Making Sense of Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State

By Charlie Winter

Abstract

This article explores why jihadis make propaganda. Through the analytical lens of Bockstette's 2008 framework for jihadi communication strategies, it assesses two of the Islamic State's most important doctrinal texts on media jihad—the first, a little-known speech by Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir that was published posthumously in 2010, and the second, a field-guide prepared by the Islamic State's official publishing house, the Himmah Library, in 2015. After drawing out the core insights, similarities and presuppositions of each text, it discusses the enduring salience of Bockstette's model on the one hand and these two texts on the other, noting that, while it is imprudent to make policy predictions based on them alone, so too would it be remiss to ignore the strategic insights they contain.

Keywords: Strategic communication; propaganda; insurgency; Islamic State; Islamic State of Iraq; jihadism.

Introduction

In 2017, the Islamic State's utopian project failed—at least, it did in material terms. As the year progressed, the borders of what had once been its proto-state disintegrated; its ranks haemorrhaged, and financial reserves collapsed.[1] On top of all that, once-key urban strongholds like Mosul, Raqqah and Mayadin, to which many had tied the fate of the caliphate project, were recaptured and purged.[2] For these reasons among others, policymakers are already rushing to declare that the Islamic State is defeated, and that, like a flare burning bright one minute and extinguished the next, it is now bound to fade into obscurity.[3] Such optimistic predictions have been made before about this group, and that we are hearing them again now should be cause for concern, not reprieve.[4] Military defeat and ideological failure are not one and the same thing for this organisation and, if 2018 is anything to go by, it is down but certainly not out.[5]

Central to the Islamic State's ability to navigate through its current tribulations is strategic communication, something for which it is already renowned. In the last few years alone, its official propaganda outlets have become household names, and they have already demonstrated that they have no intention of quietening down now that the caliphate is no longer contiguous—indeed, in many cases, their wares have actually increased in technical sophistication.[6] Hence, although the Islamic State's kinetic threat may have diminished, its ideational menace remains a clear and present danger. The present article explores the extent of this danger, assessing it through the lens of internet-mediated communication. Using Bockstette's 2008 work on jihadi strategic messaging as an interpretative framework, it evaluates the Islamic State's past rhetoric on propaganda with a view to identifying prevailing trends in how and why it engages in media warfare—as well as when those trends evolve.[7]

The article proceeds as follows. After a brief review of the existing literature on the Islamic State's digital outreach strategy, I set out Bockstette's understanding of what motivates jihadi communication. In the section that follows, I use it to inform a critical analysis of two seminal texts on Islamic State propaganda activism—the first, a little-known speech by Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, and the second, a field-guide prepared by the Islamic State's official publishing house, the Himmah Library.[8] In the conclusion, I discuss the enduring salience of both these texts, noting that, while it is imprudent to make policy predictions based solely on them, so too would it be remiss to ignore the strategic insights they contain.

Literature Review

Much ink has been spilled on the Islamic State, especially in the context of its approach to outreach, which is perhaps the single most researched aspect of the organisation. Scholars have tended to explore it from three angles: thematic analyses of its aggregate output; content analyses of individual texts or groups of texts; and quantitative analyses of its social media support-base.

The first body of work is characterised by studies from the likes of Zelin, Milton, and Winter, whose respective efforts revolve, like Kimmage's earlier examination of al-Qa'ida in Iraq's communication strategic, around archives—built both in the short- and long-term—of official media output.[9] Generally speaking, their findings are consistent with one another: they each identify a net decline in the amount of propaganda being produced by the group, one that has roughly correlated with (but not necessarily been caused by) its territorial contraction since 2015. While a series of intuitive conclusions may be reached about this, there is no agreement as to what exactly caused this deceleration, and the Islamic State has remained entirely silent on the matter. It is worth noting that the consensus is not quite complete, with an account by Fisher contending that there has been no such productivity decline.[10]

The next stream of research comprises mixed methods analyses of individual genres of Islamic State propaganda. There have been myriad explorations into its magazines, Dabiq and Rumiyah, with some also turning their attention to the Arabic-language equivalent, Naba'.[11] Others, like Winkler et al. and Adelman, have focused on decrypting the hundreds of infographics it has published since 2015, while scholars such as Nanninga and Dauber and Robinson have instead concentrated on its production of videos.[12] El Damanhoury and Milton are among the very few to have examined its mass production of still images, about which much more can and should be said.[13] Notwithstanding the diversity of their subject matter, these genre studies often reach similar conclusions regarding the presence of mainstream visual rhetoric in the Islamic State's propaganda— that is, motifs and tropes that are very much at home in contemporary Western media culture.

The last of these three research trends focuses on the other side of the communication equation: it consists of explorations into Islamic State support-base dynamics on social networking and file-sharing platforms. Since 2014 in particular, jihadi activism on websites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube has attracted a lot of attention from scholars and policy analysts alike. Carter, Maher and Neumann's investigation was one of the first such mapping efforts, and it was followed by similarly orientated explorations from the likes of Klausen and Berger and Morgan.[14] Later research on the same issue by Conway et al. and Alexander illustrates that the presence of jihadis on these mainstream platforms has declined since 2015, with new, privacy-maximising services like Telegram, Wickr, and Pidgin coming to take their place as preferred communication hubs for jihadi extremists.[15]

The present study builds on the above, albeit from a slightly different perspective. Drawing on the Islamic State's own rhetoric about media warfare, it contributes to a less prominent cluster of outreach research that evaluates the group's communication imperatives by examining documents that it itself has published. Relatively few have approached the issue from this angle. Among them are Rogan, whose 2007 monograph on al-Qa'ida's approach to propaganda provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of jihadi outreach;[16] Whiteside, whose historical exploration of Islamic State media operations is informed by documentary evidence dating as far back as 2003;[17] Winter, whose analysis is based on the same Himmah Library text on media strategy that is explored below;[18] and Milton, whose work is based on internal documents captured, translated and declassified by the United States Department of Defense.[19] Considered together, these accounts demystify some of the more intricate details of the group's media production, distribution and evaluation activities—and, crucially in the present context, they also inform us as to what strategic considerations drive them. By testing the validity of Bockstette's analytical framework in the specific context of the Islamic State—which, lest we forget, was embryonic when it was first proposed—this article contributes to and builds upon this last body of work.

Jihadi Insurgency and Strategic Communication

Writing in 2008 in the context of al-Qa'ida's media strategy, Carsten Bockstette, then a lieutenant colonel in the German Air Force, proposed that the way in which jihadis conceptualise the communication battlespace means that they are in a highly advantageous position vis-à-vis their more numerous, better-resourced, and better-equipped adversaries. Indeed, by taking advantage of the "favorable communication asymmetry" that is proffered by the nimbleness with which they can navigate the global information environment, jihadis, he holds, have been able to "compensate for a significant part" of what they are lacking in terms of "military might."[20] Relatively unchallenged, they are able to deploy meticulously planned, high-risk outreach strategies using both social and mainstream media, influencing friend and foe in almost equal measure.

Typically, jihadi communication campaigns revolve around one of three strategic objectives: propagation, legitimisation, and intimidation.[21] The first essentially refers to efforts to attract new recruits, draw in new donors, and expand the reach of their ideology. The second speaks to a more defensive form of communication, one that focuses on justifying violence and situating the actions of the movement in question within a broader Islamic context. The last focuses on the adversary audience; it manifests most prominently in terrorist operations deployed because of their communicative, not kinetic, potential.

In pursuit of these three sets of objectives, jihadi groups are said to work to a five-step model, one that is common to much effective strategic communication planning and could thus be applied in the context of many political marketing campaigns—including those that are non-jihadi:

i.   Strategic end-state assessment and development.

ii. Communication infrastructure evaluation.

iii. Target audience analysis and channel selection.

iv. Plan development and execution.

v.   Monitoring and evaluation.[22]

By adopting this approach, Bockstette contends that jihadi communicators have been able to exploit a fundamental asymmetry that their enemies—as risk-averse states often (but not always) bound by the ethical and moral conventions that have come to be associated with modern-day warfighting—are simply not party to.

While there was much evidence for the validity of this framework back in 2008, the advanced state of jihadi media production today bears little resemblance to the rough-cut tapes that characterised it in the 2000s. Nevertheless, these same three strategic objectives have withstood the tests of time, something that I endeavour to demonstrate below.

Framework, Applied

In this section, I interpret two doctrinal documents relating to the Islamic State's media war, drawing on Bockstette's framework throughout. The first text is a speech attributed to Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir—a successor to Abu Mu'sab al-Zarqawi and former prime minister and war minister of the Islamic State of Iraq, the direct predecessor to what is now known as the Islamic State. Entitled, 'To those entrusted with the message,' it surfaced posthumously in 2010, when the group was at its lowest ebb. The second text is a field-guide for media operatives that was published by the Islamic State's printing press, the Himmah Library. Entitled, 'Media operative, you are a mujahid too,' it first appeared in mid-2015, when the group was at the zenith of its influence. Both documents are similarly orientated: each addresses core supporters of the group, setting out the strategic value of media activism with a view to justifying why the Islamic State invests so much time and energy in it. Below, each is considered in turn.

Text I: "To those entrusted with the message"

Stripped of ideological window-dressing, the Abu Hamzah speech consists of fourteen guidelines falling into one of four thematic clusters. Three of these clusters correlate almost exactly to Bockstette's core communication objectives—propagation, legitimisation, and intimidation. The fourth relates to educational and administrative matters, pursuits that, while interesting, are not considered to be motivating factors for propaganda activism. The discussion below is thus limited to the first three of these clusters.[23]

Throughout the text, Abu Hamzah comes back to the perceived importance of proactive and positive outreach, holding that it is the chief means with which to propagate the Islamic State's ideology and creed. He variously advises that media workers should "establish communication and dialogue with those who sympathize with and support the issue of Islamic media";[24] "prepare a daily video news bulletin that focuses on updates and analyses events, especially those relating to the mujahidin";[25] and compile "a memorandum of proposals and guidance on a monthly basis for the mujahidin and the commanders of jihad."[26] If each of these instructions is correctly implemented, he holds, Islamic State media operatives will be able to enlarge their global support base with unparalleled efficiency. Indeed, through them, they could variously "raise [the mujahidin's] spirits, frighten [the mujahidin's] enemies," and—perhaps most importantly in this context—make the group and its supporters "appear as one ummah fighting for one objective on many frontlines."[27]

Abu Hamzah also makes much of the media workers' potentially pivotal role in legitimising the Islamic State in the face of its adversaries, noting that they are on the very frontline of defensive communications. He states that media workers are beholden to constantly "defam[e] the image of the infidels, expos[e] their immorality, and describ[e] every defect they have."[28] Simultaneously, they must work to understand the stuff of which the adversaries' arguments is made—the implication being that counter-messaging campaigns should be developed based on this awareness.[29] If this is done successfully, he contends, the regular media operative will be equipped with everything that they need to "expose their [enemies'] contradictions, violations, and grave sins."[30] Essentially, then, this second stream of operations revolves around the targeted derision of any ideas that run contrary to the Islamic State and its belief system—and that includes those which emerge in the mainstream news. Thus, it appears to be geared towards entrenching the group's exclusivist in-group identity, something intended to leave it legitimised and its adversaries discredited.

On the topic of intimidation, Abu Hamzah speaks at length; indeed, it is the very first thing he mentions. In particular, he proposes two key lines of aggressive communication operations: "sow[ing] terror in the hearts of our enemy using everything permitted by shari'ah for this purpose"—including, that is, terrorism and violent propaganda—and "provid[ing] hackers with instructions" to deploy electronic warfare against enemy institutions such as banks and political foundations in order to "terrify those who have shares in these establishments and destroy their trust."[31] Here, he hints at the potentially war-changing impact of propaganda of the deed and propaganda of the virtual deed. As well as fostering a sense of the Islamic State's apparent ubiquity, intimidation-focused influence campaigns conceived along these lines are said to be a way to compound, in the eyes of both friend and foe, the perception of organisational "strength" in terms of "determination and number."[32]

Notwithstanding the fact that this speech was made nearly a decade ago by a man who is now long-dead, the ideas it contains continue to run strong within the Islamic State's media ministry. They have been writ large across its outreach activities for years—seen in anything from its utopian promotions of life inside the caliphate and counter-messaging campaigns to its deployment of terrorism and distribution of ultraviolent propaganda—and, as is demonstrated below, continued to undergird them when the group was at the height of its power in 2015.

Text II: "Media operative, you are a mujahid too"

The Himmah Library booklet was composed primarily for in-theatre consumption, its core goal being to motivate Islamic State media operatives in their day-to-day efforts. Setting out the strategic importance of propaganda production and distribution, it describes the imperative for media jihad and, just as is the case with

the above, speaks to motivational ideals strikingly similar to those identified by Bockstette.

The authors are unambiguous when it comes to the role of media production in propagating their ideology and expanding the movement. In the introduction, they state that the first goals of the media operative are:

> "To buoy the morale of soldiers, spread news of their victories and good deeds, encourage the people to support them by clarifying their creed, methodology and intentions and bridge the intellectual gap between the mujahidin and ordinary Muslims."[33]

In other words, propaganda is considered to be the central vehicle for popularising the Islamic State brand—anything from its news and current affairs to more esoteric, ideological matters that relate to its creed. This idea closely echoes what Abu Hamzah stated on the matter: he too held that media outreach is the chief means with which to incite 'regular Muslims,' en masse, to jihad. In any case, the authors frequently return to this notion, variously noting that there are few more important things than "bring[ing] glad tidings to the believers' hearts," "transmit[ting] to the simple people a true picture of the battle," and "steering others towards [the ideology] and opening their eyes to it."[34]

The authors are equally explicit about the need to defend the Islamic State through legitimisation-focused media operations. They write at length about "the intellectual invasion" being conducted by Western nations against Muslims the world over, contending that media workers must "declar[e] the truth" in the face of their "daily lies and professionalised falsification," responding aggressively to the "frenzied media campaign" they are waging.[35] Moreover, given the recent "intensification of this propaganda war"—something that jihadis have long complained about—they hold that defensive communication operations have never been more important: after all, this battle is being fought not just for the reputation of the Islamic State as an organisation, but for the very existence and future of the religion of Islam.[36]

Just as it does in the Abu Hamzah speech, a discussion of the intimidation logic behind media jihad takes centre-stage in the Himmah Library text. The authors write extensively about how aggressive communication operations are a central part of both "verbal jihad" and "jihad of the sword," and they devote an entire section to its value in "infuriating the enemy."[37] Because "everything that angers the enemies of Allah" is a legitimate "form of jihad," they hold that offensive psychological operations should be viewed as a logical extension, or even a substitution, to kinetic campaigns.[38] It is worth noting that, because the Islamic State's war is total, it matters not which aspect of the adversary is targeted—whether it is the government and its military or its softer, more vulnerable underbelly, the general public.

Considered together, the field-guide's eight chapters repackage and reiterate much of what Abu Hamzah stated five years earlier. This is significant, because the Islamic State at the time of its release in 2015 was almost unrecognisable from the Islamic State in 2010: the group was ascendant, not floundering, having just declared its caliphate, attracted tens of thousands of volunteer supporters to Iraq and Syria, and provoked a global war. Given that, at the time of writing, we are on the cusp of another new phase in the group's history, one in which it is structurally much closer to the Islamic State of 2010, it is critical that this evolution—or lack thereof—is kept in mind.

Concluding Remarks

By examining the above texts through the lens of Bockstette's framework, this article has illustrated its ongoing relevance in the context of jihadi strategic communication. Judging by its own rhetoric on the matter, the Islamic State does indeed appear to consider media warfare to be an effective way to propagate and legitimise itself and intimidate its adversaries. That these objectives have continually been at the heart of its information strategy across some of its most difficult years is interesting, especially given that they did not seem to change even after it had transformed itself from an ailing insurgency into a booming proto-state. This points towards the versatility of Bockstette's model as a general framework for communication at times of war, one that places

information at the heart of the asymmetric arsenal come rain or shine.

A recent audio statement by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi suggests its salience will continue to be the case in the aftermath of the group's most recent material collapse. Fifty-five minutes in length, the speech made for a predictable retelling of the last few years—the central proposition was that the current tribulations were all part of God's plan and that all would soon be well. In the course of making this point, though, Abu Bakr also spoke specifically about the state of the media war. Among other things, he closely echoed both Abu Hamzah and the Himmah Library field-guide, stating that his caliphate was under more ideological pressure than ever before from its foes, who had intensified their "campaign of intentional disinformation and defamation" through the establishment of specially devoted "centres, committees, and significant numbers of trolls." In view of this, he warned "of taking news from any other source than the Central Media of the Islamic State" and called upon his media activist listeners to double down in their efforts, "renew the[ir] covenants, make further sacrifices, and divert [the disbelievers] away from fighting"—a statement that was reiterated in the October 2018 video, 'Inside the caliphate VIII.'[39]

As per the above directive—which was enthusiastically circulated in multiple languages by Islamic State supporters on Telegram—the media jihad rages on, even as its kinetic counterpart slows down. Hence, in spite of continuing efforts to limit the dissemination of jihadi propaganda online, which are having an undeniable impact on the group, the strategic communication space could still stand to become even more important to it than it already is.[40]

With this in mind, it is probably fair to say that Bockstette's framework is as salient today as it was ten years ago. However, it is not quite complete: at least one more core communication objective—that of instruction—exists alongside his tripartite structure. While scarce in quantity, the Islamic State's instructional materials have been central to its aggressive communication campaigns in recent years. Indeed, in the last two years alone, its central media offices have issued detailed advice on how to commit terrorist attacks using anything from knives and cars to more complex tactics like hostage-taking and bomb-making.[41] To be sure, the group is not the first to produce such materials—they have a rich pedigree both in and out of the jihadi paradigm, what with the likes of AQAP's Inspire magazine and 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Muqrin's 2004 publication, 'A practical course for guerrilla warfare'[42]—and nor will it be the last. However, their global impact is, at least at the time of writing, unprecedented.[43] While, to an extent, they have merely been geared towards intimidating adversaries, when one considers that releases like the video 'You must fight them, o muwahhid' have had a direct role in executed terrorist attacks, there can be no denying their pedagogical value.[44] For that reason, in months and years to come, we should think instead of there being a quadripartite, not tripartite, motivational structure for jihadi internet-mediated outreach, one consisting of propagation, legitimisation, intimidation, and instruction.

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Notes

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[6] While many contend that the Islamic State's media capabilities have been degraded across the board, this is not actually the case. In narrative terms, its propaganda has become less complex—that is to say, there is less variation to it—but, in terms of technical and editorial sophistication, it has improved. See, for example: Islamic State, "Flames of War II," AlHayat Media Center, 29 November 2017. Accessed at: https://jihadology.net/2017/11/29/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-flames-of-war-ii/.

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[21] Ibid. 11-12.

[22] Ibid. 9.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Anon. Mujahid, you are also the media operative. 13-14.

[34] Ibid. 32, 40, 25.

[35] Ibid. 44, 39, 42, 15.

[36] Ibid. 10; for another example of this content, see: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi," Federation of American Scientists, 2005. Accessed at: https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf.

[37] Ibid. 13, 16, 26.

[38] Ibid. 26.

[39] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "And give glad tidings to those who are patient," Furqan Foundation, August 2018. Accessed at: archive.org; see also: Islamic State, "Inside the khilafah VIII," AlHayat Media Center, 30 October 2018. Accessed at: https://jihadology.net/2018/10/30/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-inside-the-caliphate-8/.

[40] See, for example: Milton. Down, but not out.

[41] See, for example, the "just terror" advice pages in its foreign-language magazines, Dabiq and Rumiyah, or the video: Islamic State, "You must fight them, o muwahhid," Raqqah Province Media Office, November 2016.

[42] See Anne Stenerson, "The Internet: A virtual training camp?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:2, 2008, 215-233; and Norman Cigar, *Al-Qa'ida's doctrine for insurgency: Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin's "A practical course for guerrilla warfare,"* Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009.

[43] For an account of how other such materials have tried (and failed), see: Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: Mētis, techne, and the limitations of online artifacts for Islamist terrorists," Terrorism and Political Violence 22:2, 2010, 177-197.

[44] Ben Farmer, "YouTube video that taught Manchester bomber how to make explosives is still being shared on the site, US probe hears," Telegraph, 17 January 2018. Accessed at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/17/youtube-video-taught-manchester-bomber-make-explosives-still/.