

**Jihad 2.0:  
Social Media in the Next Evolution of  
Terrorist Recruitment**

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss the jihadist use of social media, and what can the government do to address this challenge.<sup>1</sup>

This testimony focuses on the Islamic State (IS), which has taken strategic communications by a jihadist group to an entirely new level. The proficiency of IS and its supporters as communicators can be discerned from the group's production of tightly choreographed and slickly produced videos, from its apparently deep understanding of how to catch the Western media's attention, and from IS's exceptionally skilled coordinated distribution of its content on platforms like Twitter.<sup>2</sup> The group's leap forward in reaching its various target audiences is of great concern. Through the strength of its communications, IS has helped inspire unprecedented numbers of young Muslims from across the globe to flock to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq to fight on the group's behalf.<sup>3</sup> IS has provoked a wave of lone wolf terrorist attacks that raises legitimate questions about whether extremists' savvy use of social media might produce a permanent rise in lone wolf terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Not only has IS eclipsed the communications skills of its predecessors in the jihadist movement, but it is also widely perceived (rightly so) as winning its propaganda war against the United States and other Western powers.

The key argument I will advance is that underneath the hard shell that the Islamic State has cultivated through its propaganda campaign exists a soft underbelly: IS has become entirely dependent on the success of its messaging, yet the group's propaganda is vulnerable to disruption. IS's flawed military strategy has left it surrounded by foes, and fighting wars on several fronts. As IS has made more and more enemies, ranging from the nation states bombing its convoys to the shadowy vigilantes killing IS officials in the territory it controls,<sup>5</sup> IS's propaganda operations have become the key to preventing its overstretched caliphate from experiencing even greater setbacks.

Even if the U.S. government is able to undermine IS's strategic communications campaign, that is not the same thing as defeating the attractiveness of the broader jihadist movement's message. For reasons that this testimony will outline, IS—despite its technically excellent communication—possesses weaknesses that the jihadist movement does not overall. Nonetheless,

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<sup>1</sup> I recently completed a study commissioned by the consulting firm Wikistrat examining how the U.S. government can undercut the Islamic State's messaging. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Nathaniel Barr, *The Winner's Messaging Strategy of the Islamic State: Technically Excellent, Vulnerable to Disruption* (unpublished manuscript, forthcoming 2015, Wikistrat). This testimony is largely adapted from that forthcoming study. I would like to thank my co-author Nathaniel Barr for his top-notch work on this project.

As to the term "jihadist," how to describe the movement of which both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are a part is a topic of some contention amongst researchers. I employ the term "jihadist" in this testimony in large part because it is an organic term, the way that those within the movement refer to themselves. As the terrorism researcher Jarret Brachman notes, this label has "been validated as the least worst option" linguistically for referring to this movement "across the Arabic-speaking world," including being employed in Arabic-language print and broadcast media. See Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., J.M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (London), January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "What Does the Recent Spate of Lone Wolf Terrorist Attacks Mean?," *War on the Rocks*, October 27, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Kiley, "Underground Guerrilla Force Battles IS in Mosul," *Sky News*, April 21, 2015.

weakening IS's impressive strategic communications campaign would be a significant victory for the U.S., and would represent a first step toward better understanding the battlefield of social media in which the United States will be forced to compete with jihadists, and other varieties of extremist groups, in the future.

This testimony begins by exploring how IS's communications strategy depends upon projecting an image of strength. It explores the ways that IS has sought to project that image, including through exaggeration and fraudulent means. Finally, the testimony concludes by providing a framework through which the United States can focus on IS's key vulnerability by undercutting that image of strength.

### **The Islamic State's Need to Project an Image of Strength**

As IS has lost territory in Syria and Iraq and its supply of foreign fighters has precipitously declined—only around 120 foreign fighters joined its ranks in the first three months of this year<sup>6</sup>—IS has focused its messaging efforts on adding new affiliates internationally. There are many ways that drawing in additional affiliates gives IS a lifeline. New affiliates feed into the perception that IS is an indomitably growing force even if it is experiencing setbacks in Iraq. The Islamic State hopes to gain operationally by drawing new groups into its orbit, as IS may be able to compensate for its loss of foreign fighters by drawing manpower from these affiliates, and may be able to secure additional funding sources this way as well. And international expansion ensures the organization's survivability even if it loses its hold over broad swathes of Iraq or even Syria. IS's propaganda has been critical to this international growth, such the brutal Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram's decision to pledge *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to IS in March 2015.<sup>7</sup>

The comments of former and current American officials suggest that IS has fashioned such a powerful propaganda apparatus that it could take the United States years to formulate a “counter-narrative” capable of undermining the group's appeal.<sup>8</sup> This view, however, conflates IS's appeal with that of the jihadist movement as a whole: They are not the same, and the former is easier to counter than the latter. Although IS obviously strikes many of the same themes as do other jihadist groups, conflating the narrative of IS as an organization with that of the broader movement causes practitioners and observers to overlook a central vulnerability in IS's propaganda efforts: IS's communications can be described as a “winner's message” at a time that it is, on the whole, losing. That is, IS's messaging depends on the group projecting an image of strength and momentum—and if IS's narrative is undermined or disrupted in this regard, then IS risks becoming unattractive to its target audience.

That is precisely what happened to IS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Like IS, AQI also had a winner's message that involved the use of extraordinary brutality, including releasing videos in which its hostages were humiliated and beheaded. From 2005-07, the combination of this brutality and AQI's battlefield successes made AQI perhaps the most prominent jihadist organization in the world, with many observers arguing that its emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had eclipsed Osama bin Laden, the emir of the overall al-Qaeda organization, in prominence. But

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<sup>6</sup> “Islamic State Recruits 400 Children Since January: Syria Monitor,” Reuters, March 24, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “The Islamic State's African Long Con,” *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2015 (explaining how IS's propaganda efforts were important to luring Boko Haram into its network).

<sup>8</sup> See comments in Simon Cottee, “Why It's So Hard to Stop ISIS Propaganda,” *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2015.

AQI's excesses pushed many Iraqi Sunni tribes to support the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement that stood up against AQI's power. Sunni tribal engagement played an important role in AQI's defeat in 2007-08, and AQI's brutality shifted from a potent symbol of the group's power to a demonstration of how it had overplayed its hand.<sup>9</sup>

Though the projection of strength is central to IS's communications strategy, much of the anti-IS messaging efforts attempted to date by the U.S. and its allies have focused on aspects of the group's narrative that are less critical to the organization and also more difficult to counter. Indeed, at times the counter-IS narrative and IS's own narrative have been *exactly the same*: Anti-IS messaging has often emphasized the jihadist group's brutality, while IS also proudly proclaims its own brutality. The Islamic State is content to flaunt the atrocities it commits because, while many people will find its messaging distasteful, that bloody imagery also projects the group's power.

Fortunately, IS *has* been experiencing significant setbacks, though the group hasn't yet lost control of its narrative of victory.<sup>10</sup> A counter-messaging strategy focused on undermining IS's image of strength and momentum is the best approach for the Islamic State's foes. In launching such a campaign, the U.S. needs to adapt some of its internal processes that stand in the way of competing with an organization like IS that moves at the speed of social media. The U.S.'s inefficient and highly bureaucratic internal processes often make it hard-pressed to even compete with a messaging campaign that moves at the speed of the Gutenberg Bible.

### **The Islamic State's Flawed Business Model**

The Islamic State's faulty strategy has left the group with a long list of powerful enemies, which has in turn transformed the Islamic State's powerful communications capabilities from a luxury into a necessity. IS is now stuck in a multi-front war in Syria and Iraq, severely straining the group's resources and forcing it to lean more heavily on propaganda operations to galvanize its support base.

From the outset, IS generally rejected collaboration and compromise with like-minded militant organizations, and instead challenged these groups directly. When IS (then known as ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) expanded from Iraq into Syria in the spring of 2013, it immediately began feuding with other Syrian rebel groups, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. The two groups had very different approaches to relations with other rebels who opposed Bashar al-Assad's regime. As Charles Lister of the Brookings Institution has noted, "Jabhat al-Nusra shared power and governance," whereas IS "demanded complete control over society."<sup>11</sup> IS's inability to work cooperatively with other Syrian rebel groups quickly earned it a host of enemies who were ostensibly on IS's own side of the conflict. Indeed, the majority of IS's geographic gains in Syria have come at the expense of other rebels rather than Assad's regime.

Despite its difficulties in working with other groups, IS managed to assemble a relatively

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<sup>9</sup> See Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Awakening vol. 2: Iraqi Perspectives* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2009); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Sterling Jensen, "The Role of Iraqi Tribes after the Islamic State's Ascendance," unpublished manuscript, forthcoming 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "ISIS Is Losing Its Greatest Weapon: Momentum," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014), p. 13.

broad-based Sunni coalition for its dramatic military push into Iraq in June 2014. This offensive obviously caused IS to immediately become the number-one foe of a wide variety of actors, including the Iraqi state, its ally Iran, and Iraq's Iranian-backed Shia militias. Indeed, mere days after IS seized Mosul, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, called on Iraq's citizens to join the fight against IS.<sup>12</sup> Thousands of Iraqi Shias responded to Sistani's appeal.

Although IS already possessed a wide array of enemies, the jihadist group almost immediately betrayed its partners in early July by rounding up ex-Baathist leaders in Mosul who had aided IS's advance.<sup>13</sup> Rather than consolidating its forces and reinforcing its territorial holdings, IS's next move was to attack another group, this time Iraq's Kurds—who, at the time, were not fighting IS—and thus opening a new front to the group's north. But IS was not done making enemies. Its genocidal campaign against the Yazidi minority religious sect, coupled with the beheading of two American journalists, prompted the U.S. and a coalition of allied states to join the fight, mounting a campaign of air strikes against IS.

The flaws of IS's military strategy have become increasingly apparent. The group's military defeat in Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish city in northern Syria, was particularly damaging, resulting in the death of over 2,000 IS fighters and the destruction of hard-to-replace military vehicles and weaponry.<sup>14</sup> IS's defeat at Kobani was also a blow to its cultivated image as an indomitable military force. More recently, IS lost control of Tikrit, and has found its northern Iraq holdings under increasing pressure, although it has been able to launch a new offensive into Anbar province that, among other things, masks the group's overarching trajectory of mounting losses.

As IS has lost territory in Iraq and parts of Syria, it has found itself increasingly dependent on external support to buttress its capabilities, sustain its growth, and maintain its juggernaut image. IS relies on three primary sources of external support: foreign fighters from outside Syria and Iraq (though foreign fighter numbers, as previously noted, have been in decline), likeminded jihadist organizations outside of Iraq and Syria who may pledge allegiance to IS or otherwise provide it material assistance, and other rebel factions in Syria and Iraq who may bolster IS's local capabilities.

IS's propaganda machine is critical to the group's efforts to attract support from these sources. Propaganda is especially important in recruiting individuals and organizations who might never come into physical contact with Islamic State fighters, and who instead judge the group largely based on the image it has cultivated through social media and online strategic messaging, and on the mainstream media's reporting on IS's gains and overall health. Such individuals and organizations who are considering a relationship with IS may also judge IS based on what the group's emissaries tell them, although the veracity of the emissaries' messages will largely be judged by how well they track with perceived on-the-ground realities projected through these various media sources.

In other words, IS's strong propaganda apparatus has helped to keep the organization afloat

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<sup>12</sup> Loveday Morris, "Shiite Cleric Sistani Backs Iraqi Government's Call for Volunteers to Fight Advancing Militants," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2014.

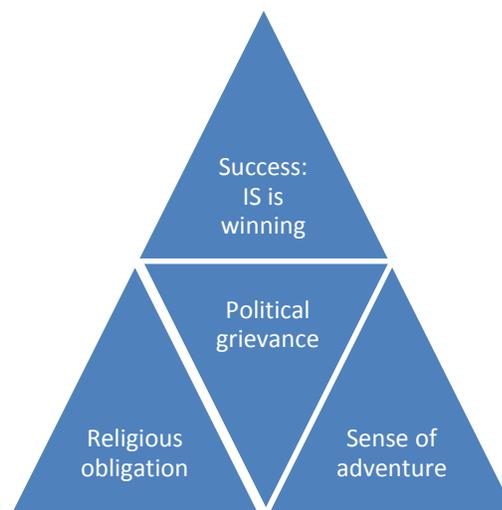
<sup>13</sup> Maggie Fick and Ahmed Rasheed, "ISIS Rounds Up Ex-Baathists to Eliminate Rivals," Reuters, July 8, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Wright, "A Victory in Kobani?," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2015.

despite its flawed business model. This report now explores IS's messaging, as understanding it is critical to defanging the jihadist group's powerful narrative.

### The Islamic State's Narrative

The Islamic State has a multifaceted narrative that appeals to its various target audiences in several ways, as depicted in the pyramid in Figure 1. The three messages at the bottom of the pyramid—religious obligation, political grievance, and sense of adventure—are some of the most difficult for IS's foes to counter. They are also the areas upon which a significant amount of counter-IS messaging has focused.



**Figure 1:** The Islamic State's Narrative

There are a large number of components to the religious aspect of IS's narrative, but the culmination of the various threads is that Muslims worldwide have a religious duty to support the caliphate. One duty allegedly upon them is to emigrate to the territory that IS holds. As the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, said in an audio address released weeks after the caliphate's establishment: "Whoso is able to emigrate to the Islamic State, let him emigrate. For emigration to the Abode of Islam is obligatory."<sup>15</sup> Another alleged obligation is fighting jihad on IS's behalf. Foreign fighters in the theater have exhorted their countrymen—both through distributed statements and also peer-to-peer communications—to fulfill this religious obligation. In one release from March 2015, titled "Message from Those Who Are Excused to Those Who Are Not Excused," two deaf IS foreign fighters used sign language to call on Western Muslims to join the caliphate. The video's title refers to the fact that individuals with disabilities are generally exempt from waging jihad under Islamic law, and the use of these deaf men was designed to shame able-bodied men who have yet to migrate to the Islamic State. Another set of religious arguments calls on Muslims to carry out attacks in their home countries if they cannot migrate to Syria or Iraq.

A second component of the Islamic State's communications strategy emphasizes political grievances with the West. There are many different varieties of political grievance that the group can draw upon. IS, for example, has turned the U.S.-led air campaign against it into a propaganda opportunity, comparing the military operation to the Crusades of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the fourth issue of *Dabiq*, IS's English-language magazine, was titled "The Failed Crusade," and discussed the new Judeo-Christian Crusade against the Muslims.

Another component of IS's narrative appeals to jihadists' sense of adventure and

<sup>15</sup> Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, "Risāla ilā 'l-mujāhidīn wa'l-umma al-Islamiyya fī shahr Ramaān," *Mu'assasat al-Furqān*, July 1, 2014.

excitement. Foreign fighter recruitment videos blend narratives about religious obligation with themes depicting jihad as an action-packed adventure, replete with symbols of masculinity intended to attract young men. IS's cutting-edge special effects also help life on the battlefield to seem both exciting and "cool."

If any of these IS narratives were to be definitively refuted, it would have a significant impact on the organization. However, these narratives are particularly difficult to prove false because they are to a large extent subjective. For example, IS has offered a myriad of theological justifications for the atrocities it commits, and has extensively explained why IS is uniquely fulfilling Islamic obligations. IS's supporters are aware that the majority of Muslims, and most Islamic scholars, vehemently disagree: The fact that such a large body opposes their religious justifications is unpersuasive to most (though not all) of IS's supporters. This is not to say that arguments challenging IS's religious legitimacy are unimportant, but they likely serve as a bulwark against too much IS expansion, as well as a means of persuading the occasional IS supporter to step back from the ledge, rather than a dagger through IS's heart. Similarly, the battlefield may not be as glamorous as IS claims, but many of the group's supporters won't know one way or the other until they arrive.

But IS's claim that the group is defeating its opponents on the battlefield is not a simple matter of opinion: It is either objectively true or not. Thus, this is the aspect of IS's narrative that can be most effectively countered. It is also the aspect of IS's narrative that is most tightly wedded to IS as an organization. IS, as previously noted, should not be confused with the jihadist movement as a whole: It is one organization within the broader movement, an organization that is uniquely problematic due to its over-the-top brutality and other repugnant excesses, such as its institution of sexual slavery. While IS will be hurt if fewer people turn to jihadism, it will be more directly harmed if jihadists choose not to support it as an organization. And its narrative of victory is critical to persuading jihadists to support IS specifically, as opposed to—for example—regional jihadist groups. Indeed, IS's competition with al-Qaeda has been every bit as intense as its fight against regional governments.<sup>16</sup>

One important reason that IS's argument that it has immense momentum can be more easily countered than other aspects of its narrative is that IS has been steadily losing ground in Iraq, and has largely failed to take and hold new ground in the Iraq-Syria theater since October 2014. Thus, IS has begun to exaggerate its gains, both in the Iraq-Syria theater and internationally, and sought to obscure its losses. In other words, large parts of this argument are untrue, and IS's narrative of success can be undermined.

A recent Arabic-language article by IS supporter Shaykh Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadhi sheds light on IS's messaging strategy. Warning against the "showing of weakness," Jahbadhi implored residents of cities controlled by IS not to show the hardships that sieges against their cities impose on the population—such as lack of food, water, and gas. He warned that "such announcements are considered to be major shortcomings in maintaining the psychological war with the enemy." Jahbadhi went on to say that even displaying atrocities committed by IS's enemies against civilian populations, such as casualties inflicted by "Crusaders" bombing IS-held areas, should be avoided,

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<sup>16</sup> See discussion of the contours of the competition between the two in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Al-Qaeda Is Beating the Islamic State," *Politico*, April 4, 2015.

because the world would not sympathize with IS regardless. He explained:

The caliphate showed the crimes of the coalition and the *rawafid* [rejectionists]; however, it has always featured the retaliatory attacks, that is, the slaughter of a spy or punishment of soldiers. This is intended to reflect the absence of weakness. The caliphate would never publicize the crimes of the enemy alone! This would never happen, for the world no longer sympathizes or empathizes with us. You show their crimes only when they are accompanied with the punishment. When the caliphate published the video of the burning of Moaz [al-Kassasbeh], it had previously released pictures of children burned in the shelling of the coalition warplanes. The caliphate shows their crimes and also shows how it is capable of retaliating for them.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the projection of strength is IS's central message. It is acceptable to show the atrocities that the caliphate's enemies are committing, but only if such imagery is accompanied by a display of how IS retaliated—thus underscoring IS's fundamental power.

In addition to obscuring its losses, IS has systematically exaggerated its strength. Part of the reason it has done so is precisely to disguise those losses. The best example of IS's tendency to exaggerate and embellish is in Africa. In October 2014, a group of militants in the eastern Libyan city of Derna openly pledged *bayat* to IS, and declared that they had established an emirate in the city. Soon after the *bayat* pledge, IS flooded social media with videos and pictures of IS militants in Derna, including a video showing a parade of militants waving IS flags as they drove down a thoroughfare in the city.



**Figure 2:** Photo of a convoy of IS militants near Derna

This show of force led many observers to conclude that the Islamic State held full control of Derna, and numerous media outlets then reported IS's control of Derna as an objective fact.<sup>18</sup> But in reality, control of Derna was, and remains, divided between a number of militant groups, including some al-Qaeda-linked groups that oppose IS's expansion into Libya.

After bluffing its way into convincing observers that it controlled Derna, IS issued a deceptive claim of responsibility for the devastating March 18 attack on the Bardo museum in

<sup>17</sup> Abu Sulayman al-Jahbadi, "War Policy against the Enemy Does Not Allow Showing of Weaknesses," posted April 2, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of these reports, see Paul Cruickshank et al., "ISIS Comes to Libya," CNN, November 18, 2014; Maggie Michael, "How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group," Associated Press, November 9, 2014.

Tunis. Though IS quickly claimed credit for that attack, Tunisia instead attributed it to the al-Qaeda-aligned Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, and identified the group's emir Luqman Abu Saqr as the mastermind.<sup>19</sup> Even though IS's claim of responsibility was an exaggeration, it nonetheless furthered the perception that the group had significant momentum internationally, as it came amidst a series of IS advances in various countries, including Boko Haram's March 7 pledge of *bayat* to IS.

IS's rationale for exaggerating its role in the Bardo attack was clear. In the battle for market share of global jihadism, IS has al-Qaeda's media operations outgunned. The Bardo attack, because it was carried out by a rival, threatened IS's narrative of success at a time when IS was experiencing losses in Iraq but compensating by gaining ground in Africa. But IS knew from past experience that al-Qaeda generally doesn't claim credit for attacks while the operatives who carried them out are still at large: Thus, IS could issue a claim of responsibility before al-Qaeda was prepared to do so. Given the way media cycles work—and IS is *very* attuned to the media cycle—a false or exaggerated claim of responsibility would dominate the news before anybody could disprove it, at a time when Bardo remained a top headline. Al-Qaeda's greater role wouldn't become known until the attack was no longer a hot news item.

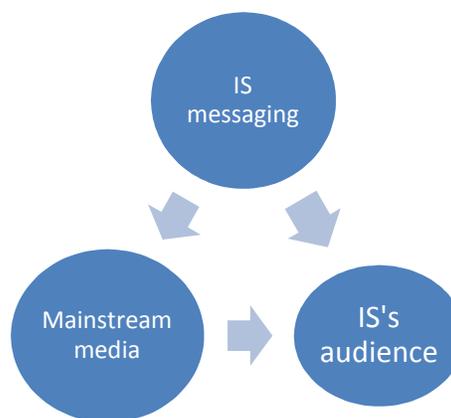
In addition to exaggerating its gains, IS has sought to downplay, or deflect attention from, its military defeats. Thus, as the group experienced losses in Iraq, it aggressively pushed to expand outside of that theater. IS's recent acquisitions of both Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt and also Boko Haram have been helpful in shifting the media's attention from IS's losses in its stronghold to its growth on a new continent. IS's extreme brutality has also seemingly been employed to distract from the group's military defeats. Just days after IS pulled its forces back from Kobani, thus finally acknowledging its defeat there, IS released a video showing the immolation of Moaz al-Kassasbeh, a Jordanian fighter pilot whom IS had captured after his plane crashed in Syria. The media fixated not on IS's defeat in Kobani but instead Kassasbeh's brutal execution.

The media has often unwittingly aided IS's propaganda strategy by having a narrative about the jihadist group that mirrors its own, emphasizing IS's growth and its brutality. Indeed, in critical instances, the media has helped IS to portray itself as stronger than was the case by reporting its false or exaggerated claims—such as IS's supposed capture of Derna—as fact. Rather than refuting IS's false claims, the mainstream media has at critical times reported them as objective fact, thus *reinforcing* the audience's view that these exaggerations are true. (See the graphic depiction of this process in Figure 3.)

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<sup>19</sup> See Patrick Markey, "Tunisia Signals Local al-Qaeda Links to Bardo Museum Attack," Reuters, March 26, 2015; Richard Spencer, "Tunisia Arrests 23 over Museum Attack," *Telegraph*, March 26, 2015.

One reason the media often repeats IS's claims uncritically, and reinforces its narrative, is that IS dominates the media environment in territories under its control, making it difficult for independent media outlets to obtain a clear picture of developments in IS-controlled territory.<sup>20</sup> Further, in Derna social media has low penetration relative to the Syria conflict, and it is also too dangerous for the vast majority of reporters to visit the city.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it isn't shocking that the media repeated IS's factual claims uncritically, especially when neither the U.S. government nor any other interested party took the time to refute them. The Islamic State has leveraged its manipulation of the media to present a narrative of military momentum and strength.



**Figure 3:** IS pushes its message, including exaggerated claims, to the media and its target audience. The media often repeats these exaggerations back to the target audience as fact.

### How to Combat the Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy

The U.S. has thus far been unable to wrest control of the narrative from IS. The U.S. confronts a couple of major weaknesses in attempting to respond to IS's propaganda offensive. First, the operational tempo of the U.S. government's messaging campaign is too slow to keep up with IS's high-octane, rapid-fire social media apparatus. Second, even if the U.S. could keep up with IS's messaging campaign, it is seen as lacking credibility by key members of the target audience of people who are vulnerable to IS's recruitment tactics.

So what can the U.S. do? The Islamic State's messaging strategy is based on the idea that it has massive momentum, at a time when this momentum is running out. That presents a significant vulnerability for the organization, social media juggernaut or not, and the U.S. should work to shift the narrative surrounding IS from one of strength and victory to one of weakness and loss. This can be achieved by focusing attention on the group's military defeats, fact-checking the group's claims of victory, and revealing the group's many exaggerations. Further, this counter-narrative should expose IS's governance failures, and its struggles to function as a state. Just as puncturing IS's narrative of success can make it far less attractive, exposing its failings as a state can undermine the image of the caliphate as an Islamic utopia, dissuading foreigners from making the arduous trip to Syria and discouraging like-minded jihadist groups from pledging allegiance to a caliph whose caliphate is crumbling.

Several steps can be taken to improve the U.S.'s counter-IS messaging campaign:

- To address the problem of how government bureaucracies harm the U.S.'s ability to

<sup>20</sup> See Bryan Price et al., *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2014), p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> A graphic illustration of the dangers can be found in "Army Official: Islamic State Kills 5 Journalists Working for Libyan TV Station," Reuters, April 27, 2015.

compete in a social media campaign, the government should have a small and nimble unit specifically charged with refuting IS's propaganda. This unit should include both strategic communications professionals with expertise in social media and also intelligence analysts who are capable of monitoring a) what messages IS is pushing out to advance its narrative of strength and victory, and b) in what ways IS's claims diverge from the ground truth.

- The U.S. government should not always be the face of the response to IS's claims. As Nicholas Rasmussen, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, acknowledged, "the government is probably not the best platform to try to communicate with the set of actors who are potentially vulnerable to this kind of propaganda and this kind of recruitment."<sup>22</sup> Rather, one primary means of dissemination for this counter-IS unit should be pushing out its information—for example, in the form of fact sheets—to members of the mainstream media who can investigate the U.S.'s claims, and report them if they are persuaded following their own due diligence. This can break the cycle wherein IS's target audience receives the same, often exaggerated, factual claims from both IS and also the media. Further, while many jihadists are disdainful of the Western media, it is nonetheless perceived as a more neutral arbiter of fact in a way that the U.S. government is not. Sharing information with the media in this manner can have a snowball effect: IS critics and members of civil society may capitalize on press reports of IS's decline, thus amplifying the message.
- To further the objective of undercutting IS's narrative of victory, the counter-IS unit should have the ability to selectively declassify information for journalists that supports its claim that IS is losing momentum.
- Credibility is vital in any messaging campaign. One reason IS's message is vulnerable is because parts of it are not true, and thus IS risks more serious damage to perceptions of its trustworthiness. The counter-IS unit should strive to maintain its credibility in all instances, and should not push out false or questionable information even if its dissemination has the potential to harm IS.

Countering the Islamic State's narrative of invulnerability is not a silver bullet. IS possesses the resources to threaten Iraq and Syria for the foreseeable future, and especially in the Syrian city of Raqqa it may have longevity. But by showing areas where IS is enfeebled and declining rather than strong and vibrant, the U.S. government can diminish the group's ability to recruit new fighters and affiliates.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Rasmussen, "U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS' Message," *New York Times*, February 16, 2015.