Strategy Research Project

Regaining the Initiative and Defeating ISIS's Social Media Campaign

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In September 2014, President Obama addressed the United Nations General Assembly on the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), stating: "The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force." In one sense, the President is correct, Western efforts to reason with ISIS to halt their brutal campaign are almost certainly futile. However, in another sense, the President's statement reveals a flawed strategy and a myopic focus on using force at the expense of waging an effective war of ideas. To say ISIS only understands the language of force ignores their effective use of social media to recruit, fundraise, and encourage attacks in Western nations. Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to counter ISIS's social media campaign fail to neutralize ISIS's appeal to sympathetic audiences - appearing stiff, unimaginative, and contrived. With military options against ISIS limited by political and economic considerations, the U.S. must re-examine its strategic communications and improve its use of social media. This paper explains why the U.S. must adapt to emerging social media technologies, build culturally resonant messages, and exploit several key weaknesses in ISIS's strategic messaging.

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Abstract

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Regaining the Initiative and Defeating ISIS's Social Media Campaign

We're not just fighting a force... we're fighting an idea"
– General John Allen (ret.)[1]

On 22 January 2015, United States (U.S.) Central Command (CENTCOM) provided battle damage assessment for Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. CENTCOM assessed over 6,000 Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) fighters killed, including half of the group's senior leaders.[2] On the surface, this metric seemed to denote progress in the campaign. However, when asked for comment, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel refused to confirm CENTCOM's enemy killed-in-action figure. Instead, he offered this cautious perspective: "I was in a war where we did body counts and we lost that one." [3] Secretary Hagel's reservations about using enemy dead as a metric of success are rooted in his own Army service during the Vietnam War. Despite extensive analysis of the Vietnam War, it appears 'body count' has reared its head again as the U.S. attempts to broadcast positive news about the campaign against ISIS.

The U.S. military's strategy against ISIS is analogous to sitting in a rowboat taking on water due to a hole in the bottom. The first instinct is to bail the water out as quickly as possible. Indeed, this is a necessary task, but it is only part of the solution. To ensure the boat doesn't sink, at some point, one must plug the hold. Exclusive focus on bailing the incoming water out will only lead to exhaustion and an eventual sinking. In this scenario, the incoming water is a symptom of the real problem – the hole in the bottom of boat. Likewise, the U.S.-led Coalition against ISIS appears overly focused on the symptom.

Airstrikes and high value targeting efforts against ISIS are akin to bailing the water out of the sinking rowboat. Realistically, ISIS casualties alone will never compel

the organization to surrender or neutralize the threat it poses. ISIS is not a recent phenomenon. It evolved and adapted from another infamous organization – al Qaida in Iraq (AQI). In May 2008, then-CIA director Michael Hayden declared the "near strategic defeat" of AQI.[4] It seemed a safe assessment. The combined effects of the 2007 U.S. 'surge' and loss of Sunni tribal support had decimated AQI's ranks – particularly its senior leaders. Hayden was not alone is his assessment. However, just six years later, AQI's successor organization, ISIS, seized most of Mosul and prepared to advance towards Baghdad.

In September 2014, President Obama announced his strategy against ISIS. "First, the terrorist group known as ISIL must be degraded and ultimately destroyed…We will use our military might in a campaign of airstrikes to roll back ISIL. We will train and equip forces fighting against these terrorists on the ground. We will work to cut off their financing, and to stop the flow of fighters into and out of the region."[5]

Degrading ISIS is akin to bailing the water out. Although it is an essential ingredient to victory, it is an incomplete strategy. President Obama's use of the word 'destroy' is troubling. It assumes the U.S. can conduct enough airstrikes, kill enough ISIS leaders, and destroy enough of their equipment to achieve victory. However, achieving *enough* is both unmeasurable and unfeasible. Like bailing water, airstrikes and high value targeting only provides temporary gains at the long-term risk of political and financial exhaustion. Killing and capturing ISIS personnel only removes the present danger. The U.S. must also focus on preventing new ISIS personnel from indoctrination and recruitment.

Victory over ISIS, and violent Islamic extremist organizations like it, is only possible by addressing the hole in the boat. In this case, the root problem is ISIS's ability to recruit followers by manipulating religion and framing a narrative portraying an apocalyptic war between Islam and the modern secular world. To address this root problem and defeat ISIS, the U.S. must pursue a strategy designed to delegitimize ISIS rather than destroy it. To delegitimize ISIS, the U.S. requires a comprehensive strategic communications strategy and must aggressively counter-message ISIS propaganda. Because ISIS relies heavily on social media to broadcast its strategic messaging, the U.S. must understand ISIS's social media campaign and develop ways to defeat it.

This paper opens with an introduction of foundational concepts of strategy within the context of terrorism and ISIS, before defining social media and introducing the primary social media platforms used by ISIS. Next, ISIS's social media capabilities are examined and followed by an analysis of the failures of U.S. social media efforts against ISIS. This paper concludes with a series of recommendations to senior political and military leaders on how to combat ISIS's strategic messaging.

Key Terms

<u>Strategy</u>

> "We must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda." - Mikhail Bakunin[6]

To understand why terrorists embrace social media, one must first understand the strategy of terrorism. Clausewitz's discussion of *ends*, *ways*, and *means* is helpful when delineating the differences between the U.S. and ISIS's strategies. Following Clausewitz's strategic framework, the U.S. <u>ends</u> are the defeat of ISIS to the extent that it no longer poses a serious threat to U.S. interests, allies or partners. To achieve these

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ends, the U.S. overwhelmingly pursues <u>ways</u> to destroy ISIS's warfighting capabilities, while the <u>means</u> are maximizing the cumulative effects of tactical overmatch and destruction / denial of ISIS's critical resources.

Conversely, ISIS's <u>ends</u> are to supplant Westphalian-style, nation-states in the Middle East, North Africa, South and Central Asia with their version of an Islamic caliphate. Their <u>ways</u> are exploiting historical grievances and radical interpretations of Islam to recruit insurgent forces to overthrow target governments and terrorist forces to prevent Western intervention. To spread this message, recruit followers, and maximize the impact of their terrorist attacks, ISIS's <u>means</u> are strategic communications platforms such as news and social media.

<u>Terrorism</u>

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *terrorism* as the "use of violent acts to frighten people in an area as a way of trying to achieve a political goal." This definition is reminiscent of Von Clausewitz's famous description of war as "…the continuation of politics by other means."[7] Media outlets sometimes report on terrorism through a myopic lens, focusing on the act in isolation of the desired political end state. In reality, the only difference between it and any other approach to conflict are the ways and the means. The ends remain the same and are inherently political in nature. In the case of terrorist organizations targeting Western nations, one of the primary ways used to achieve the desired ends is creating sufficient fear among a civilian population to compel their government to acquiesce. In this model, the means are not only the use of violence, but ensuring news of the violence spreads as far as possible. In the case of ISIS, social media serves as an extremely effective platform to ensuring their message amplified.

<u>Social Media</u>

The Oxford Dictionary defines social media as "*websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.*"[8]

This paper focuses on three primary forms of social media used by ISIS: YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Each of these social media platforms offers unique and overlapping capabilities. All of them are free and require only a valid email address to create an account. Although messages and uploaded content are subject to review by company monitors, the staggering volume makes terms of service enforcement virtually impossible.

YouTube allows users to upload, share and view video content. Over one billion unique users access YouTube every month and upload over 100 hours of video every minute. Approximately 80% of YouTube activity originates outside the U.S.[9] ISIS's use of YouTube is arguably the most notorious, as the gruesome videos of prisoner executions they've uploaded burned indelible images in audiences worldwide. However, ISIS also uploads lengthy videos updating their insurgent campaigns, portraying everyday life in areas under ISIS control and proselytizing their apocalyptic worldview. Journalists frequently note the quality and production value of ISIS's YouTube productions, noting the superiority when compared to al Qaeda videos.[10] The quality of these videos also conveys the importance ISIS places in both social media and strategic communications as a whole.

ISIS exploits Facebook to enable recruitment, networking, propaganda, and communication. In September 2014, Facebook averaged over 864 million daily active users and over a billion monthly users. Over 82% of Facebook's daily active users are outside of the U.S. and Canada.[11] ISIS's presence on Facebook is less conspicuous

than its YouTube content, but on top of disseminating strategic communications, the social network enables direct indoctrination and recruitment of vulnerable individuals. In February 2015, Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein opened fire on a free-speech forum and a synagogue in Copenhagen, Denmark. Later, investigators found he had sworn loyalty to ISIS through a Facebook post just before the attack.[12]

Twitter is a social media platform primarily intended for mass dissemination of short messages called "Tweets," which are limited to 140 characters, and uploaded pictures. There are over 284 million active Twitter users, who collectively send 500 million Tweets every day and 77% of whom reside outside the U.S.[13] Like YouTube, ISIS uses Twitter primarily as a viral dissemination tool. Despite the character limitation, ISIS uses Twitter to send out brief battlefield updates, take responsibility for attacks, and disseminate images. Twitter also allows a hashtag feature, which links select words and phrases to searches by other Twitter followers entering those same words or phrases in their search prompt. During the 2014 World Cup, ISIS routinely added the hashtags #Brazil2014 and #WC2014, knowing people who used these terms in unrelated searches would stumble upon ISIS's Twitter accounts.[14]

ISIS's Social Media Strategy

Since mid-2014, ISIS's social media proficiency has garnered significant media attention. The New York Times described ISIS's "deft command" of varied media.[15] Some journalists have rhetorically weaponized ISIS's media campaign, describing its "army of tweeters" and "devastating social media salvos."[16] Chief Digital Officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sree Sreenivasan, judged the quality of ISIS social media campaign: "Everything I've seen from ISIS is almost textbook, professional marketing and messaging…ISIS has been able to use social media to spread their evil on a whole

new level."[17] In contrast, Western media outlets have described the U.S. social media effort as "falling short."[18] Although these terms are colorful examples of journalistic metaphor, they reinforce perceptions that frame strategic realities.

<u>What Social Media Does for ISIS</u>

Social media offers attractive capabilities to organizations like ISIS. The viral nature or salacious content, the tendency of mass media to derive lead stories from uploaded content, and the hopelessness of any effort to regulate or block unwanted content or users make social media an excellent communications platform. Specifically, social media serves four primary purposes for ISIS.

First, ISIS relies on social media as a dissemination mechanism for its strategic communications. Not unlike the word *strategy,* the term *strategic communications* is problematic, as the term is open to various interpretations depending on the environment it is referencing, such as business, politics, or defense.[19] Joint Publication 5-0 defines *strategic communication* as "focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power."[20] Of equal importance, JP 5-0 insists "…strategic communication considerations should be included in all joint operational planning for military operations from routine, recurring military activities in peacetime through major operations."[21] Indeed, juxtapose references to the U.S. Government with ISIS and the definition remains equally effective, albeit on a much smaller scale. When examining strategic communications, one arguably observes ISIS demonstrating closer adherence to JP 5-0 than the U.S.

ISIS, like most competent terrorist organizations, understands that terrorism is

communication. This perspective is often lost on audiences viewing terrorism purely as

an expression of violence. Instead, the terrorist uses violence not to destroy an

adversary's physical capability to wage war, but to erode their resolve to wage war,

regardless of numerical or technical advantages they may enjoy. A prime example of

this approach was AQI's bombing of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, which housed the

United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq and had only commenced operations five

days earlier. Directly, the bombing killed 22 and wounded 100, many of whom were UN

staff. However, its real target was the resolve of the UN and non-governmental

organizations, who eventually withdrew from Iraq.[22] This phenomenon is commonly

referred to as *propaganda of the deed*, which was expertly defined by the Royal United

Service Institute in the United Kingdom as "depicting an act of violence whose signal

and/or extreme nature is intended to create an ideological impact disproportionate to the

act itself."[23]

In addition to ISIS's use of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, ISIS also uses other

social media to disseminate its written strategic communications globally. In May 2014,

ISIS released its first English-language military reports, entitled *The Islamic State News.*

The following month, ISIS released *The Islamic State Report,* another English-language

report to discuss its political philosophies and goals. In July 2014, ISIS combined these

two ad hoc publications and combined into one online magazine – *Dabiq.*[24] According to

research conducted by the Institute for the Study of War, *Dabiq* focuses upon

strengthening the religious legitimacy of ISIS.[25] In contrast, al Qaida in the Arabian

Peninsula's (AQAP) publication, *Inspire,* primarily focuses on providing news and

encouraging attacks in Western nations. *Inspire* targets potential sympathizers in Western nations and provides instructions on ways to conduct homegrown terrorist attacks. *Dabiq* takes more of a rhetorical approach, explaining the goals and religious justifications for their campaign.[26] Social media serves as a primary means of disseminating *Dabiq* to a global audience. A cursory search of Twitter and Facebook leads to numerous links to the online magazine.

During Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, Islamic terrorist organizations routinely recorded videos of ambushes, IED detonations, and suicide attacks to demonstrate their capabilities and attract donors. [27] These videos were largely distributed in the form of DVDs, stored on thumb drives, or uploaded to obscure and secretive web forums. Terrorist financiers would show these videos to wealthy foreign donors for fundraising drives. However, ISIS's social media campaign enables wider exposure to donors of all income levels all over the world. Estimating how much ISIS receives in foreign donations is extremely difficult. According to the Jamestown Foundation, ISIS generates as much as $20 million annually.[28] To put ISIS's financial health in a macro perspective, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ed Royce, declared ISIS "…occupies territory the size of Great Britain, holds an estimated $2 billion in assets, and is believed to be the most well-funded terror group in history."[29]

Without reliable spreadsheets, assigning a causal percentage of that funding to ISIS's social media campaign versus any other form of strategic communication remains problematic. However, Malcom Gladwell makes an important point when addressing the impact of social media in a context such as fundraising. Gladwell

describes the type of connections established via social media networking as "weak ties," which are distinct from "strong ties," such as personal relationships.[30] Gladwell argues that "Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice."[31] In other words, the weak ties of social media reach a wider audience comprised of sympathetic, but less motivated, who would rather donate money than leave home and family to fight alongside ISIS. However, ISIS transcends social media's tendency to establish weak ties, evidenced by their extraordinary recruitment worldwide.

Pursuant to ISIS's ends to restore their Caliphate, ISIS must build the size of its forces on multiple fronts. To accomplish this task, ISIS relies on social media to recruit individuals worldwide. To gainer attention, ISIS posts videos on YouTube that attempt to glorify their conflict against Iraqi and Syrian forces. The production value, editing, and scenes of combat (both real and staged) can appeal to at-risk or impressionable youths. Once an individual is curious or interested, it is not difficult to find accounts or users associated with ISIS on Twitter and Facebook, which serve as platforms to communicate directly with the potential recruit.

The results of ISIS's recruitment drive are startling. In February 2015, Representative Royce, described ISIS's recruitment effort as a "virtual caliphate," which recruited foreigners at an 'unprecedented rate.'[32] According to his information, "Some 20,000 foreign fighters from more than 90 countries now make up its ranks, including at least 3,400 from the West and more than 150 Americans."[33] In January 2015, the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) estimated

over 20,000 foreign fighters joined Sunni militant groups in Syria and Iraq.[34] The ICSR didn't identify how many of these foreign fighters joined ISIS specifically or how many joined because of ISIS's social media efforts by the group. However, given the size estimates of organizations operating in Iraq and Syria, it is safe to assume ISIS was one of the leading organizations receiving these recruits. Further, if ICSR's data is accurate, foreign fighter participation in Iraq and Syria has surpassed the previous peak observed during Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s. It is evident ISIS will not experience manpower shortages in the near term.

Finally, social media enables ISIS recruitment of sympathizers in Western nations to conduct terrorist attacks – divided into two main categories: homegrown terrorism and lone wolf terrorism. Definitions for these terms vary. A Congressional Research Service report on domestic terrorism defines *homegrown terrorism* as "…terrorist activity or plots perpetrated within the United States or abroad by American citizens, legal permanent residents, or visitors radicalized largely within the United States." [35] This definition doesn't specify whether the perpetrators were directly recruited, trained, or directed to conduct the attack by a terrorist organization. Journalists often use the terms *homegrown* and *lone wolf* interchangeably. However, Gabriel Weimann, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center and professor at Haifa University, feels the term *lone wolf* represents a slight misnomer. He identifies an important distinction, pointing out that behind every 'lone wolf' is a "virtual pack" that indoctrinates and supports the individual or small group until execution of the attack.[36]Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, *lone wolf terrorism* will be treated as a subset of homegrown terrorism and describe individuals who conduct attacks with no

direct contact or direction from a terrorist organization. For example, the 2009 Fort Hood

shooter, Major Nidal Hasan, represents a *homegrown terrorist* because he

communicated with and possibly radicalized by AQAP spokesman Anwar al Alawaki.[37]

Although there is no evidence to suggest Alawaki directed the Fort Hood attack, his

influence over Major Hasan almost certainly played a role.

Separately, *lone wolf* terrorists are self-radicalized, self-trained and conduct their

attacks without the knowledge or direction of a known-terrorist organization. Further,

social media was one of the primary sources of their indoctrination and training.

Additionally, lone wolf attacks afford a terrorist organization a means of customizing any

claims or denials of responsibility. Fearing a direct attack might galvanize domestic

resolve and increase political will against the terrorist organization, a long wolf offers a

chance to cast the attack as the work of a nation's own citizen, rather than an external

force subject to military defeat or surrender.

Two examples of *lone wolf* terrorism occurred in October 2014. The first was an

attack in Ottawa, Canada, in which Michael Zehaf-Bibeau killed a Canadian soldier,

injured three, and triggered a lockdown in the capital.[38] ISIS refrained from claiming

responsibility. However, a month later, ISIS claimed in a *Dabiq* article that a YouTube

video featuring ISIS spokesman, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, inspired the Ottawa attack.

In the video, al-Adnani calls upon Muslims living in Western nations, whose militaries

conduct airstrikes against ISIS, to conduct terrorist attacks. However, many Canadians

are still not sure how to classify the attacker.[39] According to his family, Michael Zehaf-

Bibeau was mentally disturbed and a drug addict. The Canadian government has yet to

release the contents of a recorded pre-attack statement from Zehaf-Bibeau, which could shed definitive light on any motives, indoctrination, or recruitment.

The day after the Ottawa attack, a hatchet-wielding man named Zale Thompson attacked two New York City police officers, critically injuring one of the officers. The FBI labeled the attack an "act of terror," citing videos of ISIS beheadings on Thompson' s computer.[40] Thompson's Facebook page also contained rambling posts about radical Islam and encouraged attacks like the one he later committed.[41] However, other New York Police Department and FBI sources labeled Thompson as just an "angry guy" who accessed Islamic extremist propaganda, but had no direct contact with any parent organization.[42]

Homegrown terrorism and lone wolves threaten to circumvent the extensive U.S. Department of Homeland Security measures designed to prevent domestic terrorism. Michael Steinbach, head of the FBI's counterterrorism division, said "I'm worried about the individuals that we don't know about that have training. We know what we know. But there is a number that's greater than that that we don't know."[43] Steinbach also discussed the inherent limitations when investigating potential homegrown and lone wolf suspects. "Look, there are lots of threats out there, criminal threats, counter-intelligence-based threats, cyber threats and terrorism threats…There is a finite number of resources and we have to focus those resources on those threat." [44]

Although lone wolf recruitment was primarily associated with AQAP, ISIS increasingly embraces the tactic. Several February 2015 tweets from British ISIS member, Abu Rahin Aziz, stated on Twitter: 'Muslims in the West given instructions to strike the enemies of Islam and Muslims within their own countries,' Aziz wrote. 'Wonder

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who will strike first? 'Could it be UK first to be attacked? They've attacked us with jets

killing scores, plus they have many Muslims in prison as war on Islam. 'Maybe sit and

wait outside TA offices? Maybe some other interests, maybe an MP. Hmm interesting.

UK can blame foreign policy.'[45]

<div align="center">U.S. Efforts to Counter ISIS Social Media</div>

<u>The Battlefield of Social Media</u>

Denying ISIS's access to social media is highly improbable. In accordance with

company policies, both Twitter and YouTube frequently block ISIS-related accounts

once identified. However, ISIS can simply create new accounts in a matter of minutes.

Further, the volume of uploaded content is staggering, with over 100 hours of new

media added every minute.[46] Further, the viral nature of the material makes blocking

users or deleting content a futile task. YouTube subscribers can immediately save,

copy, or re-post content under different aliases. According to a twelve-month study

conducted by the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, an

examination of only 190 European social media profiles associated with ISIS found

linkages to over 18,223 unique profiles following the content.[47] From each of those

unique profiles, the number of linked users increases exponentially, exposing the

magnitude of trying to identify and isolate sources of ISIS social media content.

Further, even if the U.S. were capable of denying ISIS's access to social media,

the cost/benefit of such an action is a highly contentious topic between law enforcement

agencies and intelligence services.[48] Removing ISIS social media content also removes

opportunities to analyze the content for clues on the timing or location of future attacks.

Blocking or eliminating the source accounts of ISIS propaganda on social media could

undermine efforts to perform network analysis or study dissemination habits. Though

difficult to tolerate, the intelligence community argument to allow the posted material likely outweighs the law enforcement argument to block or censor it. Ultimately, the capability to block a majority of the material, much less all of it, does not exist. Therefore, if one thinks of social media in context of virtual terrain, the U.S. cannot achieve dominance or control. To defeat ISIS in social media's virtual terrain, the U.S. must achieve dominance in an even more nebulous construct of terrain – ideas.

A Lack of Doctrine

Although a February 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism reflected thoughtful examination of the problem and could lead to more effective solutions, this effort remains State Department led.[49] To effectively degrade ISIS's recruitment and delegitimize its ideology, the U.S. must employ a whole-of-government approach and synchronize its strategic messaging and social media efforts among all pertinent departments. In short, the State Department cannot focus on delegitimizing ISIS's ideology (plugging the hole), while the Department of Defense (DOD) focuses on degrading ISIS's military efforts (bailing out the water).

DOD understanding of social media and its role as a strategic communications platform remains deficient. In the case of the DOD, the problem begins with a lack of doctrinal understanding. Joint Publication (JP) 3-13 represented a major step forward in acknowledging the strategic importance of information operations in the 21st century. However, it was arguably obsolete prior to publication. JP 3-13 makes no mention of social media, Facebook, Twitter or even 24-hour cable news. Yet, all of these information sources represent strategic resources for non-state actors threatening the Western world and the global economy. Interestingly, virtually every unified combatant command, sub-unified combatant command, even forward-deployed joint task forces, is

present on Facebook and Twitter. However, it isn't enough to simply maintain obligatory

social media presence. Social media is only a means of communication and possessing

accounts is meaningless without an effective, culturally resonate messaging. As of

February 2015, a scan of U.S. Central Command's Twitter feed reveals irregular

posting, battle damage assessments, and operational updates. Many posts include links

to grainy airstrike footage, also known as *kill-tv*, which contains no accompanying

explanation of the target's significance or the anticipated results of striking the target.

There is little-to-no discussion of impact or larger strategic contribution. It is the author's

opinion that content of this nature likely appears dry, one-dimensional, and outclassed

by ISIS's Twitter content, which routinely post content explaining the group's strategic

purposes, goals, and attempts to demonize its enemies.

While the DoD has yet to fully embrace social media, the early lead by the State

Department reveals cognitive traps – particularly mirror imaging. A prime example of

U.S. mirror imaging was an early effort of the State Department's YouTube *Think Again,*

Turn Away series.[50] The October 2014 video, entitled Welcome to ISIS Land, is

approximately one minute long and features gory scenes of ISIS's brutality against

Iraqis and Syrians amidst captions sarcastically extolling life under ISIS's control, such

as "Run, do not walk, to ISIS land." Although the video clearly intends to undermine

ISIS's portrayal of peace and security by highlighting their atrocities, irony and sarcasm

are extremely difficult to translate. New media outlets and late night comedy programs

openly mocked Welcome to ISIS Land.[51] The director of the Search for International

Terrorist Entities (SITE) Institute, Rita Katz, also criticized the State Department's video,

writing: "Videos like this clearly illustrate that the U.S. government lacks the basic

understanding of recruitment of young Westerners…These ghastly scenes of executions and destruction are exactly what groups like IS have been using as recruitment propaganda."[52] Worse, as evidenced by the relatively low number of views on YouTube, the video failed to reach its target audience. [53] Although Welcome to ISIS Land eventually received several hundred thousand hits, most of these were likely the result of curiosity stemming from the negative Western media attention. As of January 2015, the other uploaded content in the State Department's *Think Twice, Walk Away* series had received low viewing – especially when compared to ISIS's videos. Richard A. Stengel, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs acknowledged efforts to counter ISIS's social media campaign were lacking, but expressed optimism in future efforts.[54]

Inherent Mistrust

These poor results should not come as a total surprise to U.S. officials. The Pew Global Attitudes Project indicates negative views of America in Muslim-majority countries, largely stemming from widespread suspicion of U.S. foreign policy goals in the region. This baseline mistrust enables ISIS's core narrative – the West, led by America, is at war with Islam.[55] Therefore, ISIS members inherently dismiss any negative portrayals of their organization in the media, regardless of their evidentiary foundation, as Western propaganda. A December 2014 al Jazeera interview with an ISIS sympathizer in the U.K. reveals the mistrust of the media's portrayal, "I have friends who are fighting for ISIS right now and I have no reason to disbelieve what they tell me. What we are currently seeing are mass lies and propaganda. Of course, there are some members of [ISIS] who have made mistakes, they've done terrible things, but to label the whole group under one category is wrong."[56] Ironically, ISIS's YouTube

executions and official justifications for enslaving female captives are the primary source of the condemnations in the media. For ISIS to extol brutal executions as righteous and, simultaneously, dismiss news media as propagandizing the brutality reveals a disturbing lack of cognitive dissonance. Although ISIS probably doesn't concern itself with cognitive dissonance, the global audience (and the potential recruits among them) might. Regardless, the U.S. must expose and challenge this hypocrisy. However, to do so, the U.S. must use culturally resonate strategic messaging and disseminate it through social media.

There is a still a woeful lack of Middle Eastern or South Asian cultural or political comprehension within the U.S. Government. In 2011, after nearly a decade of war in Afghanistan, then-International Security Assistance Forces Commander, General Stanley McChrystal, remarked: "The U.S. and its NATO allies are only 'a little better than half way' to achieving their military goals, partly due to a frighteningly simplistic understanding of the country."[57] Although experts reside throughout the ranks of the DoD and the Department of State, that expertise is clearly not guiding the formulation of U.S. strategic communications or social media campaigns. How can the U.S. hope to challenge ISIS's rhetoric when it doesn't understand it? Thus far, U.S. social media messaging efforts, like the Think Twice, Turn Away series focus myopically on ISIS's violence and depravity. However, if ISIS openly broadcasts and boasts of its violence and depravity, why does the U.S. believe exposing it further will make an appreciable difference in their support? Although this highlighting ISIS's brutality could harden Western resolve and political will to fight, ISIS's sympathizers readily dismiss this narrative as heavy-handed and one-dimensional propaganda. "It's all Western media

lies because they fear the return of the caliphate," said Amir Khan, a 27 year old with an engineering degree from an upper middle class family living in an area controlled by ISIS.[58] Exclusive or overwhelming focus on ISIS's violence will also likely belie its Western origin and subject the messaging to immediate dismissal, with little chance of convincing sympathetic audiences. Instead, the U.S. must go on the offensive and challenge ISIS's politics and abuse of Islam.

<u>Challenging ISIS's Politics</u>

In the political realm, one topic ISIS regularly references that deserves deeper examination in the West is the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916, which defined the modern nation-state borders of the Middle East, as a political objective of their movement. On 29 June 2014, when ISIS released audio recordings in five languages, announcing the establishment of their *caliphate*. A companion video to this announcement showed ISIS operated bulldozers destroying portions of the land barrier demarking the Iraq-Syria border – established by the Sykes-Picot treaty.[59] Although many Americans have likely never heard of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a Middle Eastern audience is likely familiar with, and potentially resentful of, Sykes-Picot. Because of this, Islamic extremists in Iraq and Syria have cited the abolition of Sykes-Picot as a primary goal for years. Abu Musab al Zarqawi, widely considered the founder of what we call ISIS today, routinely referenced Sykes-Picot as evidence of maleficent Western conspiracy in the Middle East and pledged its undoing.[60] To design effective social media messaging, the U.S. must understand the foundation ISIS's political purposes to counter it and without appearing obviously American.

<u>U.S. Capabilities in Social Media</u>

Some analysts find the U.S. ineptitude to intellectually challenge and delegitimize ISIS in social media baffling. Gabriel Weimann points out the stark contrast between the demonstrated U.S. success in social media campaigns in politics, fund-raising, and commercial advertisement.[61] The three major social media platforms discussed in this article are American innovations. Consider the profits of the American film industry, whose top five studios earned more than many small nations entire GDPs. When viewed from this perspective, the U.S. should dominate the social media battlefield.

The U.S. ineptitude to use social media against ISIS is especially frustrating when compared to the success of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign, which demonstrated masterful wielding of social media to excite voters, inspire volunteers, and solicit donors. Dr. Steve Tatham, an authority on the subject of information operations, believes lessons from President Obama's "Change" campaign are applicable against ISIS.[62] Dr. Tatham identifies two forms of communication: attitudinal and behavioral.[63] Attitudinal communication focuses on reinforcing desired behaviors and discouraging bad behaviors. However, when addressing a culturally alien audience, attitudinal communication risks appearing clumsy, forceful, or even comically obvious. Dr. Tatham asserts a proclivity towards *attitudinal* communications was one reason U.S. strategic communications and information operations in Afghanistan were ineffective.[64] Instead, he believes the U.S. should focus on *behavioral communication,* which focuses on "mitigating or encouraging specific and pre-determined behaviors" and notes the success of this communications method in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign.

Victoria Chang, of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, authored a comprehensive analysis of the Obama Campaign's success and social media's role in securing a decisive election victory.[65] Ms. Chang identified some key ingredients to the campaign's success, which compliment findings by Dr. Tatham. First, the campaign worked closely with behavioral psychologists, determining the best way to generate campaign support was build a "viral" level excitement, suggesting a building groundswell of local support and portraying campaign rallies as a spectacle to increase turnout. This approach targeted the ideologically aligned and the politically uncommitted by using mechanisms with universal appear, such as excitement, emotional arousal, and positive attitudes towards the future.[66] Having decided on themes for content, the Obama campaign used social media as the delivery vehicle. It's important to note that all of the candidates in the 2008 election used social media. Much like the U.S. social media war with ISIS, the tactics supersede the technology. The Obama campaign's behavioral messaging was effective and eclipsed its opponents. By Election Day 2008, Obama had four times the number of supporters, four times more viewers on YouTube, and 23 times more followers on Twitter than John McCain.[67] Ms. Chang aptly describes the result: "the most effective Internet marketing plans in history—where social media and technology enabled the individual to activate and participate in a movement."[68]

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

In February 2015, the White House hosted a three-day summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Participants included local law enforcement, intelligence agencies and international leaders – including President Obama. Although the purpose of the summit was to identify effective methods to combat extremism as a whole, the topic of ISIS's strategic messaging was a leading topic. [69] In closing the summit,

President Obama remarked, "We are not at war with Islam…We are at war with people who have perverted Islam."[70] Immediately, the remarks became bi-partisan fodder and cited as evidence of the President's weak stance on terrorism.[71] This criticism of the President's statement and the CVE is ill informed and, arguably, enables ISIS's narrative that the West intends to destroy Islam. Rather, critics say, the U.S. must double-down on military options to eliminate ISIS leaders and sufficiently degrade their military strength.[72] This debate reveals serious disagreement on the U.S. strategy to defeat ISIS. Before the U.S. proceeds further on its campaign against ISIS, it must revise, clarify and achieve appreciable consensus on its strategy.

Re-Examine U.S. Strategy

First, the U.S. must reexamine the ends, ways, and means to defeat ISIS. Understanding how the enemy pursues these strategic foundations, the U.S. must realize that destruction of enemy warfighting capability through destruction of its material resources is likely unfeasible. To achieve victory against ISIS, the U.S. must delegitimize the group and its ideology. Otherwise, physical destruction of ISIS allows for another organization to take its place. Undoubtedly, delegitimizing an ideology is a generational task. However, most U.S government officials already acknowledge the fight against ISIS will take many years. In September 2014, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, declared ISIS: "It is a generational problem. And we should expect that our enemies will adapt their tactics as we adjust our approach."[73] Senator Lindsay Graham offered a grimmer appraisal. "Y'all may live to see the end of this war…I won't."

Despite the inherent difficulty of defeating an ideology, the U.S. victory over Soviet Communism proves it is possible. The differences between the Soviet

communism and Islamic extremism eliminate the Cold War as a detailed template to follow. However, the Cold War offers useful lessons. Cold War strategist George Kennan advocated a strategy of deterrence and containment, based on the assumption the Soviet Union would ultimately fail in the competition for ideas. Kennan argued for "…a long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."[74] Kennan felt a strategy based on destroying the Soviet "supply" of Communism would ultimately fail. Instead, he wanted to delegitimize Communism itself and thus eliminate the "demand" for it all over the world.[75] Likewise, the U.S. must focus on curbing ISIS's ideological expansion and global recruitment. As discussed, one ISIS's primary means to expand and recruit globally is social media. Were George Kennan alive today, it's reasonable to assume his strategic crosshairs would center on ISIS's social media campaign.

Ultimately, the fall of the Soviet Union was not the result of a final apocalyptic military showdown with the West. To borrow from T.S. Eliot, the USSR went out, not with a bang, but a whimper. And like the Soviet Union, the end of ISIS is more likely to resemble a whimper, than a bang.

Although today's communications environment is radically different from that of the Cold War, Kennan's strategy deserves re-examination in light of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. Kennan would likely have disagreed with this approach without an accompanying effort of equal resource and priority to address the demand for ISIS and organizations like it. Can the U.S. military, though destruction of ISIS personnel, weapons, infrastructure, force ISIS to abandon their goals or neutralize their capability to pose a threat to U.S. interests? Perhaps, but it is highly unlikely and the level of U.S

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military escalation required to achieve such an effect is politically and fiscally prohibitive.

Thus, in concert with its military effort, the U.S. must also address the demand for ISIS.

<u>Build Culturally Resonate Narratives</u>

Words have meaning and the U.S. must ensure it uses the right words when

confronting ISIS's strategic communications, particularly when doing so through social

media. As an example, this paper refrains from using the term *jihadist* when labeling

ISIS as an organization. *Jihad* is synonymous with "striving" or "struggling" the religious

duty of all Muslims.[76] Jihad is broken down into two primary categories: the lesser jihad

is the external struggle against non-believers and enemies of the faith while the greater

jihad is the internal struggle of self-control and discipline. Fundamentalist and *Takfiri*

organizations manipulate the term *jihad* to legitimize their use of violence and terrorism.

It is the author's opinion that *Takfiri* is a more accurate and useful term when discussing

ISIS, as it defines Muslims who accuse other Muslims, or followers of other Abrahamic

religions, of apostasy.[77] *Takfiri* carries a negative connotation. In the case of ISIS and al

Qaida, the term *Takfiri* references Muslims who declare themselves righteous enough to

judge and condemn the faithfulness of other Muslims.[78] However, in the case of ISIS,

the *Takfiri* label is more apropos. ISIS condemns AQ and Hamas as soft and deserving

of punishment.[79] Westerners are likely less familiar with the term, but it carries weight in

the Islamic world. For example, Press TV, an Iranian state-owned new organization,

commonly refers to ISIS as *Takfiri*.[80] Press TV's condemnation of ISIS as a Takfiri

organization is understandable, given ISIS's brutality against Shia and conflict with

Hezbollah.

In closing the CVE summit, President Obama went a step further and

recommended divorcing the term *Islamic* as an adjective to describe ISIS. Daily Beast

reporter Dean Obeidullah, who attended the CVE agreed: "ISIS and Al Qaeda not only want people in the Muslim world to think their actions are based on Islam, but they want Westerners to as well. Why? Because they hope that people will retaliate against Muslims living in the West for Al Qaeda and ISIS' actions. If these Muslims are then subject to demonization, hate crimes or worse, the terrorists can tell Muslims: 'See, the West hates Islam! That is why you should join us to fight them.'"[81]

To counter ISIS's strategic messaging with culturally resonate messages and effective terminology, the U.S. must involve experts in the target culture and in religious jurisprudence at every stage of the process. Only then can it move to the dissemination phase with social media. Although dissemination of effective and culturally resonate messages through official U.S. government social media outlets is necessary, the inherent mistrust among the target audience will likely dilute some of the messages impact. To avoid this, the U.S. can implement two approaches. First, CENTCOM's official Twitter feed and Facebook page should reduce its focus on posting battle damage assessments and increase posts with links to news and opinion articles featuring intellectual challenges to ISIS's ideology. These social media tactics are already widely employed in the private sector by businesses seeking expansion of their brand and digital footprint.[82] Further, CENTCOM should use the same social media tactics as ISIS. Clever hashtags can draw larger audiences and increase the viral nature of content. The DOD can also work more closely with the State Department's social media efforts to ensure maximum coherency and consistency in the messaging effort. The State Department is already taking active steps to improve its messaging and expand its efforts against ISIS's social media campaign. First, the State Department

will expand the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). Created in 2011 by Executive Order 13584, the CSCC coordinates strategic messaging against terrorist organizations. Second, it will work extensively through social media to increase the "digital footprint" of U.S. counter messaging efforts.[83]

Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, the mistrust of the U.S. government isn't exclusive to ISIS sympathizers or extremists. Thus, any official association with the U.S. government could weaken the impact of otherwise effective strategic messaging and successful social media dissemination tactics. Sometimes, the U.S. will likely need to avoid official attribution of its strategic messaging. As a potential remedy, Charles Lister of the Brookings Institute suggests challenges to ISIS's religious and political rhetoric come from non-attributional "mole" accounts. Not to be confused with military deception, these mole accounts will avoid acknowledgement and simply spark meaningful debate and discussion using factual evidence backed by research. Further, by manning these mole accounts with individuals possessing cultural and religious expertise, they can present alternative and contrary views to ISIS without appearing obvious. One pitfall of such an approach is inadvertently appearing biased towards the U.S. government or heavy-handed in the rhetorical approach. It is crucial the goals and objectives of these moles remain realistic and tempered. For example, these social media moles are more likely to convince a fence sitter not to join ISIS than actively oppose the terrorist group or embrace the U.S. perspective. To ensure maximum authenticity of these efforts, the goals must remain pragmatic and well defined.

<u>Identify and Exploit ISIS's Strategic Communication Vulnerabilities</u>

Having reset the strategy and built a sufficient bench of cultural, religious, and social media expertise, the U.S should go on the strategic messaging offensive. The U.S. should relentlessly identify and expose ISIS's mistakes and vulnerabilities.

ISIS propensity towards cruel and unusual execution is one such vulnerability. One assumes an organization willing to record burning its prisoners to death, then boastfully disseminates the recording all over the internet, carries any concern over world opinion. However, evidence suggests otherwise. The horrific execution of Jordanian pilot, Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh, was too much even for other Takfiri organizations. Jordanian Salafist leader, Abu Sayyaf, publicly condemned the method of execution and the social media publicizing of it. [84] ISIS appeared to perform damage control in a *Dabiq* article, attempting to discredit Abu Sayyaf's Islamic credentials and attempting to justify the execution. They also offered Islamic religious citations to claim the act was well within the boundaries of Islamic law. This latter claim was risky and could spark more mainstream Islamic condemnation of ISIS. The Kingdom of Jordan apparently believes this kind of debate is useful as well. On February 5, 2015, Jordan released Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, a pro-AQ / anti-ISIS cleric who was also Zarqawi's spiritual advisor. Although there was no official explanation, Jordanian government sources believed al Maqdisi was released based on the likelihood he would condemn ISIS's execution of Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh and compound mounting criticism of ISIS among Islamic extremist circles. [85]

ISIS's condemnation of other Takfiri groups and poaching of their personnel is another prime vulnerability. In September 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a senior jihadist scholar, posed a challenge to ISIS online: "Will this caliphate be a sanctuary for

all the oppressed and a refuge for every Muslim? Or will this creation take a sword against all the Muslims who oppose it?" [86] Another prominent Qaeda-linked jihadist scholar, Abu Qatada al-Falistini, echoed that: "They are merciless in dealing with other jihadists. How would they deal with the poor, the weak and other people?"[87] In February 2015, Hamas condemned ISIS for beheading twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya, "…ugly crime and this shameful approach to the distortion of the image of Islam by violating its principles."[88]

ISIS's greatest rival is AQ and its affiliated movements (AQAM). Although once linked in a tentative agreement brokered by Abu Musab al Zarqawi and Ayman al Zawahiri, the split between ISIS and AQAM is likely irrevocable. From AQ's perspective, ISIS has fallen into the same trap of wanton violence Zarqawi led it into in 2006. Zarqawi's brutality, initially against the Shia to spark a civil war, eventually spread (in true Takfiri fashion) to Sunni tribesmen in al Anbar Province and provoked their revolt known as "The Awakening." Both sides now find themselves in competition for recruitment, funding, and (as many journalists have pointed out) social media dominance.

There is evidence to suggest ISIS recognizes the long-term harm of publicly alienating AQ. Only a month after ISIS published an article in *Dabiq* criticizing AQ and Usama bin Ladin claiming he was soft on the Saudi monarchy, ISIS published a new article entitled, <u>Responding to the Doubts</u>, which amended the previous article and assured readers ISIS held Usama bin Ladin in "good opinion." [89]

However, ISIS's rejection of other Islamic militant groups doesn't end with AQ. The Long War Journal highlighted ISIS's criticisms of the Afghan Taliban in the January

2015 issue of *Dabiq*.[90] The article's author is alleged AQ defector Abu Jarir ash-

Shamali, who criticizes not only the Afghan Taliban, but also all adherents to

Deobandism – a revivalist, 19th century, South Asian Islamic movement that fueled anti-

colonial revolts against British occupation of India.[91] ISIS adheres to *Wahabbism*, also a

highly conservative, 19th century Islamic sect. Speaking on behalf of ISIS, Shamali

wrote, "…we also considered the Taliban in Afghanistan to have shortcomings with

regards to teaching *tawhid* [monotheism] to their individual members…[which] caused

many of their individuals to fall into *shirkī* matters [polytheism, or idolatry] such as

circumambulating graves and wearing amulets. And sadly, these matters exist until

now."[92] In criticizing extremist Deobandi organizations, Shamali risks alienating ISIS in

large swaths of territory it presently claims as part of its future caliphate. Additionally,

ISIS announced the establishment of a caliphate in June 2014 and changed its name to

the Islamic State, denoting that it had expanded beyond Iraq and Levant. Further Abu

Bakr al Baghdadi declared himself *Amir ul Momineen* or 'leader of the faithful'.

Depending on the circumstances, bestowing this title is highly controversial and

potentially divisive. For example, Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar, already

declared himself *Amir ul Momineen* in 1996 when he declared war against the Rabbani

government in Afghanistan. Even AQ's current leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, recognizes

Mullah Omar as *Amir ul Momineen.* So who is the real *Amir ul Momineen*? The U.S.

should take advantage of this dispute and ensure the topic remains in the news cycle

and social media. Given the aforementioned mistrust of U.S. strategic communications

in the Middle East, it would likely be more effective to highlight regional condemnation

and Islamic sources. However, whenever a development like this arises, the U.S.

should highlight it and fuel further discussion; if for no other reason than to keep ISIS's ministers of propaganda on the defensive and busy preparing responses to mounting criticism from its own constituents. Further, it also keeps Takfiri organizations divided and mistrustful of one another. The near-term objective is simple: create friction, raise doubts, and consume ISIS's strategic communication resources. This will not defeat them. However, it will make life more difficult for them; consuming time, energy, and resources ISIS would otherwise invest towards pursuit of its ends and posing a threat to the U.S. and its allies.

Conclusion

Although ISIS's strategic communications and command of social media remain superior to that of the U.S., the February 2015 White House summit on Counter Violent Extremism is a major step in the right direction. This paper argues ISIS's advantages wielding social media, but equally important are the demonstrated social media capabilities of the U.S. when it possess sufficient expertise, understands the audience, and exploits vulnerabilities. Returning to the analogy in the introduction, as the U.S. dedicates greater attention and resources towards plugging the hole, as opposed to near exclusive focus on bailing out the incoming water, the inherent strengths of this nation will hopefully achieve decisive results in defeating ISIS and like-minded Takfiri organizations.

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