

# ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization & Recruitment on the Internet & Social Media

**BREAKING NEWS** **DABIQ**

## THE WORLD HAS DIVIDED INTO TWO CAMPS

Amirul-Mu'minin said: "O Ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present:

The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews."

### A CALL TO HIJRAH

Amirul-Mu'minin said: "Therefore, rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis.

The earth is Allah's. (Indeed, the earth belongs to Allah. He causes to inherit it whom He wills of His servants. And the [best] outcome is for the righteous) [Al-A'raf: 128].

The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah (emigration) to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah to the land of Islam is obligatory."

### A CALL TO ALL MUSLIM DOCTORS, ENGINEERS, SCHOLARS, AND SPECIALISTS

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

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

So fear Allah, O slaves of Allah."

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The Honorable Alberto M. Fernandez, Vice-President, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Washington, D.C.

It is particularly fitting to be holding this hearing almost exactly two years from when the Islamic State burst into the global psyche in a spectacular way. An organization that changed its name and altered its focus in 2006 and that has immediate roots going back into Jordan in the 1990s, it is in June 2014, with the double blow of the fall of Mosul and the declaration of the Caliphate that the “State of the Islamic Caliphate” either galvanized or horrified much of the world.

And while June 2014 serves as an appropriate political marker, it also is a key milestone in the evolution of ISIS propaganda. The media output of the Islamic State began to change in 2013, as ISIS moved into Syria and it began to produce better, more multifaceted, multi-language and sophisticated material than it had when it confined its efforts to the struggle in Iraq. But it is in the summer of 2014 that ISIS launches the Al-Hayat Media Center (HMC), focusing on non-Arabic speaking audiences and that the first issue of their online magazine *Dabiq* appears. Indeed, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani’s statement announcing the return of the Caliphate was released in June 2014 in Arabic and in English, Russian, French and German by the HMC.

In addition to evocative material on Mosul and on the Caliphate, June 2014 saw the release of emblematic, high quality productions with original material including two effective videos on erasing the borders between Syria and Iraq, and two music videos (German-English and English-Arabic) combining male acapella singing and the sounds of the battlefield. Also released in June was the recruitment video “There is No Life Without Jihad” featuring British and Australian ISIS members, with the memorable line that the “cure for (Western lifestyle induced) depression is Jihad.” This English language production was, not surprisingly, heavily covered in the Western media.

All this material was aggressively pushed out across all social media platforms but especially on Twitter with hashtags such as #AllEyesonISIS. Amazingly, none of this material nor the diffuse online networks amplifying and embroidering on the material were taken down at the time with social media companies, government and law enforcement deciding – for different reasons – not to do so. At the time, individual supporters of the Islamic State, including in the West, openly proclaimed their allegiance, churned out tens of thousands of tweets and aggressively promoted ISIS materials without negative consequences.

I remember, as then Coordinator of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), surveying this landscape in June 2014 and asking colleagues, “how do you counter the fall of Mosul and declaration of a Caliphate with a video or a tweet?” Creativity and our rough and ready guerilla attitude so at variance with the way government usually worked could only go so far. The sense

of being heavily outgunned and outnumbered was palpable, both in terms of our own resources and in what everyone else was doing against this adversary worldwide. This was especially true given that the sense in much of Washington – both official Washington and the punditocracy – since the death of Bin Ladin in 2011 and until the fall of Mosul was that the global Salafi Jihadist threat was ebbing, that al-Qa’ida and its franchises (which at the time would have included the Islamic State of Iraq) were contained and on a downward trend, with the threat becoming more localized, inward looking and fractured.

Two years later what has changed? As pioneers in the field, we at the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) have closely monitored and minutely analyzed Jihadist propaganda for years, long before ISIS became fashionable and so we have been well positioned to track subtle changes over time in the jihadosphere and in the content, style and delivery of ISIS material.

First, a quick survey of ISIS propaganda in June 2016 shows the dimensions of the ongoing challenge. As a graphic example of their continued potency, the Islamic State released 29 separate videos during the month. Interestingly enough, the rival, al-Qa’ida-aligned Nusra Front (JN) alone in Syria was almost as prolific as ISIS in its video production during this particular month with all of its material being very Syria-centric and localized. So the overall, Jihadist media “pie” has grown and ISIS and al-Qa’ida struggle for dominion. Both Nusra’s production and that of ISIS were overwhelmingly in Arabic. ISIS releases that month included videos produced by ISIS *wilayat* in Aleppo, Raqqa, Ninawa, Dijla, Al-Furat, Al-Khayr, Salah al-Din, Al-Jazira, Fallujah, Anbar, Homs and Khurasan.

Videos included the bloody execution of “spies” and journalists, praise for the Orlando terrorist attack, repeated calls to attack the West, the announcing of a new ISIS *wilaya* in the Philippines, the second anniversary of the declaration of the “Caliphate,” and, of course, footage on daily life in ISIS territory, on Ramadan, and of combat operations. While the production was prodigious and of a high quality, a considerable amount of the footage was recycled stock image previously used in other products. There were no real videos of military victory because the Islamic State had none to claim.

Given the intimate connection between the political-military reality in the region and its projection onto the virtual world, the biggest change from two years ago is the continuation of a series of increasingly important military reverses on the ground which began with the retaking of the Mosul Dam in August 2014 and are ongoing with recent key milestones such as the taking of Fallujah and Manbij by local forces working with the international coalition. Slowly, all too slowly perhaps, the Islamic State “victory narrative” is being deflated although ISIS

propagandists have ably sought to obscure this to date by highlighting other events, such as the work of international franchises, spectacular overseas terrorist operations, and topics related to the implementation of Islamic governance in the territory it still controls. Despite Al-Adnani's important May 23, 2016 remarks preparing the ground for the possibility of future reverses, the overall impression Islamic State propaganda still projects is, not surprisingly, one of assured confidence in victory and in their steadfastness. An important fact for us to deal with is that they are still doing a better job at projecting strength while slowly retreating than ISIS's enemies have done while slowly advancing.

The recent military successes in Manbij and Fallujah underscore the challenge that our allies have in even reporting good news. The technical quality of material released by both the Syrian Defense Forces and the Iraqi military still does not match that of the basic ISIS video but more concerning is the overall context. Both events, but especially the Fallujah operation, occurred within the context of heightened sectarian and ethnic discourse in both social and broadcast Arabic-language media.

This is an example of where the broader sectarian (Sunni-Shia) conflict raging in the Middle East reinforces the overall ISIS narrative. It wasn't so much the Islamic State pushing that narrative on Fallujah (ISIS supporters certainly did do that) but media outlets and voices ostensibly opposed to and independent of ISIS that did so.

Rather than being portrayed as a success for a united Iraq and an Iraqi Security Force liberating everyone against ISIS brutality, the narrative on pan-Arab media, especially, and incessantly on Al-Jazeera, was about the sectarian nature of the siege, and the suffering of Fallujah's Sunni Arab Muslim civilians even after the fall of the town. By one account, if you followed only Al-Jazeera for your news, you would have thought that Iraqi Security Forces had suffered more than 1400 dead in the battle for Fallujah while ISIS was reported as suffering less than 40 dead.

And while Al-Jazeera tends to be particularly sectarian – and has a long, controversial track record on Fallujah – it must be said in their defense that many in the Western media made very similar points, at least about civilians. The graphic language and sectarian imagery used by some PMU militias before and during the taking of the city provided ample ammunition for the critics.

Shiites in outskirts of **Fallujah** Cursing Aeesha R.A by showing a **shoe** towards her name



Even what should have been an unalloyed propaganda bounty can be muted by confusion. The destruction of an ISIS convoy fleeing Fallujah in the last few days did just that with US spokesmen speaking of the destruction by American and Iraqi aircraft of over 175 vehicles in two convoys while the head of the Iraqi Air Force spoke of over 700 vehicles. Some of the coverage suggested that there may have been at least a few civilians mixed in with fighters, a fact acknowledged by Americans and denied by Iraqi military spokesmen.

This is not to deny the overall success of taking Fallujah from ISIS, nor its real propaganda value. An ISIS defeat is a defeat even if not handled perfectly. And even with the overblown rhetoric, the very real concerns about human rights abuses of Fallujah's civilian population and the skewed regional coverage, showing ISIS losing is a key element in the propaganda battle. But at the very least, this is a victory which could have been more complete and convincing in influencing the basic ISIS demographic of Sunni Arab Muslims inside and out of Iraq. A more successful example of quality media coverage that was both convincing and riveting was Vice News embedding with the Iraqi Golden Division's Special Forces on the "Road to Fallujah"

(<https://news.vice.com/video/fighting-the-islamic-state-with-iraqs-golden-division-the-road-to-fallujah>) in June 2016. This news product captured some of the



edginess and immediacy of ISIS videos and also portrayed a picture of Iraqi government forces that was nuanced but mostly positive.



Cahida Dêrsim @cdersim3 · Jun 4  
Notes from #Manbij: Two #Arab women smoke the first cigarette after their villages was liberated from #IS by #SDF

The equally important but more modest operation in the taking of Manbij was better handled as far as overall spin is concerned. Manbij was a far less sectarian issue than Fallujah, of course, (with less overheated regional media rhetoric) and the Syrian Democratic Forces/YPG use of the “Manbij Military Council” was a smart move to at least give a stronger impression of Sunni Arab and other non-Kurdish involvement and highlighting the positive voices of liberated local people ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5ChxobTh8o&index=2&list=PLNxxwX7r4A554rJNXnTIO5\\_7rAPGqVNol0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5ChxobTh8o&index=2&list=PLNxxwX7r4A554rJNXnTIO5_7rAPGqVNol0)). Again, one would have liked to have seen greater technical quality, more volume and more compelling stories and packaging but Manbij was an ISIS safe haven much used by foreign fighters, including a strong contingent from Western Europe, so a strong message has been sent by the inability of the Islamic State to hold on to it.

So two years later, ISIS propaganda is still being extensively produced. The continued pummeling of the Islamic State territory in Syria, Iraq and Libya should eventually puncture the ISIS victory narrative and weaken some of its appeal. Still another positive factor has been the shrinking of the ISIS online presence in social media. An unprecedented terrorist media success like the Islamic State still has a considerable footprint, still gets its message out and still influences but today ISIS publicists online are more contested, more frequently shut down than ever before.

They stay on for shorter periods and their ability to build large stable online networks has been interdicted.

J.M. Berger has estimated recently that the median follower count of a typical ISIS support twitter account is down about 90% from 2014. The Twitter hashtags for the delivery of Adnani's May 2016 speech were rapidly interrupted and the material removed or feed corrupted. It is a far cry from the halcyon days of 2014 when ISIS supporters felt themselves invincible and numerous. MEMRI has tracked this over the past year as the decline of the ISIS presence on Twitter has been coupled with rapid rise of Telegram as an alternate platform. Since October of 2015, 35% of our material comes from Telegram, 34% from Twitter. 10% from Internet Archive, 7% from YouTube and 10% from Jihadi forums. Facebook as a source declined from 25% to 2%.

Telegram today is probably the single most important online safe haven for ISIS. In a recent discussion by ISIS supporters that we at MEMRI monitored, one infamous ISIS fanboy described Telegram as his "hideout" and lamented that he wasn't able to keep up with the many suspensions on Twitter. "Remember Twitter back in 2014 when we hijacked hashtags and spread the news for the entire world," he noted wistfully. So the efforts of social media companies, of government agencies and of people of good will everywhere to take down ISIS material, to challenge it, and to mock it is having some effect in terms of the viability of their stable presence online.

But this success is not permanent. Only two days ago, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, the Al-Wafa Foundation, a pro-ISIS media outlet, produced an article calling on ISIS supporters to return to Twitter and Facebook and not limit themselves to Telegram. The author praised the advantages of Telegram, especially its policy of avoiding the mass suspension of Jihadist accounts but lamented that it is not as conducive as other platforms for rapidly and broadly spreading ISIS content.

We are also seeing a growing ISIS member/supporter presence on Instagram even after some are suspended. This community seems to include militants and friends from places as diverse as Malaysia, Indonesia, Chechnya and Turkey. Instagram is a valuable secondary tool for these extremists because of the power of its visuals and accessibility. There is also a real extremist presence on Snapchat and we recently documented an English language blog on Tumblr run by ISIS medical personnel with the purpose of encouraging doctors to flee to the Islamic State and providing them with practical information on how to prepare to do so.

But while jamming ISIS hashtags with rainbow flags and porn or generating disinformation about the fate of Al-Baghdadi through bogus Amaq News Agency

accounts are perfectly legitimate, even better is disseminating content that actually adds something to the anti-extremist discussion. Content that does not just distract or confuse but inform is also key. In this field, the establishment of initiatives such as the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (<http://www.icsve.org/>) in July 2015 which documents the voices and stories of ISIS defectors and recanters is worthy of continued support by both public and private partners. It is particularly effective to have such material tracked and disseminated by the private sector and by independent media rather than directly by governments.

Despite the progress made in this area over the past year, there are still more unheard stories of the ISIS disaffected that need to be captured, as well as those of the many Sunni Arab Muslim victims of ISIS brutality. Obviously all victims of terrorism are worthy of respect and solidarity but we are talking here about the use of victim narratives in a way that could influence the key demographic from which ISIS draws support and which are of greatest concern to us: Sunni Arab Muslims and members of Muslim diaspora communities in the West.

How many Western Muslims, for example, are familiar with the dramatic/horrific stories of Syrian and Iraqi Sunni Muslim tribal resistance to the Islamic State? How many know of the hundreds of Iraqi Sunni clerics killed at its hands over the past decade? How many know of the lives and deaths of young men from the Shaitaat or Albinimr tribes told in their own voices and made available in English or French or German?

There is no one silver bullet or kryptonite in the fight against ISIS propaganda. There is no substitute for the continued steady working away on a variety of political, military, social, economic and ideological fronts. The situation we are in is the result of actions taken, and not taken, over decades by both Western governments and Middle Eastern ones. If progress has been made on the battlefield and in the realm of cyberspace and in the stories of defectors, what then are the great lacunae, the things we are still missing?

We must recognize that while the physical Islamic State in Syria and Iraq may be on a slow slope towards eventual decline it has also, in a very important way, already succeeded. It has succeeded in creating – for a small, but not inconsiderable, zealous and deadly clique – a sturdy and mature revolutionary brand that still endures and inspires. Of particular concern to our own homeland security ISIS and its fans, as a lively and defiant English-language sub-culture, is still here and still largely impervious to obvious subverting. These are not going to be deterred by rainbow flag spamming.



MEMRI recently documented the creation of an ISIS supporters' matrimony group on Telegram in June 2016. Initially the group was called "Baqiya Matrimony" but was soon changed to the less conspicuous "Love Fillah." While some commentators initially reacted angrily that this must be some sort of Western plot, the organizers reassured that this was not the case and posted a sarcastic meme related to security with a young Muslim man saying "Salaams, beautiful sister. I'm planning to join ISIS soon. Do you love me?" To which the answer comes, "Yes, I do love you coz I'm an FBI agent and you are going to jail."

"Baqiya Matrimony" is just one small brick in a larger Baqiya Family edifice that is a lasting result of all those intensive ISIS mobilization efforts of the past years. Some of it may seem ridiculous and some may be deadly, but this is now a brand which has to a large extent already been internalized. The commitment, identity, distinctiveness and autonomy of this ISIS subculture (whether online or not) is intimately tied to an innate understanding of the ISIS brand and the broader ideology that undergirds it. It is often fully understood and does not necessarily require a new video or new conversation with extremists to be maintained. French ISIS killer Larossi Abballa, who livestreamed the killing of a Paris police officer and his wife in June 2016 put it this way, "Allah said that if you follow the majority of people on earth, they will lead you away from the path of Allah. Through this verse, Allah tells us that there will be only a minority on the right path, thank him and bow to his greatness. Yes, Allah has chosen you and not all the other billions of people."

Whether in the form of mere identity groups and propagandists or as actual DIY terrorists in places like San Bernardino and Orlando, the ISIS brand can be all things to all extremists, a rallying cry to rebellion clothed in the language of righteous violence. It makes everything "better" and more purposeful, making what might have just been the seamy and sad violence of a lost soul into something transcendent, translating what would purely be the local and the personal into part of a larger whole that is global and ideological. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise: the ranks of the Islamic State today are full of former petty criminals and troubled people who have finally found purpose in life. And no one epitomized this more than Abu Musab al-Zarqawi himself, the godfather of what became the Islamic State shortly after his death in 2006.

The neutralization of this pro-ISIS sub-culture is still extremely difficult, except when individuals clearly overstep legal bounds and come to the notice of law enforcement. But aside from that type of preventive action, the ideological building blocks of the ISIS of tomorrow, of the Salafi Jihadist threat 2.0 to come, are still there, fully intact and ready to be redeployed.

As an experiment, I went to YouTube a few days ago and entered in English the name of key themes that are an essential part of the worldview of the Islamic State and other Salafi Jihadist groups. These are Islamic Arabic terms with a rich, nuanced and complicated history over centuries but which extremists have simplified and weaponized and wield with great effectiveness to brainwash the young, zealous and untutored recruit. They are *Kufr* (unbelief), *Shirk* (polytheism or ascribing partners to God), *Al-Wala wal-Bara* (loyalty and disavowal), *Taghut* (tyranny), *Rafidah* (rejectionists, a pejorative term for Shia Muslims) and *Tawhid* (oneness or strict monotheism of God). Except for *Tawhid*, which is the key Islamic doctrine not limited to Salafis, all searches returned results of English-language voices reinforcing the underlying bases of the Islamic State narrative even though none of the voices were of actual ISIS members or supporters. The top entry for *al-wala wal-bara* – the key concept of actively hating non-Muslims and giving loyalty to the (right) Muslims - was by none other than the late Anwar al-Awlaki.



Al Wala wal Bara - Imam Anwar Al Awlaki

Shiraz Maher in his magisterial new book (*Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, 2016) notes about this key element in the ISIS/Al-Qa'ida discourse that

“all of this was ultimately shaped to create alternative structures of legitimacy and authority for Salafi-Jihadi actors who typically operate

beyond the framework of the state. It allowed them to delegitimize their opponents for not having displayed adequate levels of *al-wala wal-bara*, while presenting themselves as the custodians of a pure, unadulterated form of Islam.”

So while we fight on the battlefield, and in cyberspace, while we seek to find personal stories that can be useful to the anti-ISIS fight, there is still a larger ideological challenge that needs to be fought more effectively. This is something that most fragile and conflicted regimes in the Middle East are loathe to take on themselves even though the ideological challenge is a direct threat to their survival.

Wouldn't it be amazing if a YouTube search on these incendiary topics brought back returns which did NOT fit in so well with the ISIS narrative? So that the young, searching American youth, struggling with identity issues and conflicting emotions and driven to look for knowledge in this most modern and personal of ways might have a better chance?

A potential project worth funding would be to find some smart, tech-savvy American Muslim civil society group that can come up with better, more tolerant and convincing, answers for those searching for these terms and make sure that the algorithm is in place for them to be easily accessed.

One can, and should be, cautiously heartened by much of the work the Federal Government, our allies, the private sector and community organizations have done over the past couple of years, once reality hit them on the forehead in 2014, in the fight against ISIS, including in the key field of online communications used to radicalize and recruit individuals. Progress has been made in removing content, in contesting or crowding the space, and in kinetic operations. But that is not enough.

Much of the information surrounding the new inter-agency Global Engagement Center (GEC), the newest iteration of the old CSCC I headed, seems to be White House spin directed at a gullible public by repackaging old duties and mandates in new verbiage. There is also perhaps entirely too much emphasis on transitory GEC events, such as hackathons and coordination meetings, which add too little to the fight and not enough on building a permanent and professional organization dedicated to what is clearly going to be a generational fight.

One question evidently not clarified by the new March 2016 Executive Order creating GEC is whether this is actually an organization with a dedicated, line item budget appropriation or whether it is – as was the case until 2015 – an organization funded entirely out of the discretionary budget of the State Department's Under-Secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy (“R” in State Department parlance) and emergency funds of other organizations.

I am encouraged, however, by some of GEC's work, especially in promoting voices of defectors and discrete funding of proxies but wonder if its long-term mission would be better served as part of the more integrated Counter-Terrorism Bureau (CT) at State rather than under R, traditionally a weak performer in the Department's leadership. Such a move could also shield GEC somewhat from the temptation of micro-managing from aspiring White House communications czars.

While ISIS may have peaked as a formal organization in its Syrian-Iraqi heartland, the ISIS style, especially its style of violence, has not yet done so and still shows great potency and staying power. It is incumbent on us, at the very least, to keep the pressure on social media and to try to shrink and hem in its presence there as much as possible while trying to change facts on the ground in the region - particularly the very public destruction of the ISIS "Caliphate" - and come up with better answers to its powerful toxic narrative of empowerment, grievance and faith. This is, after all, a narrative largely shared by its bitter rivals in al-Qa'ida.

While I have dwelt at length on the ideological challenge of the Islamic State, a cocktail strong enough to inspire well educated, upper class boys in Dhaka to stab total strangers to death a few days ago, this challenge is, of course, expressed powerfully through narratives. And what is a narrative but a story? As Hassan Hassan relates in his recent seminal work on ISIS's hybrid ideology:

"The Islamic State relies heavily on stories and events from Islamic history because they can be more powerful than the citation of Islamic principles, especially if the stories and events support Quranic verses or hadiths. The group makes the most of any example it can find, and borrows from what Muslim clerics consider isolated incidents that should not be followed as rules. It uses stories not always to argue a religious idea: they may be offered to help Islamic State members who struggle with committing acts of extreme violence."

In 2014, ISIS used the slaughter of the supposedly rebellious Jewish Beni Qurayza tribe in Medina, exterminated at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, to justify the slaughter of the rebellious Syrian Sunni Muslim Shaitaat tribe. As George Orwell wrote, "he who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past."

We are doing much to fight the Islamic State, but little is being done to reclaim Islamic history and it's telling from them. While this is a task best left to Arab Muslim regimes and individuals (despite its affiliates and worldwide supporter, ISIS is overwhelming an Arab Muslim organization influenced by that society), the great and deadly unwinding of existing Arab regimes, the ongoing crisis of

authority happening in the region means that these governments may not be capable enough to pull this reclaiming of the narrative off.

One last word about narratives. The ISIS narrative is indeed a powerful, revolutionary one but we must never forget that one of the blessings of the United States of America is that we have our own powerful narrative. In this we are fortunate indeed compared to some Western countries in the world struggling for meaning in a seemingly untethered, post-modern world.

As an immigrant and a refugee myself, I tell you that the American identity, pride in our country, in its past and in its future, identification with its propositions and in its symbols, its inclusiveness and its power for good in the world, is something to be nurtured, to be supported and promoted as an important ideological safeguard for both native born and immigrant Americans. Such a patrimony is something of value in the world today. And that unity of purpose, patriotism, and social harmony is of great importance to us and to the world in this ongoing bitter struggle that has some years yet to run.