly an area that requires additional research to better prevent and respond to the continued use of propaganda by extremist organizations such as the Islamic State.

Despite these limitations, this report has leveraged a combination of enemy sources, whether declassified or obtained from open-sources online, to illuminate some of the successes and challenges faced by the organization in the media realm. One of the current debates among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers regarding the Islamic State is what will happen to the organization if deprived of its territory in Iraq and Syria. Questions of interest include how many people will staff the organization, what the structure will look like, and whether such an evolution eventually results in a greater threat to nations supporting the fight against the Islamic State. There is no consensus answer to these types of questions. However, what this report has shown is that, whatever the organization eventually looks like, it will have at its disposal a well-evolved and developed knowledge of how to appeal to potential supporters through its use of the media. It will continue to leverage propaganda products to terrorize and threaten those who oppose its worldview. Given the certainty of the group's continued development and use of its media capabilities, investing in the capability to more fully engage the Islamic State and other organizations on the media battlefield is not just an important idea, but a critical part of diminishing the threat posed by these groups.

Appendix

Islamic State of Iraq Media Organizational Chart, December 2008

Translated and original documents available on subsequent 2 pages

Top Secret (TN: ISI Designation)

Media Committee's representative (full time)
The deputy of Media Committee's representative (Full time)

Organizational Chart of the Media Committee in the Operation Sectors

Internet and Technology Section

A mujahid with expertise in this field should be elected, and he should a full time [employee]

| 3rd Brigade | 2nd Brigade | 1st Brigade |

Each brigade elects one mujahid or more who live in various regions and have basic expertise in computer and internet. Besides their duties, they should carry out the duties of the section in the sector.

Preaching and Guiding Section

The commander of the sector [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] sector's headquarters and the brigade commanders

| 3rd Brigade | 2nd Brigade | 1st Brigade |

The commander of the brigade [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] brigade's headquarters and the regimental commanders

| 3rd Regiment | 2nd Regiment | 1st Regiment |

The commander of the regiment [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] regiment's headquarters and the company commanders

| Company A | 3rd Company | 2nd Company | 1st Company |

The commander of the company [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] company's headquarters and the platoon commanders

| 3rd Platoon | 2nd Platoon | 1st Platoon |

The commander of the platoon [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] platoon's headquarters and the squad commanders. The squad commanders [should be] in charge of educating the members of their squads

Commanders can use the help of shari'a men in the duties of educating, preaching, and guiding

Filming and Documenting Section

The deputy of the committee's representative (full or part time) should be in charge of the section

| Documenting Committee in the Sector | Filming Committee in the Sector |

The head of the committee (Part time)

| 3rd Brigade's Documenting Committee | 2nd Brigade's Documenting Committee | 1st Brigade's Documenting Committee |

The brigade's clerk [should be] the head of the committee

| 3rd Regiment's Documenting Committee | 2nd Regiment's Documenting Committee | 1st Regiment's Documenting Committee |

The regiment's clerk [should be] the head of the committee

| 3rd Company's Clerk | 2nd Company's Clerk | 1st Company's Clerk | Company A's Clerk |

R.'A.S. [it could be an acronym for: company's staff sergeant] should be in charge of all the documentation of the company. At least one clerk should be elected and trained in each platoon, and prepare a trained substitute for him

The head of the committee (Part time)

| 3rd Brigade's Filming Committee | 2nd Brigade's Filming Committee | 1st Brigade's Filming Committee |

The head of the brigade's committee

| 3rd Regiment's Filming Committee | 2nd Regiment's Filming Committee | 1st Regiment's Filming Committee |

The head of the regiment's committee

| 3rd Company's Photographer | 2nd Company's Photographer | 1st Company's Photographer | Company A's Photographer |

At least one photographer should be elected and trained in each platoon, and prepare a trained substitute for him

Media Section

The representative of the committee [should be] in charge of the section

| 3rd Brigade's Media | 2nd Brigade's Media | 1st Brigade's Media |

The deputy of the brigade's commander [should be] in charge of the brigade's media

| 3rd Regiment's Media | 2nd Regiment's Media | 1st Regiment's Media |

The deputy of the regiment's commander [should be] in charge of the brigade's media

| 3rd Company's members | 2nd Company's members | 1st Company's members | Company A's Members |

The company's commander [should be] in charge of the media and distribution of the company's releases). He should assign the duties of distributing releases, magazines, and other [materials] to any of the company's members based on a previously studied plan

سري للغاية شخصي

هيكلية هيئة الإعلام في قواطع العمليات

ممثل هيئة الإعلام في القاطع (مسؤول فرع) معاون ممثل هيئة الإعلام في القواطع الكبيرة (مسؤول)

| قسم الإعلام | قسم التصوير والتوثيق | قسم الوعظ والإرشاد | قسم التقنيات والإنترنيت |

قسم الإعلام — ممثل الهيئة مسؤول القسم
- إعلام اللواء 1
- إعلام اللواء 2
- إعلام اللواء 3

معاون أمر اللواء مسؤول إعلام اللواء
- إعلام الفوج 1
- إعلام الفوج 2
- إعلام الفوج 3

معاون أمر الفوج مسؤول إعلام الفوج
- منتسبي سرية 1
- منتسبي سرية 2
- منتسبي سرية 3

أمر السرية مسؤول عن الإعلام والتوزيع أي من منتسبي السرية وتكلف مدورية للتنفيذ والإحداث والمدورة مبنياً على خطة

قسم التصوير والتوثيق — معاون ممثل الهيئة مسؤول عن القسم (المقر أو المعسكر)

لجنة التصوير في القاطع — رئيس اللجنة (مكلف)
- لجنة تصوير اللواء 1
- لجنة تصوير اللواء 2
- لجنة تصوير اللواء 3

رئيس لجنة
- لجنة تصوير فوج 1
- لجنة تصوير فوج 2
- لجنة تصوير فوج 3

رئيس لجنة الفوج
- مصوري سرية 1
- مصوري سرية 2
- مصوري سرية 3

يتم انتخاب وتدريب مصور واحد بديل في كل فصيل على الأقل ونخبة بينها المدرب

لجنة التوثيق في القاطع — رئيس اللجنة (مكلف)
- لجنة توثيق اللواء 1
- لجنة توثيق اللواء 2
- لجنة توثيق اللواء 3

كاتب اللواء رئيس اللجنة
- لجنة توثيق فوج 1
- لجنة توثيق فوج 2
- لجنة توثيق فوج 3

كاتب الفوج رئيس اللجنة
- موثقي سرية 1
- موثقي سرية 2
- موثقي سرية 3

سري للغاية شخصي (2-2)

يتم انتخاب وتدريب موثق واحد في كل فصيل على الأقل ونخبة بديل ع ج من مسؤول عن جميع التوثيق في السرية

قسم الوعظ والإرشاد — أمر القاطع مسؤول وأمراء الأفواج
- اللواء 1
- اللواء 2
- اللواء 3

أمر اللواء وأمراء الأفواج مسؤول تثقيف مقر القاطع
- فوج 1
- فوج 2
- فوج 3

أمر الفوج مسؤول وأمراء السرايا
- مدرس 1
- مدرس 2
- مدرس 3
- سرية 1

أمر السرية مسؤول تثقيف مقر السرية وأمراء الفصائل مسؤولين عن تثقيف أفراد الفصائل
- فصيل 1
- فصيل 2
- فصيل 3

يمكن للمدرس التثقيف والوعظ طلبة العلم الشرعي

قسم التقنيات والإنترنيت
- اللواء 1
- اللواء 2
- اللواء 3

يتم انتخاب مجاهد في خبرة في هذا المجال ويكون مثقف فني

نخبة كل لواء مجاهد في مناطق مختلفة ذي خبرة أساسية في مجال التقنيات والإنترنيت يعمل لصالح جميع التنفيذ