



How ISIS Survives Defeat: Propaganda and Decisive Minorities

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Despite suffering major losses of territory and personnel, Islamic State (ISIS) has continued to produce propaganda. Understanding the strategic role of propaganda in the group's campaign strategy offers telling insights into the ISIS phenomenon and what it may do next.

As Islamic State (ISIS) continues to hemorrhage personnel, resources and territory across Syria and Iraq – the heartlands of its so-called ‘Caliphate’ – the world is witnessing another bloody chapter in the group’s ‘boom-bust’ history. ISIS’s propaganda machine has not been immune from this destruction with recent [airstrikes](#) killing two crucial figures: the charismatic spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani on 30 August and the self-declared Minister of Information Wa’il Al-Fayad on 7 September. Nevertheless, ISIS has continued to churn out messaging designed to lure friends and foes alike into exaggerating its waning strengths while deflecting from its mounting losses.

Just this month, ISIS released a new online magazine called *Rumiyah* (Rome) – a mix of rehashed content from its Arabic newsletter *Al-Naba* and segments drawn from *Dabiq* such as ‘Among the believers are men’ which eulogizes Western foreign fighters. Meanwhile, ISIS videos continue to capture global media attention. In the last fortnight, videos commemorating Eid Al-Adha were released by several ISIS *wilayats*, including Wilayat al-Khayr’s ‘The making of illusion’ showing captives being slaughtered like animals, while another video (‘But if you return, we will return’) featured child executioners. Whether ISIS’s propaganda efforts are ramping up or down in response to its losses, the central role of propaganda in ISIS’s politico-military campaign strategy will

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remain unchanged even as messaging themes shift with its fortunes.

Understanding the strategic role of propaganda in ISIS's campaign strategy and how messaging trends reflect this relationship offers telling insights into the ISIS phenomenon and what it may do next.

ISIS's war of meaning and control



Image by thierry ehrman via [Flickr](#).

ISIS are the great strategic plagiarists of modern asymmetric warfare. As Dr Craig Whiteside's excellent [analysis](#) highlights (also [here](#)), whatever is unique about the ISIS phenomenon is significantly outweighed by what it has cannibalized (knowingly or unknowingly) from insurgency/revolutionary war doctrinaires like Mao Tse-Tung, Che Guevara or Abu Musab Al-Suri. Like other modern insurgencies, ISIS's war is characterized by two interrelated contests: a 'battle of control' between opposing politico-military apparatuses (e.g. ISIS versus the Iraqi government) and a 'battle of meaning' for the 'hearts and minds' of local, regional and even transnational populations. ISIS fights the former battle with a spectrum of politico-military actions that results in the group looking remarkably state-like in its shrinking areas of dominance (i.e. bureaucratized governance, conventional military capabilities), more like a guerrilla warfare movement in contested areas (i.e. informal governance functions, asymmetric warfare) and a terrorist network on the fringes of its regional and global reach (i.e. terrorist violence, no governance initiatives). The 'battle of meaning' occurs largely in the 'information theatre' and it is a contest for not only the dominant narrative (i.e. how the conflict is described), but to shape the perceptions and polarize the support of audiences (i.e. how the conflict is understood and judged).

Cartels

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While it may be popular to point to ISIS's use of social media and flashy production to explain the allure of its propaganda, far more important is how ISIS uses a diversity of messages to leverage powerful psychosocial forces and strategic factors that are pertinent to its audiences. Indeed, ISIS propaganda is characterized by two broad categories of messaging: *rational-choice appeals* (highlighting how ISIS are pragmatically addressing supporter needs via politico-military actions) and *identity-choice appeals* (interplaying identity, solution and crisis to influence how the conflict and its actors are perceived). Of course, ISIS's battles of meaning and control are deeply interrelated and strategic success is often reliant upon how seamlessly both can be intertwined. As Robert Taber [argues](#) in *War of the Flea*: 'The guerrilla fighter is primarily a propagandist, an agitator, a disseminator of the revolutionary idea, who uses the struggle itself – the actual physical conflict – as an instrument of agitation.'

Success in modern small wars is largely dependent on winning popular 'support'. But support operates on a spectrum where, at one end, there is 'behavioral' support (compliance with a group's politico-military system) while, on the other, is a deeper 'attitudinal' or 'perceptual' support (adherence to a group's agenda). [Research](#) has shown that armed groups are not necessarily strongest where support is highest but rather support tends to be highest in places where armed groups are strongest. This points to a dominance of 'behavioral' support under such circumstances. Having conducted dozens of field interviews as part of my research with civilians, migrants and activists, as well as former and current fighters, from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Chechnya, almost all described the civilian population as largely apolitical whose 'support' tended to follow whoever was in control. But another trend emerged: interviewees regularly cited the influence of what could be described as 'decisive minorities' who had a disproportionate influence – perhaps as a

consequence of their social status, access to resources, social connectedness or zeal for the ‘cause’ (i.e. deep attitudinal/perceptual support) – on how the broader population assigned their support.

This dynamic was particularly prominent amongst those who had lived in or near ISIS-controlled territories. ISIS wanted the behavioral support (acquiescence) of local populations but knew that it would be important to ‘win’ and mobilise their ‘decisive minorities’ while killing those ‘decisive minorities’ that were committed to its opponents (ISIS often describes the latter as ‘harvesting’). ISIS messages to potential foreign fighters and ‘lone wolf’ terrorists globally fundamentally appeals to ‘decisive minorities’. After all, ISIS are broadly despised by Muslim populations, as evidenced by [polling](#), and so their propaganda is *often* designed to drive wedges between not just friends and enemies but tacit and active supporters. While every violent non-state political group appeals to ‘decisive minorities’ to varying degrees, it seems particularly important in ISIS strategies. Trends in ISIS propaganda offer useful insights into these dynamics.

The ISIS sirens

While ISIS messaging regularly draws upon a diverse range of themes and issues, what is given priority and greater emphasis will inevitably depend on strategic calculations and circumstances. In the year after ISIS captured Mosul in mid-2014, certain themes were more pronounced than others in its propaganda. For example, ISIS tended to frame its politico-military successes as manifestations of divine-approval and their enemies’ defeats as proof of divine punishment. A central feature of this messaging was ISIS’s regular promotion of how it was [pragmatically](#) addressing the needs of populations under its control thanks to its politico-military prowess and the ineptitude of its

opponents: “In the midst of a raging war with multiple fronts and numerous enemies, life goes on in the Islamic State. The soldiers of Allah do not liberate a village, town or city, only to abandon its residents and ignore their needs.” Particularly prominent during this period were communiqués showing the variety of ISIS’s bureaucratized governance initiatives and the successes of its hybrid military operations. To local audiences, ISIS promised security, stability and livelihoods. To regional and transnational audiences, ISIS messaging wove together rational- and identity-choice appeals to lure supporters to its ‘caliphate’ or, as a secondary option, to pledge allegiance to ISIS before committing acts of terrorism ‘at home’.

Since late-2015, however, the themes of ISIS messaging have shifted in ways that may seem subtle but telling. As victories and signs of strength dwindle, a noticeable [trend](#) in ISIS messaging, particularly to transnational audiences, has been a greater prioritization of identity- over rational-choice appeals (e.g. see the latest issue of its English-language magazine *Dabiq*). For instance, an increasingly prominent theme in recent ISIS messaging is that human and material losses are ultimately fleeting and prophesied so should not deter ‘true believers’. Where victory was once framed as proof of God’s blessing, ISIS narratives focus increasingly on the value and honor of the struggle. As al-Adnani [declared](#) earlier this year: “And victory is that we live in the might of our religion or die upon it. It is the same, whether Allah blesses us with consolidation or we move into the bare, open desert, displaced and pursued.” Where ISIS once placed primacy on foreigners traveling to support its ‘Caliphate’, it now tends to stress ‘lone wolf’ terrorism.

Sure, ISIS continues to promote how it addresses the needs of its ‘citizens’, especially in [‘offline’](#) messages for local audiences, but increasing emphasis is

being placed on influencing and mobilizing. A powerful strategy ISIS continues to use is the depiction of extreme violence in its propaganda. Such messaging not only helps to coerce complicity from local populations and intimidate rivals, but inevitably works to polarize ‘true believers’ from all others. Reciprocity is a dominant theme in this messaging. Whether it is a Jordanian pilot being burned alive, a captured soldier being run-over by a tank or spies being executed like sheep or by children, the gruesome execution scene is preceded by emotive narratives, jurisprudential justifications and graphic imagery that frames the killing as a reciprocal act, performed by the victim (or their representative) in response to the aggressor’s violence. The calmness on the face of ISIS executioners helps symbolically reinforce these points.

Conclusion

The final article in *Rumiyah* was titled ‘The Kafir’s blood is halal for you, so shed it’ and in the following fortnight ISIS released some of its most graphic messaging. Look beyond the gore, though, and this messaging is in fact quite sophisticated. This is not for the masses. This is for the ‘true believers’. It has and will continue to be partnered by narratives condemning ‘moderate’ Muslim clerics as sell-outs, chastising Western powers for their ‘brutality’ against Muslims and calling for supporters to mobilise. As the antecedents to ISIS demonstrated almost a decade ago, ISIS understands that as areas of control shrink its survival is dependent on using propaganda synchronized with whatever politico-military capabilities remain to keep *their* ‘decisive minorities’ committed, motivated and ready to mobilise. ISIS may not be able to live up to its slogan of ‘remaining and expanding’ but it understands that so long as it can ‘remain’ the potential to ‘expand’ always exists.

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