The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy

Executive Summary

This Research Paper aims to analyse in depth the global propaganda strategy of the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) by looking at the methods through which this grand strategy is carried out as well as the objectives that IS wants to achieve through it. The authors first discuss IS' growth model, explaining why global expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters are pivotal to IS success. Having in mind this critical role, the authors then explore the narratives and themes used by the group to mobilise foreign fighters and jihadists groups. Third, the paper analyses how IS deploys its narratives in those territories where it has established a foothold. Fourth, it outlines IS' direct engagement strategy and how it is used to facilitate allegiance of other jihadist groups. The final section of the paper offers a menu of policy options that stakeholders can implement to counter IS' global propaganda efforts.

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About the Authors

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Acknowledgements

About ICCT

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Executive Summary
and Policy Recommendations

Since the Islamic State (IS) announced in June 2014 that it had re-established the caliphate, the group has mounted a concerted campaign aimed at expanding its presence and influence beyond Syria and Iraq. IS has declared the formation of *wilayats* (provinces) in Afghanistan/Pakistan, Algeria, the Caucasus region of Russia, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and West Africa, while carrying out attacks in several other countries in the surrounding regions. The group has also appealed to Muslims from across the globe to join its cause, with thousands of foreign fighters answering this call to arms.

Global expansion and the recruitment of foreign fighters fulfil multiple objectives for IS. For one, to affirm the religious and political legitimacy of the caliphate—which, by definition, is global in scope—IS must demonstrate to adversaries and potential allies that it can acquire and hold territory outside of its stronghold in Iraq and Syria. IS has staked its credibility on its ability to consolidate and increase its territorial holdings, even embracing a slogan—*baqiya wa tatamaddad*, or remaining and expanding—to that effect. Thus, IS has turned global expansion into an organisational necessity. The recruitment of foreign fighters, who describe their *hijra* (migration) to IS as a religious obligation, further reinforces IS' legitimacy in jihadist circles. Second, global expansion enhances IS' organisational resilience and strength, allowing the group to draw upon resources from allied factions, and providing IS with strategic depth as its territory in Syria and Iraq comes under military pressure. Foreign fighters provide IS with a steady source of new manpower when battlefield attrition rates are climbing. Third, global growth is a critical aspect of IS' competition with its parent organisation al-Qaeda. IS has tried to chip away at al-Qaeda's global network, appealing to al-Qaeda affiliates and members to defect.

IS has utilised its propaganda apparatus, one of the group's most effective tools, to facilitate its expansion into new theatres. In almost every country where IS has established a presence, the group has deployed a robust messaging campaign aimed at winning over potential allies—including regional jihadist groups, political Islamists, and local Sunnis—and intimidating adversaries. IS' propaganda apparatus has augmented the group's on-the-ground expansion efforts and amplified its capabilities, sometimes fuelling exaggerated perceptions of IS' strength in new theatres.

IS has employed several common themes and narratives in its global propaganda efforts. One theme that is omnipresent in IS' global propaganda is a "winner's message", which portrays IS as an unstoppable military force capable of defeating all enemies. This narrative has been particularly effective in persuading jihadist organisations and prospective foreign fighters that IS has staying power in the region. But IS has also

adapted its messaging to local conditions, tapping into local political and social grievances—sometimes quite effectively, and sometimes not. IS has also routinely attacked the legitimacy of rival jihadist groups and political Islamist organisations.

To supplement its propaganda operations, IS has deployed emissaries to meet with regional jihadist organisations in person. While IS' propaganda efforts familiarise jihadist actors with IS' religious methodology and strategic approach, the group's emissaries forge personal relationships with these actors, and initiate the process of securing a pledge of allegiance to IS. In exchange for this pledge, IS has offered jihadist groups significant sums of money and weaponry. Additionally, IS has assisted groups it is wooing on their messaging and social media operations.

While IS has devoted considerable resources to its global expansion campaign, it has experienced mixed results outside of Syria and Iraq. IS has established a robust presence in the Libyan city of Sirte, which has become a hub for the group in North Africa. But IS has also experienced several significant setbacks elsewhere in North Africa and the Sahel, including in Algeria, where state security forces crushed a nascent IS affiliate in May 2015. Rival jihadist forces have also hindered IS' growth outside of Syria and Iraq.

The first section of this report discusses IS' growth model, and explains why global expansion and the recruitment of foreign fighters are critical to IS' success. It specifically examines how external support (i.e., foreign fighters and jihadist organisations outside of Syria and Iraq) addresses three core organisational objectives: religious and political legitimacy, military success, and the global competition with al-Qaeda.

The second section of the report explores IS' global propaganda playbook—namely, the narratives and themes that IS uses to mobilise foreign fighters and jihadist groups to join its ranks. The report identifies nine core narratives that IS deploys in its expansion-related propaganda:

1) *Winner's message*: Projecting an image of strength and concealing weaknesses.

2) *Discrediting the competition*: Undercutting the legitimacy of rival jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

3) *The illegitimacy of political Islamists*: Accusing political Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, of possessing a deviant methodology.

4) *Sowing discord within enemy ranks*: Spreading misinformation in an effort to highlight, exacerbate, or create fissures within the ranks of rival groups.

5) *Exploiting sectarian tensions*: Fueling conflict between Sunni and Shia, often with the intent of forcing Sunnis to seek IS' protection.

6) *The caliphate as an Islamic utopia*: Presenting the caliphate as a pious, harmonious, and thriving Islamic state.

7) *Jihadist adventure and camaraderie*: Glorifying jihad as an opportunity for brotherhood and excitement.

8) *Driving a wedge between Muslims and the West*: Inflaming tensions between Muslims living in the West and their societies in order to galvanise Muslims to support the caliphate.

9) *Religious obligation to join the caliphate*: Invoking religious doctrine to pressure Muslims to aligned with the caliphate.

The third section of the report examines how IS deploys these narratives and adapts its messaging in four countries where IS has established a foothold: Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Yemen. In Libya, IS has focused on exploiting civil conflict and fomenting fissures within its enemies' ranks. IS' messaging in Afghanistan has focused largely on discrediting the Taliban from a political and religious standpoint, while projecting an image of power. Confronting an intense counterinsurgency campaign, IS' Egyptian affiliate, based in the Sinai Peninsula, has focused on winning over and coercing local populations, while IS has mounted a concurrent campaign aimed at wooing members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Lastly, amid a raging civil war in Yemen, IS has sought to inflame Sunni-Shia tensions, while also undermining the legitimacy of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has impeded IS' growth in the country.

The fourth section of the report outlines IS' direct engagement strategy, exploring how the group uses emissaries and inducements to win over regional jihadist groups. It examines how groups such as Africa Media, a pro-IS outlet based in North Africa, have served as intermediaries between IS and other jihadist actors, building relationships and facilitating pledges of allegiance. The fifth section then explores how IS has fared in each of the four countries profiled in this report.

Policy Options

Though less impressive than IS claims, IS' global expansion and recruitment of foreign fighters have presented a host of challenges for the anti-IS coalition. The final section of this report proposes a menu of policy options that stakeholders can implement to address IS' global propaganda efforts.

One measure that policymakers can take to undercut IS' global messaging is to draw attention to IS' expansion setbacks in Africa. A winner's message, as the report explains, lies at the core of IS' global propaganda strategy. However, IS' expansion struggles in Africa could shift IS' narrative from one of strength to one of weakness, potentially dissuading prospective foreign fighters and other jihadist groups. Similarly, stakeholders can implement messaging campaigns aimed at exposing IS' internal vulnerabilities and divisions, which could cast further doubt on the group's image of strength and cohesion. Incorporating IS defectors into counter-messaging campaigns is another approach that policymakers can pursue; defectors can pull back the curtain on life inside the caliphate, and dispel the myths that IS propagates.

Stakeholders can also focus on undermining the online networks that IS relies on to disseminate propaganda and recruit new foreign fighters. Technology companies such as Twitter and Facebook have made considerable progress in suspending pro-IS accounts, though IS has developed some strategies to overcome these account suspensions. One additional approach that civil society actors can take is actively infiltrating IS' online social networks with fake accounts, thus reducing IS' trust in its own networks.

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