

# ISIS and Media

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## **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS INSIGHTS & ANALYSIS**

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## Introduction

As swords and guns were the only decisive weapons of past and played a central role in battles, the media (including, mobile phones, cameras, internet, computer and TV) have become the modern tools and game-changer in war and strategy building. Today, the media has a huge influence on the masses, can convey messages and propagandas, and implant certain ideas into the minds of its viewers. It is no surprise that the terrorist networks are fully aware of the power and authority of media technology and are effectively using it to achieve their goals as well as to reach their targeted audience.

Media campaign has always been a vital tool of ISIS propaganda all over the world and the group's sophisticated and skilled media department uses well-planned strategy to target local and worldwide audience. The group has developed capability to publish their own magazines, newspapers, pamphlets and widely use internet (especially social networking websites) to propagate their ideas and goals.

The ISIS also skillfully uses media to legitimize their authority in the controlled areas, threaten its enemies while directly communicating with the people all over the world. Consequently media gives ISIS an opportunity to not only attract like-minded people globally but also frighten its opponents.

According to Deputy Commissioner of Intelligence & Counterterrorism of the NYPD, John Miller, “[the ISIS leader] Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi has demonstrated a good understanding of military tactics but he may have the most creative marketing sense for packaging mass murder since Goebbels.”

To this day, ISIS remains active in social media apparently for several reasons: firstly, to publicize its campaign of slaughtering captives and instill fear in the hearts and minds of their opponents and rivals. Secondly, to indoctrinate their ideas into the minds of youth (especially among Muslims), as well as to recruit new militants, strengthen its force and area of influence. Thirdly, to legitimize their authority in the controlled regions with propagation of the “benefits” of living in Islamic State. Fourthly, to establish liaison with other militants, supporters or sympathizers and to persuade them to execute ISIS-style attacks in foreign lands.

Following are some of the examples of ISIS media campaigns:

### **Social Media**

ISIS media wing use Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and other social networking websites to upload its propaganda material and observe dispersal of its ideas globally in matter of minutes or hours.

Initially ISIS used social media to compete with Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria) and social media was used as a stage for airing accusations and debate over the criteria of jihad in Syria. At that stage, ISIS's main focus was to gain popularity in Iraq and Syria and strengthen its position in Arab world. However, after ISIS achieved its initial goals and captured important cities in Iraq and Syria, the group started to propagate its authority and show its ability to govern, by tweeting pictures of administrative services in the areas under its control.

After ISIS captured Mosul city, its messages

pivoted towards the West. Although majority of the group's posts and messages were still in Arabic but ISIS also started to post tweets in English and translated videos, which was to target Western audience. One example of it was the image of two ISIS fighters posing over a caption comparing jihad to the video game "Call of Duty", which was aimed to attract young Westerners.

Although the images circulated in Western media were only projecting inhumane and brutal behavior by ISIS, but the local media (especially the ones under ISIS influence) portrayed both sides. ISIS media depicted piles of corpses (to threaten its enemies), and also showed its fighters passing out candy (conveying a message that, while ISIS turned the rest of the world into a graveyard, for the faithful life would be sweet).

Since Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other related websites are open and public by nature; therefore ISIS took advantage of these platforms by using it as a propaganda tool. ISIS fighters often use social networking websites to post messages, images and videos, while the fighters on the battlefield often pose next to mutilated bodies to be seen by anyone following the fighting.

ISIS media arm effectively use social media to publicize its campaign of brutal killings and threaten its enemies. It was also observed that the group's brutality was intentionally disseminated by its media wing, in order to enhance its military and weaken its enemy's moral and resistance. This strategy worked effectively for ISIS, as many soldiers fighting the group feared for their lives and flee from battlefield.

ISIS also used Twitter and Facebook pages to make appeals to solicit online funds, attract

more supporters and recruit new-comers. According to intelligence sources, ISIS also received financial support through online funding, which helped the organization to further strengthen its military and reinforce its authority in the region.

According to Israeli spy agency, the Mossad, ISIS terrorists have also been increasingly using business and marketing websites such as eBay and Reddit to send coded messages to their members and supporters around the world.

Hundreds of users have also reportedly subscribed to the dozens of application on the internet and have made use of Android smart phones apps using the Google Play store.

All in all, ISIS media campaign has proven to be quite successful in achieving the group's goal, as its supporters and followers were turned on by the aggressive expansion, savagery and slaughter campaign, while the group induced fear within its enemies that they could be the next victims of terrorism and would face the wrath of ISIS if they stand in their way.

Meanwhile many youngsters and the group's



sympathizers abroad were lured by its media campaign and were encouraged by ISIS to execute lone wolf terrorist attacks in their respective countries.

John G. Horgan, a terrorism expert and a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, was quoted as saying, “They [ISIS] are very adept at targeting a young audience... There’s an urgency ‘Be part of something that’s bigger than yourself and be part of it now.’”

### **Print Media**

More recently the ISIS has started publishing several magazines and news sheets to propagate its campaign among the locals, while anyone following the groups’ activities can also get access to them on internet.

The jihadist group has also launched an online magazine to influence its supporters and recruit more fighters. The ISIS magazine named “The Islamic State Report” projects the life within the so-called Islamic state and propagates the benefits of living under the caliphate. ISIS often publishes photographs and interviews of its fighters as well as citizens showing how they are enjoying “prosperity... under the shade of the Caliphate.

The ISIS magazines also publish interviews and pictures of captured soldiers and spies to warn foreign and local opponents and scare their rivals, who are trying to infiltrate the organization. For instance, in February 2015, ISIS published an interview with the alleged Israeli spy Muhammad Said Ismail Musallam, in its magazine ‘Dabiq’. In the interview Musallam claimed to have been spying for Mossad about ISIS’ weapons, missiles warehouses and bases. In this interview, ISIS also put a word of warning for other infiltrators through their captive, as the magazine disclosed Musallam’s message for

other spies, calling them to avoid helping the infidels and apostates. The message further quoted Musallam saying that, “do not think you are smart that you can spy on the Islamic state they are impenetrable, you will not succeed at all and you will be arrested.”

The ISIS print media campaign has proven to be quite successful in spreading their agenda in nearby areas and cities of Iraq and Syria, to warn their rivals and spies working against the group, while online magazines are mainly used to attract foreigners to join the group.

Currently, ISIS has online daily newspapers and slick monthly magazines, which glorifies their fighters and their battles, as well as release threats to its enemies.

### **Electronic Media**

As ISIS’s crimes started to receive extensive media coverage, masked men holding knives, guns and black flags became a fixture of broadcast news. Every new story of ISIS fighters beheading hostages or brutally killing civilian population becomes a challenge for media to tell the truth without either propagating or censoring its evil.

Several media channels often unintentionally fall into the ISIS trap and propagate their radical ideas and/or induce fear among the citizens. While it is also observed that some teenagers do get inspired by the terrorist group and attempt to imitate their brutal acts. For instance, in February 2015, Japanese security forces arrested an 18-year old boy for killing a 13-year old junior high school student, Ryoto Uemura. According to an unnamed Japanese police source, “Some investigators suspect (the criminal) watched Internet videos showing the execution of hostages by the Islamic State (ISIS) fighters and sought to mimic them”.

Today, much of the worldwide community

lives on the edge of panic, thus TV channels and news media play a huge role in fueling hysteria. Electronic media and news websites often publicize terrorists' propaganda campaign, and cause fear among the general population.

For example, Fox News became the only US media organization to embed an ISIS video of burning a hostage to death, on its website, and broadcast the video in full. These moves not only spread fear among the citizens but furthermore discourage the allies fighting against ISIS.

There are also several European, Asian and Middle Eastern TV channels that closely follow ISIS campaign and show the horrific images from ISIS decapitation videos, shooting clips and even they propaganda videos and images. Electronic media and TV channels unknowingly help ISIS achieve their goals (i.e. to portray their brutality and instigate fear among the masses and soldiers fighting the Islamic State, attract like-minded extremists, and incite chaos and killings) by giving excessive media coverage to the group and their actions.

### **Modus Operandi of ISIS Electronic Warfare**

Initially after declaring the caliphate in Iraq and Syria, ISIS started to recruit skilled locals, who were either active on social media websites or had IT education background. Many talented people living in these war-torn countries had no stable jobs or constant source of income, let alone future opportunities of getting a decent job; hence they willingly or unwillingly joined the ISIS media wing in return for some money and respect.

Later on, ISIS cunningly used the talent of

young Muslims and paid handsomely to its appointed developers and audio & video editors, moreover the group also cleverly lured its sympathizers with an incentive that they can join the "noble cause" without even entering the battlefield. The idea of being a valued member of influential organization (i.e. ISIS) just by sitting in front of computer or in a safe location is indeed very attractive for radical youngsters and ISIS sympathizers; therefore they either join the group or show their support.

The ISIS has also employed highly skilled social media experts in its electronic warfare and propaganda campaign, who are not only active in Syria and Iraq but also maintain contacts and links within several other countries and regions including UK, U.S. Australia, South Asia, Middle East and North Africa.

Counterterrorism expert John Miller believes that, "the real media genius of ISIS is in the team that produces their videos; at once dark, horrifying and compelling, they are slickly produced with special effects and a movie-maker's sense of story arc and drama."

According to Western defence commentators "experts are impressed with the blend of technical, tactical and psychological savvy displayed by Islamic State (IS) planners and executors thus far."

It is also surprising that dozens of creative, talented and Western-educated youths have been lured to join the IT campaign of ISIS.

The maximum use of internet, Twitter, Skype, Facebook and WhatsApp applications has linked the ISIS cyber experts with not only sympathizers and supporters but also adventure-seeking youths in many



Western states. Dozens of sympathizers began promoting ISIS ideas as un-appointed franchise machineries making it difficult for many governments to locate and control the electronic offensive including cyber-attacks, hackings and penetrations.

The ISIS network has effectively not only set up an internal surveillance system, control the local and foreign media but also used TV channels to promote their own agendas and goals.

According to Western writers the ISIS' battlefield adaptations and tactical innovations have been a resounding success.

Counterterrorism expert John Miller said, "Baghdadi has given young people a "tangible... here-and-now place" that recruits can actually travel to, and IS lives this promise "out loud", on Facebook and Twitter, in online magazines and on YouTube." While explaining how ISIS media-wing lures new recruits, he further stated that, "videos and the magazines paint the Islamic State as a real place, a sovereign nation, where any Muslim can come and live with their family," Miller says. "If they don't have a family, no problem, ISIS will find them a wife and a nice place to live."

### **Measures to counter ISIS media campaign**

International community (especially coalition against ISIS) has already been alarmed by the ISIS threat and has taken several steps to counter the terrorist organization. However, these measures have proven to be ineffective in countering the threats from the group and counter the media wing of ISIS.

Following are some of the examples of measures taken to counter ISIS media campaign:

- American and British intelligence agencies (namely, CIA and Mi6) have been working closely with social networking websites to track and take down ISIS accounts.
- MI6 and Mossad have recruited linguist specialists in Arabic, Urdu and Pashto to translate the online magazines that both al Qaeda and ISIS are publishing with instructions.
- Twitter has stepped up its battle against online terrorism with the suspension of at least 2000 accounts linked to ISIS supporters.
- Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been constantly blocking ISIS accounts and taking down ISIS messages and videos. Although these websites has a fast-track system for removing videos and posts, however ISIS supporters are putting them up again by newly created accounts within minutes or hours.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Law enforcement agencies of international community and regional states should formulate a strategy to streamline an information sharing network with an aim to track ISIS leaders, members and its supporters' misuse of media and impose legal sanctions and punishments.
- The regional intelligence agencies should engage local IT experts to counter cyber offensive by ISIS men and closely monitor the IT-related aggressiveness and media campaign by radicals.
- Regional states should train media persons and set guidelines for media houses to launch a counter-campaign to unmask the callousness and brutalities of ISIS and other radical elements of the society and promote moderate ideas and religious harmony;
- Measures should be taken to control and



ban the propagation of ISIS and other hate-promoters, while an effective ‘media strategy’ should be formed and implemented in the Middle East and Asia to address the grievances of misguided youths in the Middle East.

- The U.S. in close cooperation with other regional countries should join hands in combining their counter strategies and formulate a sincere partnership with all regional states. At the same time, communication, information sharing between the Western allies and regional countries should also be enhanced.
- A fresh international drive should be launched to prevent discriminative policies in the Middle East and Muslim World and efforts should be made to addressing the miserable conditions of the people of Iraq, Syria and vulnerable countries, while unconditional aid and relief should be provided to the war-torn nations.

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