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# Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda

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### Key Points

- *Islamic State (IS) has a sophisticated and effective communication strategy that uses online media tools to disseminate its multidimensional propaganda. It has populated social media platforms and has attracted a global network of supporters that articulate, magnify and circulate its violent extremist messages worldwide.*
- *IS is strategically recruiting young men and women worldwide, using Internet sites, online magazines but mostly social media tools, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and AskFM.*
- *The online Internet frontline needs to be better defended. Censorship and removal of extremist content is ineffective. Current government sponsored counter-narrative and counter-extremism efforts are largely inadequate in suppressing IS extremist ideology from spreading on and offline.*
- *Throughout the world there is a need to better address the roots of radicalisation, which is being driven by the ideological appeal currently cultivated by extremist groups online.*
- *It is important to build and extend international cooperation to support the creation and dissemination of credible content and positive alternatives to counter extremist narratives on- and off-line.*

### Introduction

This year, the world became fixated on the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)<sup>1</sup>. Most recently, the organisation has given itself the name Islamic State (IS) -- this paper will refer to the organisation as IS. IS is a linear descendant of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's "the Organisation of Jihad's Base in the Country of the Two Rivers", which was

commonly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) formed in 2004 to fight the American invasion of Iraq. In the last year, IS strategic military campaign has taken over large swaths of Syria and Iraq at lightening speeds, taking its opponents by surprise. Its political and ideological campaign is equally aggressive; it has taken on the Internet and social media by storm. IS has forced a sea change in the way we understand modern terrorism. IS has not eclipsed Al Qaeda, which is still very relevant and dangerous, but it has physically broken away from Al Qaeda's leadership. IS continues to profit from the roots of Al Qaeda's already highly developed communications strategy.

<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is also sometimes translated as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is also known by the Arabic term Da'ish, which is based on the Arabic letters that form the acronym of the group's pre-June Arabic name, al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al- 'Iraq wa al-Sham.

It builds upon a decade of experience, in its ability to intimidate, radicalise, recruit, train and extort.

IS is different from other terrorist organisations of the past for a multitude of reasons: first, its construction of a pseudo state, an “Islamic Caliphate”; second, its ability to sustain itself economically by amassing greater riches than any terrorist organisation in the past; third, its globalist and apocalyptic ambitions and its heady millenarianism; and finally, its powerful social media campaign, that has a global following, which has to date attracted over 18,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this paper is to analyse the scale of the IS Internet campaign. It will describe how IS has unleashed cyber jihad and how best to confront this extremely innovative form of terror. Finally, the paper will outline some of the best practices in meeting this new challenge on and offline.

## The scope of the challenge

Osama bin Laden was the first terrorist to embrace Internet technology as early as 1997. Ayman al Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda, stated in 2005, “...we are in a battle and more than half of this battle is in the media. In this media battle we are in the race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.” Al Qaeda affiliates, especially Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with its Inspire magazine<sup>3</sup> and Al Shabaab with its use of Twitter, closely followed in their footsteps.

Today, IS has brought cyber jihad to a whole new level, evolving from static websites, chat forums, and online magazines to making efficient use of today’s interactive and fast-paced social media platforms. While Al Qaeda and its affiliates see the Internet as a place to disseminate information and meet anonymously, IS followers are loud and noisy, tweeting, streaming and Instagramming their exploits. Terror is now being transmitted across the globe in real time. IS is an active user of blogs, instant messaging, video sharing sites, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Tumblr and Ask FM. Their media campaign underscores that terror can be streamed and sold with graphic images, audio messages, and music. This highly successful campaign is an effective tool for psychological operations and for recruitment. Social media is the most popular medium for young people to communicate today. It is trendy, interactive, and is populated by a very young and sometimes naïve

demographic. The IS crisis has become one of the most documented and socially-mediated conflicts in history.

The role of the Internet as a driving force in terror attacks was dramatically brought to light by the Tsarnaev brothers who planted bombs at the Boston marathon in April 2013 and Roshonara Choudry, the university student who stabbed Stephen Timms, a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom with a kitchen knife in November 2010. Both the Tsarnaev brothers and Choudry were radicalised by online content which inspired them to conduct acts of terror. Both viewed websites and audio-visual sermons of radical preachers such as US-Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki<sup>4</sup>, leader of AQAP, who inspired over a dozen people in the US, UK, Canada and France to conduct lone wolf terrorist attacks in their own countries.<sup>5</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki also inspired and helped fund the Kouachi brothers who attacked the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris. Recent attacks against New York police officers, the Canadian National War Memorial soldier and the House of Parliament appear to have been committed by self-radicalised individuals following IS.

As many studies have shown, self-radicalisation and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world is still an anomaly. However, the Internet can facilitate, intensify and accelerate the process of radicalisation. Open forums and chat rooms can act as an engine of transformation because they can help validate existing ideas and facilitate support from like-minded people. Extremists can amplify their message in real time and with global reach. Today, jihadist and extremist sympathisers freely post videos, tutorials, and religious propaganda with the aim to recruit, cultivate and solidify online partisanship and brotherhood in order to conduct terror. Most of today’s IS followers grew up with the Internet, and they live and socialise online. When online, terrorist sanctioners help normalise risky behaviours and act as an echo chamber in which extreme ideas are accepted and encouraged.

Several reports on the process of radicalisation have shown that in general extremist content online does not recruit and radicalise in a vacuum; rather it tends to complement offline efforts to radicalise and it enhances the ability of recruiters and self-identified radicals to accelerate the process to extremism and ultimately terror. Today, a 20-year-old living in any city in the world who is thinking of going to Syria can go online and find a peer to talk about Jihad. If

<sup>2</sup> According to the The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (February 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Inspire magazine gives instructions how to build a bomb in the kitchen of your mom. The instructions were used by the Tsarnaev brothers to build the bombs used in the Boston marathon bomb attack.

<sup>4</sup> Anwar al-Awlaki was killed by an American drone strike in Yemen in 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Fort Hood shooter, Time Square bomber, Underwear bomber, Charlie Hebdo shooters.

they are interested in the path they need to take to fight jihad, they can engage on AskFM and be linked to offline resources that can finalise their entry into jihadism.

Farah Pandith, a former Special Representative to Muslim Communities at the US Department of State, who has traveled to more than 80 countries meeting with thousands of Muslims has argued that a growing number of Muslims today are suffering from a profound identity crisis unlike any experienced in modern Islamic history. She argues that since 11 September 2001, Muslim millennials have grown up with the word "Islam" or "Muslim" on the front pages of newspapers and have suffered intense scrutiny because of their religion. This has driven some of them to look inward, forcing them to question what it means to be a modern Muslim and finding a response to what constitutes the difference between culture and religion. In the past, a close-knit family circle within a larger community could offer a response. In today's insular communities there is less religious support, leading some young Muslims to turn to the Internet for answers, where they encounter recruiters and "religious" sanctioners who offer specifically tailored answers that are appealing and offer real meaning to this troubled generation.

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Following the Arab Spring, anger and injustice are becoming a daily experience within the ongoing conflicts across the Middle East. The Middle East has become more fragmented, and rulers and their opposition are more violent and driven by more extremist ideologies than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Instability and war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen have bred a generation of youth who have little political power, negative development indices with no real job prospects and limited futures. Recruiters are targeting young vulnerable men in environments such as prisons, ghettos, and refugee camps. They are gaining followers from ex-combatants from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Libya and Syria. The dreams that the Arab Spring inspired were left unfulfilled. There is no shortage of angry young men.<sup>6</sup> IS is thriving in this environment teeming with post-revolutionary hostilities, regional divisions, ethnic and sectarian conflict, religious intolerance, conspiracy theories and economic, social and political marginalisation.

In the West, IS is targeting people from diasporas who have never acclimated and who have been exposed to Islamophobia. They are offering brotherhood, compensation for work, and a caliphate. Men are

offered a life of purpose and adventure, women are promised marriage and romance.

While the barbarity exhibited by IS is not new, there are some striking strategic differences with other terrorist organisations of the past. First, while other terrorist organisations have taken over large swaths of land – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen -- they continue to operate more or less covertly. IS is distinctly different. On 28 June 2014, the first day of Ramadan, the spokesperson for IS, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, declared the creation of the Islamic caliphate. On 4 July, to further solidify IS propaganda, the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, calling himself "Caliph Ibrahim" gave a surprise sermon in Mosul. He set himself up as a ruler "by order of God" designating himself the "commander of the faithful," and "caliph-at-large." Pictures of him declaring the caliphate appeared on Twitter before the video of his full speech was uploaded on YouTube, which guided most major international news networks to cover the story.

Al-Baghdadi's hubris has paid off: the claim of being leader of the "Islamic caliphate" and asking Muslims to emigrate has become one of the most important drivers of recruitment for IS both from the Middle East and from the West. The declaration of the creation of an "Islamic caliphate", the first real jihadist state, has laid claim to a continuous territory of approximately 33,670 km<sup>2</sup> that reaches across Syria and Iraq. This is important because Muslim migrants have traditionally been forced to emigrate to the West because only two countries out of the 57 Muslim majority countries, Turkey and Malaysia, offer a formal path for immigrants to become naturalised citizens. IS promises Muslim immigrants "citizenship" immediately upon arrival and issues "caliphate passports."

By creating a "caliphate" IS presents itself as the vanguard of militant Islam, the only legitimate jihadist movement. This comes as a direct challenge to the legitimacy of Al Qaeda whose ultimate goal is also to create a caliphate. While not all militant Islamic extremists are supporting IS, its rhetoric has become both pervasive and persuasive. IS regularly reports the pledges of Baya'a (allegiance) from jihadists across the Muslim world. In July 2014, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram both swore allegiance to IS. In August 2014, the Egyptian terrorist group Ansar Baytal-Maqdis followed suit. A day after declaring the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi referred to India as one of the several countries where the rights of Muslims were violated, referring to atrocities against Muslims in Kashmir. He thus geographically extended the reach of the new caliphate as one that "gathered

<sup>6</sup> The demographics in the region portray that there is large number of male youths in the region see: <http://www.businessinsider.com/young-males-may-undermine-political-stability-2014-7?IR=T>

the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami (Syrian/Lebanese), Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghrabi (North African), American, French, German and Austrian.”<sup>7</sup> He also stated later, “therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The earth is Allah’s.”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to IS, the Al Qaeda network seems sclerotic. Its leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, was slow to react about the new caliphate, remaining silent until early September 2014 when he announced the establishment of a new franchise of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Also, in the first issue of Al Qaeda’s most recent publication, *Resurgence*, there is no mention of the new caliphate. While Al Qaeda is grappling with how to deal with this crisis, IS is working hard to legitimise their new pseudo state by setting up Shura councils and courts, designing school curricula and immigration policies, increasing security, banking, policing, establishing a currency and enforcing taxation. Within the caliphate, religion is also exploited both as a tool for indoctrination and motivation for recruitment and as a means of control once people have arrived. When capturing territory, IS underpins its authority at both state and provincial levels with Sharia departments, courts, and a male and female religious police that ensure that Sharia rules are not broken. In a propaganda film entitled, *A State, not a Group!*, it lists 16 IS institutions that range from “national territory”, “consumer protection”, to “public health.” During the film, the caliphate’s unofficial anthem plays in the background with lyrics that include: “We live a life in safety and peace / our state is based on Islam / and although it conducts jihad against its enemies / it regulates people’s affairs / with love and patience.”

## Production of content

The IS media campaign is overseen by Abu Amr al Shami, a Syrian born in Saudi Arabia, who was previously IS leader in Aleppo. The media effort also acts as liaison with religious leaders in the region and abroad. The key strength of IS has been the ability to decentralise its social media which has allowed its supporters to operate their own ministries of information. Yet while IS crowd sources its content, it is highly effective in using this decentralised content production for promoting a unified message, driven by its central organs.

To promote recruitment and propaganda, IS produced two issues of a magazine called *Dabiq* in July 2014. *Dabiq* is meant for a global audience,

and it was released in several different languages including Arabic, English, French, German and Russian. The magazine has three objectives spanning religious, military and political dimensions. The first issue of *Dabiq* calls on people to join the *Khilafah* (caliphate).<sup>9</sup> The title of the publication itself is meant to send a message. *Dabiq* refers to a small town near Aleppo in northern Syria, which is cited in a hadith describing events of the *Malahim* (Armageddon) where the greatest battle between Muslims and the crusaders (the West/the enemy) takes place. In the first two issues, the magazine’s contents are preceded by a quote from Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, saying that, “the spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify — by Allah’s permission — until it burns the crusader armies in *Dabiq*.”

In the second issue of *Dabiq*, which is entitled, “The Flood” a picture of Noah’s Ark is shown and an article within describes their dichotic outlook stating “it’s either the Islamic State or the Flood.” The self-proclaimed “Islamic Caliphate” is the “ark” while the rest of the Earth will soon be swept away. Alongside its religious and theological constructs, *Dabiq* is also very powerful in describing military exploits, these are meant to help in recruitment. It portrays IS’s military success and mutilation of the opposition by portraying corpses of “infidels.” The second issue of *Dabiq* also tells the story of the Islamic State’s success in gaining the support of Syrian tribes and reports on the success of recent military operations by graphically portraying its worst excesses and atrocities committed by its enemies. IS’s ferocity and unrestricted behaviour in the battle field is possibly their most powerful psychological tool in attracting fighters, and it is also a psychological tool to weaken and demoralise their enemies. IS has been strong in projecting that it is the “winning brand”, convincing young men and women that they are on the winning team.

The third issue of *Dabiq*, entitled “A Call to *Hirjah* (religious migration),” refers to the journey Mohammad made to Mecca as a prophet and it calls Muslims to “hasten to make *Hijra*...before the window of opportunity for those in the West closes.” The magazine is also meant to attract all types of migrants to the caliphate. As such, the magazine calls for scholars, judges and people with military, administrative and other expertise as well as physicians and engineers to come serve in the Islamic State. The magazine also outlines its future political strategy and indentifies the two holy cities in Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem as future targets.

<sup>7</sup> 5 July, 2014 Speech by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Mosul available at: [http://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3\\_22aw/english.pdf](http://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3_22aw/english.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2014), “A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan,” (Al-Hayat Media Center).



# A CALL TO ALL MUSLIM DOCTORS, ENGI- NEERS, SCHOLARS, AND SPECIALISTS

**Amirul-Mu'minin said: "We make a special call to the scholars, fuqaha' (experts in Islamic jurisprudence), and callers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields.**

**We call them and remind them to fear Allah, for their emigration is wajib 'ayni (an individual obligation), so that they can answer the dire need of the Muslims for them. People are ignorant of their religion and they thirst for those who can teach them and help them understand it.**

**So fear Allah, O slaves of Allah."**

## Keyboard warriors

The IS enthusiastically embraces web forums and social media to create a wireless caliphate—fighting enemies on the ground as well as on the web. They are effective keyboard warriors, tweeting terror before their boots even hit the ground. While chat rooms and discussion forums were widely used in early 2000, many extremist forums now take place within the dark web where membership, authentication and passwords are required. Pathways to chat rooms can be found on social media accounts of extremist groups and their supporters. Younger audiences are more likely to arrive at forums through social media. Chats are now embedded within most Internet-based mediums; this is most likely where 'at-risk youth' would come across Islamist narratives without previous exposure. Most social media platforms also allow for users to post comments which can also become a space for extremist dialogue.

Al-Furqan is the official media wing of IS, posting messages from the leadership and retweeting

material from other IS media sites. The global reach of social media cannot be underestimated. Facebook had 829 million daily active users on average in June 2014. It has become a decentralised hub for information distribution and a means to show support; numerous groups, individuals and pages can be present under identical or similar names. Facebook pages are being used by foreign fighters in Syria to recruit their friends to join Jihad.

Twitter is also used widely by IS. In 2014 Twitter had over 284 million registered users, posting 500 million tweets per day and supports over 35 languages. Islamists are using Twitter to engage in real-time discussions to organise, provoke and debate. Twitter feeds of popular Islamist groups are written in perfect English, sometimes being paired with social feeds in other languages and other times messages are bilingual to reach a wider audience. IS distinguishes itself from other groups on Twitter through hashtags that identify them as an IS production and allow them to hijack trending topics. For example, during the football world cup in 2014, hashtags like "#Brazil\_2014" were attached to IS propaganda as part of a strategy that allowed them to tap into new audiences. IS has also used such hashtags as "#AllEyesOnISIS", and most recently it designed a special hashtag "#CalamityWillBefallUS" which it used to threaten the US led coalition campaign to bomb IS troops in Iraq. IS uses "twitter bombs" which redirect trending hashtags to Twitter websites and material related to the Islamic State. In the Fall of 2014, there were at least 45,000 Twitter accounts used by IS supporters, 73% had an average of 500 followers, others had up to 50,000 followers.<sup>10</sup> The Al-Battar Media Group, with 32,000 followers, works constantly to mobilise Twitter members to support IS by translating IS releases through independent media wings.

IS has proven capable of complex coding, even creating IS apps such as a Twitter app called the 'Dawn of Glad Tidings', which was available through the Google Play Store. The app allows a centralised body to post tweets from the subscriber's personal Twitter account, synchronising them with other IS supporters without the user having to do anything, in an effort to get IS topics trending. Tweets were dictated by an IS social media operation and included links, hashtags and images and, to avoid triggering spam detecting algorithms, the centralised tweets were spaced out over time.<sup>11</sup> Jihadists practiced "live tweeting" during fighting, reporting injuries, deaths and battle outcomes in raw uncensored prose.

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Berger (27 January, 2015), "The Evolution of Terrorist Propaganda: The Paris Attack and Social Media," Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Berger (2014), 'How IS games Twitter', The Atlantic, (16-06).

There are several different categories of IS Twitter accounts: official news accounts, unofficial news accounts, regional accounts and individuals giving running commentary of events in Syria and Iraq. IS has become the world's first social media war where there are some individuals who are tweeting almost 200 times a day and whose tweets are attracting tens of thousands of followers.

YouTube attracts globally upwards of 1 billion unique users each month; over 6 billion hours of video are watched each month, 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute. A study prepared by the first European Conference on Intelligence and Security Informatics in 2008 demonstrated that 50% of jihadist videos contained 'martyr hailing' content or praise of martyrdom, an estimated 30% contained footage of suicide bombings and another significant percentage contained education content about Islam and the call to martyrdom. It is estimated that videos are viewed by users between the ages of 18-24. While some videos gain little attention, others go viral. YouTube is attractive, it's visual, there is no need for Arabic language proficiency or high levels of Internet literacy and it lends itself easily to copying and dissemination (e-mail links, but also copy on CDs, DVDs, mobile phones).

6 The al-Hayat Media Center is the IS wing which produces video content. In July 2014, al-Hayat distributed 11 releases in English (a new release every 3 days), which were shot in high definition with proficient editing and consistent branding. Even after fighters die, they are kept alive by continuous flooding of images, videos and statements. Before IS launched its attack on Mosul, a city of 1.5 million people, it released a film called "The Clanging of the Swords IV" with slow motion graphics and aerial drone footage, meant to demoralise Iraqi soldiers before the shooting started. For some soldiers the approaching black banners were enough to make them desert and flee. The video was uploaded on justpaste.it which led to others posting it to several accounts on YouTube. On 18 July, one such YouTube account recorded 18,034 views within a time frame of 7 hours. Al Hayet Media Centre was responsible for posting almost 40,000 tweets in a single day as IS marched into Mosul.

Al-Hayat Media Center also produces material aimed at recruiting. It produces a HD propaganda series known as "Mujatweets," which portrays daily life, a kind of reality show from fighters in Iraq and Syria, and testimonials from Western fighters who are already there. A recent post from a Canadian fighter looked more like a travel advertisement than a call to war.<sup>12</sup> The IS message is also spread by unofficial

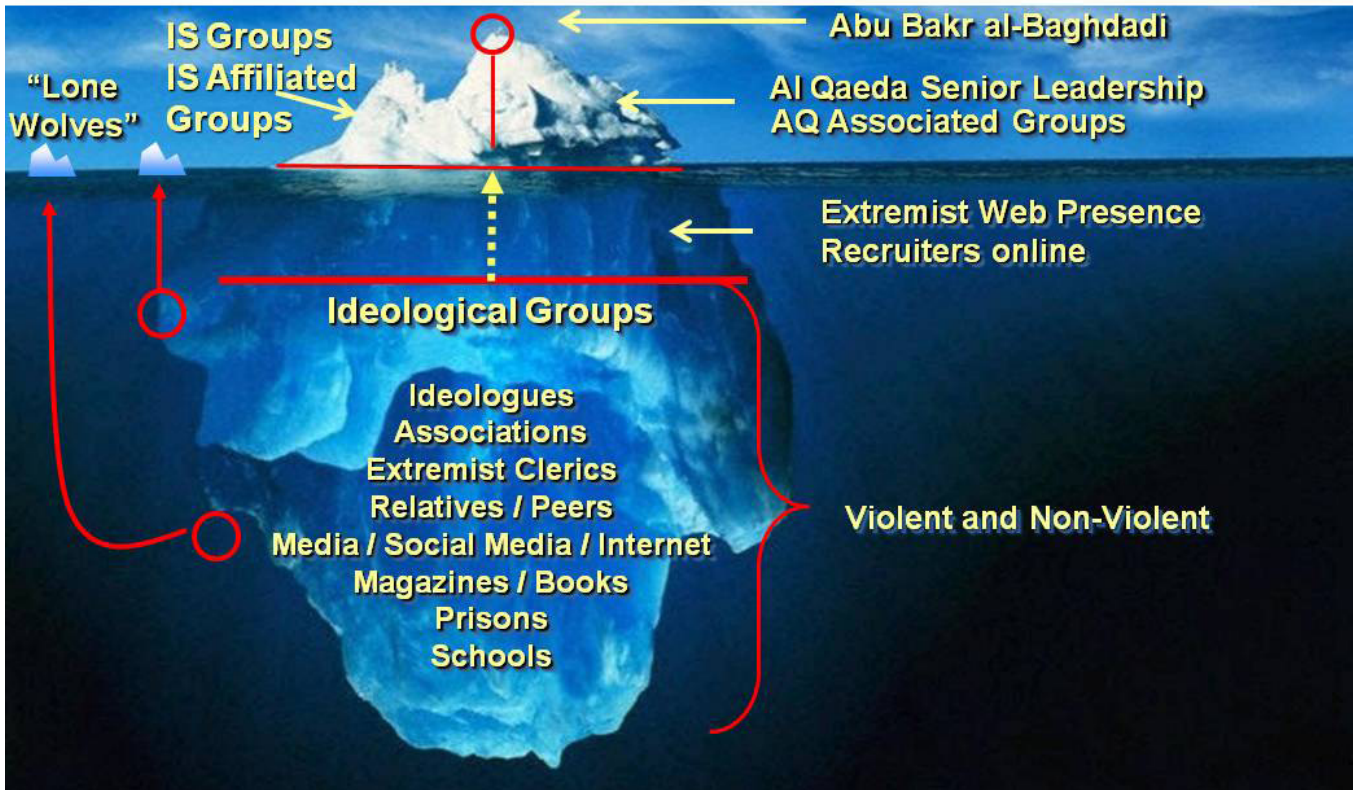
global activists who help circulate propaganda, known as tweeps, fanboys and fangirls. In September 2014, footage of an IS style videogame emerged. In the trailer for this fanboy-produced game based on the popular Grand Theft Auto series, players are seen dressed as IS fighters and tasked with shooting police and blowing up military targets.

The Islamic State terrorist group has recently established a new media wing, the Zora Foundation, dedicated to luring women. Since the Zora Foundation began posting videos and tweets in October 2014, it has gained over 3,200 followers. IS targets women much in the same way as they target men, identifying those who may have lost their way and are seeking a sense of belonging. Think tanks monitoring numbers estimate that between 200-300 women have joined the war so far. A quarter of those women have traveled with members of their families – husbands, brothers, and fathers. They are drawn to the idea of supporting their "brother fighters" and having "jihadist children". Some are lured into believing they are part of a humanitarian mission, some are offered financial incentive. If their husband dies they will be given adulation as the wife of a martyr. The largest number of female Western recruits have come from France, Britain and Germany, but others have joined from Austria, Belgium and Spain.

Twitter is a favorite media tool of the so-called Umm network, referring to an honorific name in Arabic used to address women as a mother figure. These websites are mixed with ideological indoctrination coupled with seduction for those who are seeking to marry. The content in the Umm accounts are meant to make extremism a normal lifestyle decision. Pictures of kittens and designer footwear are tweeted as well as extremist rhetoric and descriptions of the "good life" in Syria. The network gives nursing and cooking advice for those wives who want to keep their jihadists happy, and it provides information on Shariah, weapons use, and social media tools so that they can contribute to the IS recruitment campaigns. Pictures of children dressed in IS fan gear much as children are dressed in favorite football team jerseys in Europe are tweeted around the globe. Since late 2014, there has been an increasing epidemic of girls being lured into jihad. The majority are thought to be between 16 and 24 years old, and there are reports of girls as young as 13. Women are told of their importance in populating the new caliphate, and they offer a kind of stability and normality. IS propaganda is framed in such a way that appears to give women and girls a sense of empowerment and agency. The propaganda omits the brutal realities there is no mention of public stoning, harsh dress code, and constrained material hardship.

12 "Al-Ghuraba - The Chosen Few of Different Lands - Abu Muslim from Canada" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGy1o6Ql31o>

# The Extremist Phenomenon



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In early 2014, IS created two women-only policing units in Raqqa who assisted at border check points. So far, women have not been engaged in any fighting; their role is subjected to strict medieval interpretations of Sharia law with clear cut roles of being a wife and mother. IS has opened a marriage bureau for women who want to marry jihadist fighters.<sup>13</sup> However, the reality on the ground appears to be much different. Aki Peritz and Tara Muller have reported that fighters were “committing horrific sexual violence on a seemingly industrial scale.”<sup>14</sup> The UN estimated in August 2014 that ISIS has forced some 1,500 women, teenage girls and boys into sexual slavery.<sup>15</sup>

## Recommendations on tackling radicalisation online

Worldwide, governments are beginning to realise that the Internet has become an effective tool for terrorists. They are now intensifying countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. According to

Georgia Holmer, CVE is focused on “countering the pull of terrorist recruitment and influence by building resilience among populations vulnerable to radicalisation.”<sup>16</sup> Efforts have been accelerated in a number of countries to create strategies to counter violent extremist narratives on and offline. The US and the UK have established public diplomacy, strategic communications and information operations to support their national and counter-terrorism politics. In 2003, the United Kingdom Home Office created CONTEST, its counter-terrorism strategy. CONTEST is split into four work streams that are known as the ‘four P’s,’ pursue, prevent, protect, and prepare. As part of the UK government’s Prevent Strategy, CT police officers are going to schools to teach about the dangers of extremism. Digital literacy is becoming increasingly important, people must be trained with skills that involve critical consumption of online content in order to develop a natural resiliency to online extremist propaganda. The US created its first Federal CVE strategy in 2011, which revolves around countering the radicalisation of all types of potential terrorists with a “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism.” Also in 2011, the US State Department created the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) which attempts to engage violent extremists in online debate, contesting their

<sup>13</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

<sup>14</sup> 29 September 2014 Schoolgirl jihadist: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters, The Guardian.

<sup>15</sup> 13 August, 2014, “SRSG Bangura and SRSG Mladenov gravely concerned by reports of sexual violence against internally displaced persons,” United Nations Iraq: [http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=2373:srsg-bangura-and-srsg-mladenov-gravely-concerned-by-reports-of-sexual-violence-against-internally-displaced-persons&Itemid=605&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2373:srsg-bangura-and-srsg-mladenov-gravely-concerned-by-reports-of-sexual-violence-against-internally-displaced-persons&Itemid=605&lang=en)

<sup>16</sup> Georgia Holmer, “Countering Violent Extremism: A Peace Building Perspective.” USIP, 29 August, 2013.



claims in an attempt to dissuade others from joining them. It established a Twitter account, "Think Again Turn Away," where it engages in rhetoric with jihadist fighters and their supporters. According to CSCC Director, Ambassador Fernandez, what the CSCC really needs is its own "fan club", or "knights of uploading", as IS calls its support network, who will help spread the message. Organisations in the Middle East, such as Hedayah, which is located in the United Arab Emirates, are leading the way in promoting CVE at the international level. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Singapore, activists are using social media to challenge conspiracy theories in mosques, community centres, prisons, universities, and websites. The violent death of Muath al-Kaseasbah has earned the condemnation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the International Union of Muslim Scholars, as well as Jihadists and Sunni clerics. Indeed, the global religious community also has an important role to play in countering violent extremism. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation representing over 1.4 billion Muslims in 57 countries states that the IS has "nothing to do with Islam" and "has committed crimes that cannot be tolerated." In 2014, over 120 Muslim scholars wrote to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stating that he had misconstrued Islam since he ignored the context of the Koran as well as classical teachings of the current era.

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While governments have so far been mostly reactive to terrorist challenges, they are now beginning to realise that they also need to be more proactive, to think more preventively in order to get ahead of the terrorism challenge. Governments are waking up to the fact that hard security tools cannot reduce the wellspring of violent extremism; their strategies need to work on addressing the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed violent extremism. As the iceberg graphic shows, tackling the violent extremist phenomenon is not enough; one must address the underlying sources that feed violent extremism. It is essential to adopt a more proactive approach to these new challenges, Preventive Violent Extremism (PVE) seeks to bring new analytical tools and policy intervention to address enablers of violent extremism among populations at risk. Throughout, governments need to institutionalise a gender-sensitive approach to their work, empowering women to actively engage in countering radicalisation and violent extremism. In 2014, a new organisation was created, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). Funded by both public and private partners, it represents the first global effort to support local, community-level initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against violent extremist agendas. GCERF was launched by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an organisation created in 2011 by 29 countries and the European Union to reduce the vulnerability of people

everywhere to terrorism by helping to build greater capacities worldwide in preventing, combating, and prosecuting terrorist acts and countering incitement and recruitment to terrorism.

In September 2014, UN Security Council Resolution 2178 was adopted. It represents a watershed in the global civilian effort to reduce the threat from foreign terrorist fighters (FTF's) in Syria and Iraq. UNSC 2178 requires countries to have laws that enable the prosecution of travel and attempted travel for terrorist purposes, it requires states to prevent and suppress recruiting, organising, transporting, equipping and financing. It also calls for greater cooperation on CVE issues including taking national measures to prevent terrorists from exploiting technology, communications, including audio and video. In November 2014, the GCTF also passed the "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTF) Initiative called "The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon."

In the last couple of years, an increasing number of public and private initiatives have been created to strengthen CVE. Table I outlines a selected number of initiatives that have been established. Even non-state actors have become active; most recently Anonymous, a global "hacktivist" organisation, has declared war on IS in cyberspace, sending tweets stating that its objective was to "ice ISIS." Two days after the 7 January attacks on the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, Anonymous declared war on Islamic extremists worldwide, vowing to track and shut down all websites and social media networks linked to the terrorists. These online declarations, mark the first recorded wars conducted by non-state actors battling it out in cyberspace. In February 2015, Anonymous claimed responsibility for targeting nearly 800 Twitter accounts and 12 Facebook accounts. In addition, they released a video warning IS, "you will be treated like a virus, and we are the cure. We own the internet." While Twitter, Youtube and Facebook are suspending accounts held by IS and its supporters, IS is fighting back. It recently called on jihadis around the world to kill Twitter employees stating that: "Your virtual war on us will cause a real war on you."



**Table I: Selected international, government and civil society initiatives to counter violent extremism (CVE)**

<b>What</b>	<b>How</b>
Against Violent Extremism (AVE)	Google Ideas and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue connect formers, survivors and projects to exchange and disseminate information to tackle violent extremism.
Al-Sakina	Online repository of information and intervention programmes to answer questions on Islamic belief and to bring radicalised individuals back into the mainstream.
Bold Creative	Empowers credible moderates to proactively counter violent extremist messages and messengers through the Internet and social media.
Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC)	Coordinates, orients, and informs strategic government communications to counter the appeal of violent extremism at audiences abroad.
The Clarion Project	An independently funded, non-profit organisation dedicated to exposing the dangers of Islamic extremism while providing a platform for the voices of moderation and promoting grassroots activism.
EXIT Deutschland	Provides support structures to enable individuals to leave extreme right-wing movements through on and offline engagement.
EXIT Fryshuset	Provides support structures to enable individuals to leave extreme right-wing movements through on and offline engagement.
Fatwa on Terrorism	Highlights arguments that terrorists use to misuse Islamic teachings. Fatwa on Terrorism contains clear-cut rebuttals of those arguments, declaring those who commit terrorist acts as disbelievers.
The French Council of the Muslim Faith	National elected body that serves as an official interlocutor with the French state in the regulation of Muslim religious activities.
Global Center on Cooperative Security	Works with national, regional, and international stakeholders to promote holistic and integrated responses to violent extremism that underscore the critical importance of human rights, the rule of law, and community engagement.
Global Survivors Network	Provides a platform for survivors of terrorism to share their experiences in their own words, working to spread their messages in vulnerable communities.
Harvard Berkman Center for Internet & Society (Viral Peace Programme)	A network of experts, educators, practitioners, and ambassadors that facilitate, promote, and strengthen collaboration to counter youth-oriented hate speech online.
Hedayah	Established to serve as the premier international institution for training, dialogue, collaboration, and research to counter violent extremism.
Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)	ISD created <a href="http://www.counterextremism.org">www.counterextremism.org</a> , an online resource for policy makers working on radicalisation. It includes an up-to-date repository of government policies and programmes.
Islam Against Extremism	Presents profiles of prominent British Islamist extremists and organisations with a view to exposing them as deviants who are not actually following the path of Islam.
MyJihad	Promotes a moderate understanding of the term “Jihad” and derives a new user-generated, centre-ground narrative on matters of religion and faith.
Sabahi/Magharebia	Two websites providing independent and impartial coverage of news and current affairs, to promote alternative news sources to counter misinformation.
Women without Borders	Women without Borders promotes the role of women in the security sphere, encouraging them to become active participants in their communities.

## The Way Ahead

Some governments view censorship as a key tool to fight extremism, however, think tank reports<sup>17</sup> have shown that censorship is impractical and even counter-productive, as it generates significant costs whilst contributing little to the fight against CVE. IS supporters on social media are like the hydra; cut off one head and two more shall take its place. A coordinator at the CSCC stated, that “US efforts to counter terrorist and extremist messaging in the Internet is a small hill, compared to the mountain of Jihad literature, social media, and video material.” The British Army are creating a special force - the 77th Brigade - the ‘Facebook Warriors’, skilled in psychological operations. The French Ministry of Interior have produced a new counter-jihad website aimed at discouraging young people from joining IS with graphic images and messages that state, “They say: sacrifice yourself with us, you will defend a just

<sup>17</sup> Tim Stevens & Neumann, Peter, (2009) “Countering Violent Online Radicalisation: A Strategic for Action,” ICSR: London, p. 15.

cause. In reality: you will discover hell on earth and die alone, away from home.” While governments are now intensifying the fight against countering violent extremism (CVE) online, they are not even close to suppressing the behemoth that was unleashed.

The IS crisis has become one of the most socially-mediated conflicts in history. IS is the first terrorist organisation with the ability to globalise and democratise the terror experience; everyone can join “electronic jihad” and be part of the “digital caliphate”, even set a virtual foot into the battlefield, within a safe and encrypted domain in the comfort of their home.

Slowly, the world is waking up to the fact that there needs to be a strategic balancing of counter-narratives. Table II offers some recommendations for possible responses to counter the narratives online. At the local level, it involves working with community leaders, teachers, spiritual and religious guides to help reach vulnerable youth to stop the process of

**Table II: Recommendations for possible responses to counter the narrative online**

Domain	Possible Responses
<b>Local</b> (government, civil society, local companies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with spiritual guides and religious leaders to help them to reach out to vulnerable youth and teach them how Islamist hard-liners threaten Muslim communities.</li> <li>• Work with community leaders and teachers to help them to reach out to vulnerable youth.</li> <li>• Establish cultural centres that offer seed funding and training for grassroots online counter-extremism initiatives e.g. forums, Facebook pages, Twitter.</li> <li>• Create community centres that engage youths to participate in extra-curricular activities.</li> <li>• Improve digital literacy and critical consumption skills in the community.</li> </ul>
<b>National</b> (government, companies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build the capacity of schools, communities and civil society to campaign against online extremism, improve digital literacy and critical consumption skills.</li> <li>• Work with Internet companies worldwide to restrict user access to illegal terrorist materials online.</li> <li>• Fund and support the creation of counter-messaging initiatives and centres that create and disseminate credible content and positive alternatives to extremist narratives.</li> <li>• Support regional conferences to establish mechanisms for creating content to target vulnerable youths.</li> <li>• Design and support effective intervention and de-radicalisation programmes.</li> <li>• Develop international training courses on countering violent extremism (CVE).</li> <li>• Improve the process of public reporting of extremist content (government websites, the media).</li> <li>• Create dedicated national and regional cybercrime units to deal with forensic retrieval of computer-based evidence.</li> <li>• Gather open-source intelligence by using specialist online surveillance techniques from social networking sites, chat rooms, websites and Internet bulletin boards.</li> </ul>

<b>International</b> (government, international organisations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amplify and mobilise religious leaders to come together to build a common message that highlights and underscores the destructive impact of terrorism on Muslim communities, Muslim-Majority countries and the world.</li> <li>• Strengthen the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) which brings governments and experts together to coordinate and share CVE strategies.</li> <li>• Support the Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism in Abu Dhabi and create similar institutions that focus on training, research and dialogue between NGOs and governments working on CVE.</li> <li>• Build upon the work of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) which supports local, community-level initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against violent extremist agendas.</li> <li>• Strengthen links within UN agencies that play a role in building capacity in countries that are vulnerable to violent extremism. Support UNSCR 2178.</li> <li>• Strengthen current cooperative arrangements among international law enforcement agencies (EUROPOL, INTERPOL, OSCE, European Commission CyberCrime Centres of Excellence).</li> </ul>
<b>Corporate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a corporate forum for formal and informal dialogue on countering online extremism.</li> <li>• Create a corporate strategy to reduce the spread of violent extremism and design an effective strategy to take down illegal websites more efficiently.</li> <li>• Create a forum that brings stakeholders from key industrial sectors together to discuss ways to disrupt the IS economy.</li> <li>• Cooperate with civil society to create websites and social media accounts that counter violent extremism.</li> <li>• Suspend extremist accounts and create effective family-friendly filters.</li> </ul>

radicalisation. At the national level, it is important for governments to create dedicated national and regional cybercrime units to retrieve intelligence and evidence of cybercrime. At the international level, it is important to support new organisations such as GCERF and support UN initiatives including: UNSCR 2178. At the corporate level, it is important to create a forum that brings stakeholders together to reduce the spread of violent extremism while discussing ways to disrupt the IS economy (see Table II for a more comprehensive list of recommendations).

## Conclusions

Parts of the Middle East and Africa are sliding towards a warlord era. States are struggling to control their territory. Parts of states are now under the rule of local chiefs, rebel groups and terrorist movements. Armed irregular forces are holding effective power over growing areas of Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. Motivated by extreme forms of militant Islam or regional separatism, non-state actors have grabbed territory and are creating their own version of law and order.

Even more disturbing is that terrorist groups such as IS have the ability to purchase loyalties from the

people whose territories they conquer. IS is estimated to have approximately USD 2 billion in cash and assets.<sup>18</sup> IS is the richest terrorist organisation in history, it controls land and resources greater than any terrorist group in history. It is largely self-sustaining. Its greatest wealth is garnered through kidnapping, extortion, resource production (sales of oil and water), and stealing antiquities. It earns approximately USD 3 million a day from its oil and gas resources alone.<sup>19</sup>

IS represents a sea change in how terrorism is conducted. Electronic jihad and strategic messaging is the most modern manifestation of terror, it could become the winning brand, the new icon of “global jihad”, which could lead to a greater allegiance to it from other terrorist groups. It is important to address ways to reduce the impact of its strategic messaging and find more effective strategies to discredit IS both on the battlefield and in cyberspace.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Chuvlov, 15 June, 2014, “How an arrest in Iraq revealed Isis’s \$2bn jihadist network,” The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>

<sup>19</sup> Terrence McCoy, August, 4, 2014, ‘Islamic State ‘now controls resources and territory unmatched in history of extremist organisations’, Washington Post <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/04/islamic-state-now-controls-resources-and-territory-unmatched-in-history-of-extremist-organizations/>



So far, the major focus on counter terrorism strategies has always been on hard power, but policy makers have realised such strategies have produced limited results. This is why President Obama recently decided to expand the State Department's Center for Strategic Communications and has convened a global meeting of representatives of over 60 nations to join the fight against violent extremism. If we do not engage in this ideological war now, the world will continue to face threats that will morph into even greater threats. The cost of failure is great.<sup>20</sup> IS is a determined and adaptive foe, and while there have been some signs of progress in the campaign against IS, the threat could easily move from conventional warfare to guerrilla-style insurgency, increased suicide attacks and even cyber terror. This is already evident in Baghdad, where almost daily suicide bomb attacks against Shiite mosques and markets keep the capital on edge. IS is prepared to take on high casualties in the pursuit of its objectives; its "millenarian thinking" distinguishes them from past foes who weren't as willing to embrace death. As the regional order is collapsing, non-state actors are filling the vacuum. The global community needs to help catalyse the formation of social movements that are driven by civil actors and leaders in the region that seek to spread a more secular and just form of government. The problem of IS and its cyber jihad is that it has already sown seeds of ethnic and sectarian conflict whose hatred will burn long after the IS flame has been extinguished.

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<sup>20</sup> So far the daily cost of operations against IS factored at \$8.3 million per day according to United States Pentagon estimates. The operations against IS has now passed the USD 1 billion mark. See Janine Davidson (2014), "New Estimates of the Cost of the ISIS Fight," Council on Foreign Relations Blog.

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*NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.*

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