

Challenging the Narrative of the “Islamic State”

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ISIS has brought terrorist propaganda to a new level, targeting its main audiences in nearly two dozen languages with up to 90,000 tweets every day. Governments have generally been at a loss as how to counter the ISIS narrative with persuasive counter-arguments to reduce its attraction for rebellious Muslim youths in Western diasporas and Muslim-majority countries. At the core of ISIS' narrative are themes familiar to most Muslims. ISIS has appropriated and instrumentalised them for its main purpose: to expand the Caliphate proclaimed in mid-2014. In this Research Paper, Dr. Alex Schmid identifies a dozen narrative themes of ISIS and discusses them from theological, historical and other angles in an attempt to show vulnerabilities and point the way towards developing convincing counter-arguments. While the potential of this approach is demonstrated, Dr. Schmid argues that a concerted and systematic approach, based on synergetic, inter-disciplinary teamwork, is required to develop successful counter-narratives and that these need to be tested on audiences with a cultural affinity to ISIS main target groups before being utilised by credible Muslim voices who wish to engage terrorist ideologues and their potential followers with rational and faith-based arguments. The Research Paper concludes with the observation that developing counter-narratives, while necessary, is not enough. It is even more necessary to develop credible alternative narratives – narratives that can give a new sense of purpose, meaning and hope to those who feel that they have no future in their and our societies.

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Introduction¹

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Greater Syria) [ISIS a.k.a. ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), IS (Islamic State) or DAISH (*Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*)] has been a product of state failure, civil war and the repression of Sunnis by the Shi'ite government of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq and by the atrocities of the regime of Bashar al-Assad against its own people in Syria.² Almost as much, however, it is the product of the will to power of a branch of a broader Islamist movement that has been active in Iraq for more than a decade, following the American intervention in Iraq in 2003.

Since 15 May 2010, ISIS has been led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who spent some five years in American captivity in the Bucca prison in Iraq, where he was forging ties with imprisoned officers from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime right under the eyes of the American prison authorities.³ ISIS, a jihadi takfiri⁴ terrorist organisation, now controls, to varying degrees, almost half of northern Syria and more than one third of north-western Iraq, together an area larger than Belgium, an area inhabited originally by 5 to 6 million people of whom, however, more than half a million have fled. ISIS follows a totalitarian and genocidal project comparable in some ways to the one of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in the late 1970s, with Shiites being the main targets. While estimates about the size of ISIS range from as low as 20,000 people to as high as 100,000 people and beyond,⁵ this is not enough to hold and govern such a vast territory with millions of people, except by a regime of terror under which a so far unknown (but high) number of people have been demonstratively killed in order to intimidate the rest.⁶

While controlling substantial areas of land – something unusual for terrorist organisations – ISIS is also very much present in cyberspace, on the Internet where its claims too often go unchallenged. With its propaganda in the social media, and with some of its video footage also broadcast in mainstream media, ISIS has caught the imagination of a considerable number of young rebellious Muslims all over the world who are attracted by its violent messages and catchy slogans. Its apparent success has also led to a number of instant conversions to Islam among mainly marginalised non-Muslim youths in Western countries. At the same time, it has also filled with terror those who have to endure its harsh rule and those who are facing fanatical ISIS fighters at the front lines in Syria and Iraq. The media campaign of ISIS is very professional by any standards, with high-quality visual footage and well-crafted ideological statements attracting young Muslims and some recent converts to Islam to join its ranks. Per day, ISIS produces up to 90,000 tweets and other social media responses – a volume

¹ This text is a revised version of a presentation given on 8 December 2014 at a workshop in Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, in Abu Dhabi. The author wish to thank Prof. Rüdiger Lohlker, Dr. Philipp Holtmann, Dr. Milena Uhlmann, Dr. Ugur Ümit Üngör and Dr. Christophe Paulussen for commenting on an earlier version of this text. Responsibility for any shortcomings rests with the author alone.

² According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Syrian government has killed at least 109,347 civilians since 2011 (including 15,149 children and 13,695 women). 5,892 persons were tortured to death. – Cit. Simon S. Cordall. "How ISIS Governs Its Caliphate". *Newsweek*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/12/how-isis-governs-its-caliphate-288517.html>. The repression of Sunnis in Iraq under Maliki was on a lesser scale but includes summary executions of Sunni prisoners by Iraqi security forces, according to Human Rights Watch. (Cit. *ibid.*)

³ M. M. Gunter, "Why can't we defeat ISIS", *Hurst*, 17 October 2014, http://www.hurstpublishers.com/cant-defeat-isis/#at_pco=cod-1.0&at_si=5479ca0c4d775ae5&at_ab=per-4&at_pos=1&at_tot=8.

⁴ *Takfir* refers to the practice of excommunicating Muslims judged to be insufficiently dedicated to their faith and to sharia rule. Pronouncing against someone *takfir* turns those targeted into unbelievers (*kufar*) who can be killed. – John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), p. 312. Since the late 20th century, Islamic fundamentalists have applied the term to other Muslims who do not adhere to their strict interpretations of the *Quran*.

http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1229?_hi=6&_pos=15

⁵ Zack Beauchamp, "ISIS is losing", *VOX*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/2/23/8085197/isis-losing>.

⁶ A report of the UN Commission on Human Rights found that ISIS "....seeks to subjugate civilian under its control and dominate every aspect of their lives through terror, indoctrination, and the provision of services to those who obey." United Nations Commission on Human Rights, "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic", 14 November 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.pdf, p. 13.

of activity unmatched by government counter-messaging.⁷ According to the American FBI director, James Comey, ISIS has been issuing statements in almost two dozen languages.⁸

In order to break the present momentum of ISIS, the use of military force in Iraq and Syria is not enough. What is needed is a counter-narrative that can seriously challenge and undermine the narrative of ISIS. To craft such a counter-narrative is also necessary to slow down if not stop the flow of misled foreign fighters to ISIS. So far, more than 20,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries have gone to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other jihadist organisations in this cross-border theatre of war.⁹ More than 4,000 of the foreign fighters are said to originate from Western democracies, with most of them having an immigration background.¹⁰

In the following, an attempt will be made to provide arguments to counter a dozen claims of ISIS which form key parts of its narrative. The counter-messaging arguments suggested below might, after further refinement, be utilised in counter-speech acts by those trying to argue with young Muslims who wish to join the ranks of foreign fighters. A similar attempt has been made, from a purely theological perspective, by a group of 152 leading Islamic scholars who, in September 2014 – some three months after the proclamation of the Caliphate – wrote a letter to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, outlining what they consider to be errors and violations of Islamic and international laws committed by the leaders and followers of ISIS. Here is a sample of their 24 objections:

It is forbidden in Islam to force people to convert;
 It is forbidden in Islam to deny women their rights;
 It is forbidden in Islam to kill the innocent;
 The re-introduction of slavery is forbidden in Islam;
 It is forbidden in Islam to torture people;
 It is forbidden in Islam to declare a caliphate without consensus from all Muslims;
 Loyalty to one’s nation is permissible in Islam;
 After the death of the Prophet ... Islam does not require anyone to emigrate anywhere;
 Jihad in Islam is defensive war.¹¹

While some experts claim that the appeal of ISIS has little or nothing to do with religion but is more a reflection of a youth revolt among Muslims, and a counter-culture response and search of identity among converts, the position taken here is that ideology and religion are crucial and central for legitimising jihadist

⁷ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS Message”, *The New York Times*, 16 February 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html?_r=0.

⁸ Cit. Lemma “Islamic State of Iraq and Levant” in Wikipedia (engl.). I would avoid referring to Wikipedia since anybody can change the content. However, the sources mentioned on the Wikipedia page can be referred to.

⁹ “UN says ‘25,000 foreign fighters’ joined Islamist militants”, *BBC*, 2 April 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32156541>. The respective figures for other conflicts are much lower: 5,000 foreign fighters went to Afghanistan between 1979 and 1992 these are indeed the numbers Zelin is presenting, but it may be good to mention as well that others have come with higher numbers, see for instance Hegghammer (5,000-20,000), p. 61, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/The_Rise_of_Muslim_Foreign_Fighters.pdf; 1,000 to Chechnya in the 1990s, 1,000 to Afghanistan in the 1990s, 1,000 to Afghanistan after 9/11; 4,000 to Iraq between 2003 and 2007 compared to 10,000 – 20,000 to Syria between 2012 and January 2015. More than 5,000 of them have been killed. – Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State: A Video Introduction”, *The Washington Institute*, 13 January 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-state-a-video-introduction>.

¹⁰ P. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,00; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in 1980s”, *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 26 January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

¹¹ Letter of 152 leading Islamic Scholars to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, September 2014, <https://operationpakistan.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/letter-to-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-by-152-leading-islamic-scholars/>. For a larger catalogue of theological misrepresentations of Islam and their refutation, see the Saudi government’s *Encyclopedia of Responding to Misconceptions*, which is at the moment available only in Arabic.

violence.¹² This is not to deny that individual, social and generational conflicts play a role, both for those foreign fighters who come from Western diasporas as well as those who originate in Muslim-majority countries (e.g. Turkey), where young people are often well-integrated in their societies. While the fanatical extremists of ISIS might no longer be open to rational, persuasive arguments, many of those not yet fully radicalised might still have open minds. They can be confronted with facts and rational reasoning and might then be able to see ISIS for what it is, a millenarian death cult that kills mainly (Shiite) Muslims and discredits rather than defends Islam.¹³

In the following, a dozen claims and statements found in ISIS propaganda¹⁴ are identified and an attempt is made to counter these on a number of grounds – historical, theological and other.¹⁵ It is held that ISIS’ “selling points” play a major role in attracting foreign fighters to its ranks. While most people are appalled by the brutality of ISIS, a minority of born Muslims and converts to Islam are attracted to it, because or despite the violence.¹⁶ The pronouncements and slogans of ISIS therefore need to be taken seriously and need to be dissected and discussed; they cannot be simply dismissed as ideology and propaganda.

As propaganda, pronouncements of ISIS are generally well-crafted, playing on narratives familiar with many Muslims. Take, for instance, this passage from the declaration of the Caliphate by Abu Bakr where he plays on the themes of shame and humiliation many Muslims have experienced in their lives:

Lift your heads up high. You now have a state and a caliphate that restores your honor, your might, your rights and your sovereignty. The state forms a tie of brotherhood between Arab and non-Arab, white and black, Easterner and Westerner. The caliphate brings together the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, North African, American, French, German and Australian.... They are all in the same trench, defending each other, protecting each other and sacrificing for one another. Their blood mingles together under one flag [with] one goal and in one camp... perform hijra from darul-kufr to darul-Islam. There are homes here for you and your families. You can be a major contributor towards the liberation of Makkah, Madinah, and al-Quds. Would you not like to reach Judgment Day with these grand deeds... A life of jihad is impossible until you pack your belongings and move to the caliphate.¹⁷

¹² This is also a position taken by Graeme Wood. In his article “What ISIS Really Wants”, he writes: “Virtually every major decision and law promulgated by the Islamic State adheres to what it calls, in its press and pronouncements, and on its billboards, license plates, stationery, and coins, “the Prophetic methodology,” which means following the prophecy and example of Muhammad, in punctilious detail. Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do. But pretending that it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combatted, has already led the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it. We’ll need to get acquainted with the Islamic State’s intellectual genealogy if we are to react in a way that will not strengthen it, but instead help it self-immolate in its own excessive zeal. - G. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

¹³ Addressing the United Nations Security Council in September 2014, the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said: “To use this term [Islamic State] is to dignify a death cult; a death cult that, in declaring itself a caliphate, has declared war on the world”. V. Michael, “Islamic State: PM Tony Abbott tells UN Australia’s response to terrorist group will be ‘utterly unflinching’”. *ABC News* (Australia), 25 September 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-25/tony-abbott-speaks-at-un-general-assembly/5767576>.

¹⁴ These claims have been identified by TRI Research Associate Dr. Philipp Holtmann, based on his ongoing analysis of ISIS’ Internet output.

¹⁵ A more comprehensive critique would draw from at least ten different sources and frameworks: (1) history of Islam; (2) four main Islamic jurisprudential schools and their fatwas; (3) international humanitarian law; (4) moral standards as they exist in human rights documents, including Islamic and Arabian human rights texts; (5) the (political) self-interest of the constituency for which ISIS claims to speak; (6) the special interests of women and religious minorities; (7) the juxtaposition of ISIS’ own practices with its declaratory policies; (8) witness accounts of people who have broken ranks with the Islamic State; (9) victim and survivor accounts of those who have experienced ISIS’ practices first-hand; (10) internal documents from ISIS found on computers and in safe houses.

¹⁶ M. Uhlmann, “Challenges and Possible Opportunities for Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Measures vis-à-vis the ‘Islamic State’ Movement”, in: J.-L. Marret & G. Tol (Eds.), *Understanding Deradicalisation: Pathways to Enhance Transatlantic Common Perception and Practices*, (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2015).

¹⁷ K. Leggiero, “Countering ISIS Recruitment in Western Nations”, *Journal of Political Risk* 3, No. 1 (January 2015), <http://www.jpolarisk.com/countering-western-recruitment-of-isis-fighters/#more-699> (based on Carmon, Homeland Security News, 2014).

Let us look at some of the main claims, slogans and statements of ISIS.

Twelve Claims by ISIS and Arguments to Counter These

Claim No. 1:

ISIS claims that it stands for pure and unadulterated Islam

Ad 1: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

The historical record (as opposed to faith-based accounts) offers only dim glimpses of the origins of Islam in its first decades of existence. Therefore any effort to return to the golden age of the first three generations of successors of the Prophet involves, to some degree, the (re-) invention of a lost tradition.

Allah “revealed” himself over a period of 23 years to Muhammad, whose words were written down by others only after his death in 632 CE. A multiplicity of Muslim interpretations exists on the Quran, on Muhammad’s exemplary way of life and on Islamic law (sharia). These can be used to challenge ISIS and its claim to a monopoly of interpretation. This fact could be emphasised to encourage a more skeptical view among susceptible target audiences towards ISIS’ argument that it represents the “pure and unadulterated Islam”.¹⁸

Some critical scientific studies, which have attempted to get closer to the oldest versions of the Quran, have come up with findings that tend to challenge Salafist interpretations. Some of the Quran researchers who deal with the etymology of the sacred text claim that this also concerns crucial topics, such as the rewards of a “martyr” in paradise: when being retranslated, they suggest that the heavenly reward of *huri* might consist of sweet white raisins rather than virgins.¹⁹ This could be an entry for degrading certain doctrines and key discourses of ISIS. The claim of ISIS to stand for “pure and unadulterated Islam” therefore is just that – a claim among other claims with no better proof of correctness. However, by their close (but superficial) imitation of alleged and partly real historical practices from the early days of Islam following what it claims “the Prophetic methodology”,²⁰ ISIS hopes to gain legitimacy, denouncing those who diverge from its version of Islam as *takfir*.

¹⁸ The various messages of the Prophet were in the beginning not systematically collected. In fact the standardised version of the Quran used today was only issued in 1923. The original Quran (the “mother of the book” – *umm al-kitab*) is, strange enough, kept in heaven, not on earth [Quran 56:77-80; Quran 85:21 ff.]; Hans Küng, *Der Islam. Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*. (München: Piper, 2006), p.100; A. Vanya, “Beautifying Islam”, *Gladstone Institute*, 20 November 2014, <http://www.gladstoneinstitute.org/4894/beautifying-islam.3>. To quote Ahmed Vanya: “The Prophet Muhammad himself did not provide any authoritative narration or explanation for the Quranic verses while he was alive. He also did not provide a method for selecting his successor, nor did he authorize his companions to record the *Hadith* (his actions and sayings) while he was alive. Later, therefore, subsequent generations would have to shift through mountains of dubious material, in an age of primitive record keeping – and during a period of discord, partisanship and violence, even among those who were close to the Prophet. The Quran and the six canonical *Hadith* collections primarily formed the twin pillar of the sources from which the scholars of Islam developed the principles of Sharia and the commandments of the Islamic laws”.

Ahmed Vanja has further noted: “...first, we need to realize that the ‘approved’ texts were recorded by early methods and at least after a century or two after the passing of the Prophet in an age of violent sectarian conflicts. Therefore, it might be wise to take with a big grain of salt, the accuracy of these so called ‘approved’ texts (...) This mainstream, legalistic, text-bound, literalist Islam – now the dominant strain and controlled by traditional Muslim scholars – is a mixture of both humanistic ethical values, combined with supremacist ethos, as it developed throughout the centuries”. A. Vanya, “Beautifying Islam”, 20 November 2014, p. 4-5.

¹⁹ C. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*. Berlin: Schiler, 2000. For another assessment of the early roots of Islam and its subsequent history, see: H. Küng. *Der Islam. Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*. München: Piper 2006, p. 95-112; most authoritative is the work of A. al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: University Press, 2014.

²⁰ G. Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

Claim No. 2:

ISIS claims that Muslims are persecuted and their rights violated all over the world and that the only solution to stop this is to fight back.²¹

Ad 2: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

In order to claim the moral high ground, ISIS often portrays its war as defensive rather than as offensive. In its black-and-white ideology it depicts its fighters as heroic defenders of the Muslim world – the *ummah* (community of Muslims) – against Western colonisation and the domination of Arab and other Muslim lands by pro-Western Muslim rulers who are portrayed as puppets of the West. Yet it is a fact that Muslims are not persecuted “all over the world”. They are not persecuted in the West where millions of them have emigrated to voluntarily. Many of them might be discriminated against in the West but that is, unfortunately, the fate of many other immigrants – and not just in the West. The largest persecutions often take place in Muslim-majority countries themselves (Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Sudan) and often both perpetrators and victims are Muslims. In fact, a comparison of religious persecutions in Christian and Muslim countries has shown that large-scale persecutions are ten times more often taking place in Muslim-majority countries.²² The slow-motion genocide in Darfur (costing more than 250,000 victims since 2003) is perpetrated by Arab Muslims against African Muslims and neither ISIS nor other jihadist organisations have raised a finger in the defense of African Muslims in Darfur. ISIS itself is now a prime example of engaging in active religious persecution of fellow (Shia) Muslims on a large scale.

Claim No. 3:

ISIS claims that true Islam can only be established by the sword. This means that members of other religions and sects, including the monotheist ones (Jews, Christians), can be subjugated, forced to convert or be killed.²³

Ad 3: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

Religions have been established by both persuasion and coercion.²⁴ In the case of Islam’s expansion since the 7th century, the *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World* notes that “This expansion was primarily a cultural phenomenon but it was also a significant chapter in military history”.²⁵ While we only have very limited evidence about conversions in the early days of Islam, people were usually encouraged and not coerced to become Muslims. After conversion they would no longer have to pay a special poll tax (*jizya*) levied on non-Muslims who wanted to be assured of protection by Muslim rulers. Other “People of the Book”, such as Christians and Jews, could gain

²¹ According to ISIS (and other jihadist groups), the world is divided into two camps: the abode of Islam (*darul-Islam*) and the abode of unbelief (*darul-kufr*). The camp of unbelief is, according to ISIS, ruled by a Masonic Zionist group of conspirators who allegedly will never leave Muslims in peace. In this struggle, the camp of righteous belief is claimed by ISIS which promises a return to dignity, might, rights and leadership to oppressed Muslims.

²² B. J. Grim and R. Finke, basing themselves on data from 143 countries from the International Religious Freedom Reports (2003) note that “Religious persecution is present regardless of a country’s predominant religion” [p.645] (...) However, they also note that large-scale “[p]ersecution of more than 1,000 persons is present in 40 percent of Muslim-majority countries compared to 3.9 percent of Christian-majority countries”. – B. J. Grim and R. Finke, “Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies?” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 72 (August 2007), p. 633-658.

²³ See ISIS online magazine *Dabiq*, issues 1- 4. All issues are available at: <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isis-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>.

²⁴ Historically, one frequently sought tactic to convert a region was to convert the ruler who then declared that all people in his realm should have his faith. This principle of “cuius regio, eius religio” [“whose region, those religion”] made expansion of religion not directly dependent on “the sword”.

²⁵ D. Nicolle. *Historical Atlas of the Islamic World*. (New York: Facts on File, 2003), p. 48.

the status “protected” (*dhimmi*), but were, for instance, not allowed to ride horses or carry weapons – so there was also a material incentive for them to accept Islam.

However, having said that, there are numerous *hadiths* (9th and 10th century accounts of what the Prophet and other early Muslims allegedly said or did, as reported by his closest companions²⁶) which stress the importance of expanding Islam “by the sword”, i.e. by war.²⁷ But the Prophet is also quoted as saying “let there be no compulsion in religion”.²⁸ The problem of contradictory messages of the Messenger of God is “solved” by some militant interpreters of Islam with the claim that the later (more intolerant) statements of the Quran from the Medina period invalidate the (more conciliatory) earlier statements of the Prophet from his period in Mecca.²⁹

Salafis are supremacists who regard other “People of the Book” as second class citizens in Muslim societies. In the view of the jihadi extremists among them (as opposed to the more peaceful, quietist conservative Salafis), “People of the Book” and unbelievers who do not submit to rules set by them, can be subjugated, enslaved, expelled or even killed. This view is widely contested by mainstream Islam. One of the problems of religious texts – not just the Quran – is that statements that are time- and context-specific are taken out of context and taken literally and applied ad hoc and at will to fit new situations. This is also true for those passages in the Quran that advocate killing of non-believers (e.g. Surah 9:5). Yet the Quran contains also passages that oppose the killing of innocent people (e.g. the often-quoted Surah 5:32)³⁰. Fact is that the Quran and the Hadiths can be read and have been interpreted by Muslim scholars in different ways; for almost every example one can find a counter-example and, in some cases, even a counter-counter-example.

Claim No. 4:

According to some ISIS clerics, civil strife (fitna) is a positive thing because in its course the true believers (ISIS) come to the surface, distinguishing them from the heretics and hypocrites.³¹

Ad 4: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

“Fitna” literally means “to burn”, but is also referring to temptation, probation, to put to the test, distress, discord, riot, civil strife, rebellion against the divine order. Fitna is seen as a situation to be avoided at almost all costs by mainstream Islam. The term has multiple, all negative, uses, referring inter alia to “sedition” and “trial” (testing by temptation) which can lead to deserting one’s faith.³² The Prophet himself called fitna “worse than killing” in the Quran.³³ The first major civil war of the Islamic Caliphate, lasting from 656-661, is generally referred to as the “First Fitna”. Some of the supporters of ISIS apparently see fitna as not that destructive, because in their view the *ummah* is in such a catastrophic shape that civil strife can only lead to a better situation. In addition,

²⁶ J. L. Esposito. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. (Oxford: University Press, 2003), p. 101-102.

²⁷ Cf. P. Sookhdeo. *Global Jihad. The Future in the Face of Militant Islam*. (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2008), p. 66-67. An example would be a passage where the Prophet said: “I was sent by the sword preceding the judgment day and my livelihood is in the shadow of my spear and humiliation and submission are on those who disobey me” [Musnad Imam Ahmad, Volume 2, p. 50: Narrated by Ibn Omar; cit. P. Sookhdeo, op cit., p. 66-67]. It should be noted that there are also many verses in the Quran and the Hadiths which are more conciliatory.

²⁸ The Holy Quran (2:256). Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), p. 33. The Prophet probably understood that it makes no sense to coerce people to convert, for if someone complies only out of fear of punishment, he or she is not a true believer. This more tolerant position is currently still alive in some Shiite discourses.

²⁹ M. A. Gabriel. *Islam und Terrorismus*. (Gräfelink: Resch-Verlag, 2004), p. 255.

³⁰ R. Hermann, “Der Koran – Eine Tötungslizenz?“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 January 2015.

³¹ Claim found in a Muslim web-discussion by an ISIS-leaning Salafi. This argument is also part of ISIS’ and ISIS-supporters’ claims on the ideological and strategic levels that refer to an apocalyptic doomsday. The thinking of ISIS is full of allusions to the End of Times; its journal Dabiq refers to the supposed battle ground where Gog and Magog meet for the final battle.

³² Wikipedia, English version, lemma “fitna”, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_%28word%29. See my previous remark about Wikipedia.

³³ Quran 2:217.

they might use the word in the sense of “to put to test” which is but one of the word’s many meanings. Even if we accept that interpretation, the question remains by what test “heretics” and “hypocrites” can be distinguished from “true believers”. There is no historical record that any of the various *fitan* (plural of *fitna*) since the 7th century were of any help in distinguishing “true believers” from “hypocrites” and “heretics”, as ISIS claims.

As to the “true” in “true believers”: ISIS followers and sympathisers should be confronted with alternative Islamic narratives, which stand for open and rational interpretations of Islam as these existed for centuries not just in the rich medieval history of Islamic civilisations but right until the 19th century and beyond.³⁴ In this way, Muslims might be able to challenge the “truth vs. untruth” discourse of ISIS-followers and help to highlight more nuanced Islam interpretations. Truth is an elusive concept; most religions claim to be in possession of the final truth; yet their “truths” are often contradicting each other and many of them are even internally contradictory within one religion.³⁵ One thing is sure: “truth” cannot be established by intimidating and decapitating those whose arguments cannot be successfully countered by means of logic, reason and empirical testing. While ISIS can kill people and destroy monuments of humanity’s cultural heritage, it cannot kill the ideas that go with them.

Claim No.5:

ISIS claims that a Muslim has to pass through the stage of violent jihad in order to enter paradise. Jihad is even a precondition for the establishment of the *ummah*, since otherwise no separation can take place between *mu'minin* (believers), *munafiqin* (hypocrites) and *kuffar* (unbelievers). The process of ruthless separation must be continued until the two camps are completely separated: the camp of *iman* (belief) vs. the camps of *nifaq* and *kufr*.³⁶

Ad 5: Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

Jihad has been interpreted in several ways. One distinction is between, on the one hand, the “greater jihad” which means restraining oneself from committing immoral acts considered to be transgressions against divine law and, more generally, striving to become a better person. The “minor jihad” refers, on the one hand, to the defense and the active propagation of faith by armed force. This particular meaning of a violent “holy war” is the prevalent one in the Quran. The first part of this ISIS claim (referring to passing through the stage of violent jihad) appears to be inspired by a *hadith* attributed to Mohammed which says: “Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords”.³⁷

Like thousands of other hadiths, the authenticity of this one can be questioned.³⁸ The Prophet has said different things under different circumstances, for example, that “Paradise is at the feet of mothers”³⁹ – a statement hard to combine with the one about the “shades of swords”. So which one is (more) correct? It can be argued, based on logical reasoning, that if it is true that the *ummah* can only be established by the sword, which involves violence, it will lead to resentment and resistance among those coerced into the correct belief –

³⁴ For example, the new interreligious project “House of One” in Berlin offers a discussion forum and prayer rooms for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

³⁵ Truth can be interpreted as “factually correct”, “in accordance with reality”, “corresponding to the actual state of affairs”. A more modest interpretation is that “true” is what (specific groups of) people commonly agree upon at a given moment in time. This leaves open the possibility that science might prove such a common understanding wrong in the future. Philosophers generally take a skeptical view as to our ability to perceive full truth.

³⁶ See for this argument also lecture claim? No. 6, featuring Anwar al-Awlaqi.

³⁷ Sahih Bukhari Volume 4, Book 52, Number 73; narrated by “Abdullah bin Abi Aufa”; cit. P. Sookhdeo, op. cit., p. 66.

³⁸ J. L. Esposito. *Von Kopftuch bis Scharia. Was man über den Islam wissen sollte*. (Leipzig: Reclam, 2006), p. 28-29.

³⁹ Cit. *Der Spiegel*, “The Jihad Cult: Why Young Germans Are Answering Call to Holy War”, 28 November 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/why-young-germany-are-answering-call-to-war-in-syria-a-1003468.html>.

something that cannot be conducive to establishing a harmonious community which the *ummah* is supposed to be.

To term the ongoing armed conflict between Sunni and Alawite/Shia Muslims in Syria and the one between Sunni and Shia in Iraq a jihad as ISIS does, is stretching the meaning of jihad beyond belief. Various religious authorities in Islam, among them more moderate clerics involved in the Syrian revolution/civil war, such as the Islamic Body of Greater Syria (*Hay'at al-Sham al-Islamiyya*), have expressed themselves in this sense.⁴⁰ Part of the casualties in Syria (some 250,000 fatalities and nearly one million injured) were not the result of clashes between the troops of the Alawite Assad dictatorship and Syrian Sunni resistance fighters but resulted from clashes between jihadist Sunni Muslims, especially those of the ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front.⁴¹

Jihad in the sense of “greater jihad”, as an attempt of each and every one to overcome base instincts in an effort to better one’s character by dedication and self-discipline is a valid concept that might, in counter-narratives, be stressed over the violent “lesser jihad”.

Claim No. 6:

ISIS claims, citing the words of al-Zarqawi, that “the honorable resistance” has noble and great Sharia aims. All jihad exerted by the resistance is for the benefit of the Muslim people. The jihad of the resistance is not a limited jihad to redraw the borders of the Sykes-Picot agreement, but is a worldwide jihad.⁴²

Ad 6: Argumentative Elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

To understand this claim, a look at the recent historical background is necessary: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who is cited here, set up “The Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad” (JTJ – *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*) in 1999 and, by 2004, pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden as he established al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, a.k.a. *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*). Al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006 in Iraq by American forces whereupon his group created, on 13 October 2006, the umbrella organisation Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Weakened by the American surge of 2007 and the creation of Awakening Councils (*Sahwa*) in 2007 by Sunni tribes, and also weakened by the killing of two of its leaders in April 2010 (Abu Abdullah al-Rashid and Abu Azzub al-Masri), ISI was revived when Sheikh Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samara'i, a.k.a Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader on 16 May 2010. Al-Baghdadi extended his operations into Syria and in April 2013 announced the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).⁴³ By late 2014 ISIS controlled, to various degrees, an area stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq. More than five million people lived in this region but many have since fled. ISIS controls cities like Mosul, Falluja and Tal Afar in Iraq; in Syria the city of Ar-Raqqah is its headquarters.⁴⁴

Zarqawi’s resistance against the American intervention was not very “honorable” as claimed by ISIS. His cruelty was such that al Qaeda’s second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, had to warn him in July 2005 that by killing innocent Muslim Shia civilians he alienated people from al Qaeda (of which Zarqawi’s group of fighters were then part).⁴⁵ A citizen of Jordan, Zarqawi had started his career as a criminal. His Islamic theological credentials were minor if not totally absent (in that he differs from the new caliph, sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,

⁴⁰ Cit. in paraphrase by the Religious Rehabilitation Group. *The Syrian Conflict*. (Singapore: RRG (Public Education Series), July 2014), p. 3.

⁴¹ http://www.bbc.co/arabic/middleeast/2014/06/140629_syria_rebel_toll.shtml; cit. ICT, Bimonthly Report. Summary of Information on Jihadist Websites. The Second Half of June 2014, p. 26.

⁴² See lecture claim? 5, “Series of the Life From the Words of the ‘Ulamā’ on the Project of the Islamic State”. As to the context: In February 2014, the organisation used a 2006 lecture by Abu Mu’sab al-Zarqawi, former leader of *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* and founder of the original cell of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq, f. 2006) to demonstrate strategic continuity and build support for its imminent declaration of the caliphate.

⁴³ BBC. What is Islamic State, 26 September 2014; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ ISIS: Portrait, etc., p. 23; http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20733/E_101_14_163836165.pdf.

who is said to hold a doctorate in Islamic studies). As to his jihad being for the “benefit of the Muslim people”: most of Zarqawi’s victims were Shia Muslims. He referred to them as “human scum” and “poisonous snakes”.⁴⁶

The reference to a “worldwide jihad” in ISIS’ sixth claim makes clear that it wages a war of aggression rather than one of mere resistance. ISIS has to expand its territory by necessity as its economy model is based on continuous plunder rather than the creation of wealth on the territory it holds. Its systematic murder of tribal leaders in Iraq’s al-Anbar province indicates that it seeks to terrorise and subdue Sunni Muslims there rather than work for them and with them.⁴⁷

Claim No. 7:

ISIS claims that, under present circumstances, Muslim unity becomes mandatory and that therefore it becomes a religious obligation to unify under a single leader.⁴⁸

Ad 7: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

Religious movements have a tendency to split rather than to unify and Islam is no exception to this rule. Its oldest split is the one between Sunni and Shia which is more than 1300 years old and has still not been closed. Within Sunni Islam itself there are, as within Shia Islam, sects and sub-groups, for example the Druze. There is no indication at all that they will unite in the near future. Rather, they are likely, if attacked by ISIS, either to flee or to put up a fight and offer resistance. While more than half a dozen of al Qaeda affiliates have, in recent months, declared allegiance to ISIS, recent splits among some of these affiliates indicate that not everybody is willing to throw in his lot with ISIS.

The call for unity appeals to many in the diverse Islamic worlds, but few are willing to give up their own religious traditions or national aspirations. In the 1960s, the call from Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser for “Arab Unity” did not materialise. It is unlikely that such a call under a different label – religious rather than Arab ethnic – is going to succeed. A public opinion poll among Arab Muslims, conducted by the Doha-based Arab Centre for Research and Policy, surveying public opinion in seven countries, found that 85 percent of respondents had a negative opinion about ISIS.⁴⁹ Chances that more Muslims rally behind ISIS are small as the extreme violence (crucifixions, stonings, beheadings, amputations, rapes, mass killings of prisoners) disgust large majorities of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. When ISIS advanced in Iraq, over half a million civilians fled in one week⁵⁰ - hardly a sign of welcoming unity under ISIS. The Jordanian-Palestinian writer Abu Muhammad al-Maqqdisi, a respected voice among Salafists, has accused ISIL of driving a wedge between Muslims – the very opposite of the unity sought by ISIS.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁷ To quote an analysis from the Soufan Group: “The Islamic State has given up the fiction of working with the Sunni tribes in the area, and is now waging a campaign of assassination and mass murder to blunt the ability of these tribes to oppose the group from within as it battles Baghdad and the coalition”. – The Soufan Group, “War Against All: The Islamic State in Anbar”. *Intelbrief*, 26 November 2014. The report noted that “... the group has murdered almost a thousand Sunni tribesman in the last month, and over 700 from just one tribe, the Albu Nimr.”

⁴⁸ This is another argument of al-Muhajir in the context of the establishment of ISIS, probably in 2006. Republished by ISIS in 2014, in lectureNo. 7.

⁴⁹ Monia Ghanmi. Hostility to Daesh grows among Arabs. *Magharebia*, 25 November 2014. Survey released on 12 November 2014; cit. *BBC*. What is Islamic State?, 26 September 2014; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>.

⁵⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/multimedia/2014/06/140623_irap_refugees_updates.shtml (Arabic); cit. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. ICT Jihadi Monitoring Group. Periodic Review. Bimonthly Report. Summary of Information on the Jihadist Websites. The Second Half of June 2014. Herzliya: ICT, 2014 (www.ict.org.il). p. 15.

⁵¹ Cit. “The slow backlash – Sunni religious authorities turn against Islamic State”, *The Economist*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21615634-sunni-religious-authorities-turn-against-islamic-state-slow-backlash>.

Claim No. 8:

ISIS claims to be the bearer of legitimate religious authority over all Muslims which gives it the right to re-establish the caliphate.⁵²

Ad 8: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

ISIS has adopted a popular variation of the jihadi standard banner used since the 1980s, a black flag with a white circle in the middle that encloses the seal of the Prophet with the words “God Messenger Muhammad”. Its leader has declared himself caliph (meaning a “successor” who was meant to be the vice-regent of Muhammad). The title “caliph” has been used for Islamic rulers overseeing religious and political affairs of an Islamic community, while “caliphate” refers to the territory or state ruled by the caliph.⁵³ The caliph was originally a politico-religious leader who also acted as supreme military commander (*amir al-mu’minin*). This dual function has, however, disappeared after the reigns of the first four caliphs.⁵⁴ The last (Ottoman) Islamic caliphate came to an end in 1924 when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in his secularisation and modernisation campaign for Turkey, abolished the institution headed by the last caliph Abdulmejid II. After a hiatus of 90 years, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi had himself declared “caliph” of a worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014.⁵⁵ According to one Islamic scholar, Rusydi ‘Alyan (in his book *Al-Islam wa al-Khilafah*, 1996), a “caliph” has to have a “profound knowledge of Sharia law” (which the new caliph probably has) and “being fair, virtuous, dignified, mature and sane”, which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has already shown not to be.⁵⁶

In Islamic history the caliphate was a contested institution – three out of the first four so-called Rightly Guided (*Rashidun*) Caliphs (Umar, Uthman and Ali) died by assassination. Discord after the death of the Prophet at the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632 – 661 CE) even reached a point where some of the Prophet’s companions called for “jihad against the Caliph”.⁵⁷ What ISIS presents is a “romanticized history of the Caliphate”, as R. B. Furlow and his colleagues have noted. They added that ISIS portrays “...the Caliphate as a glorious, shining kingdom on a hill, while editing out inconvenient historical details that plagued the Caliphates from the

⁵² This is one of the major claims of ISIS, since legitimacy means support and fosters leadership aspirations. The ISIS power claim is based on adaptations of classical Islamic stipulations regarding the investment of a caliph and the special and general mechanisms that lend legitimacy to the investiture and proclamation of the caliph, such as “pledges of investiture” and “popular pledges of obedience”. Video-taping such ceremonies and marketing them on the Internet has been instrumental for this. In addition, ISIS adapts these stipulations to modern information society-based precepts of leadership, such as management-by-objectives. – Cf. P. Holtmann, “The Different Functions of IS Online and Offline Pledges (bay’at): Creating A Multifaceted Nexus of Authority”, *Jihadology.net*, 15 November 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/11/15/guest-post-the-different-functions-of-is-online-and-offline-pledges-bayat-creating-a-multifaceted-nexus-of-authority>.

⁵³ Religious Rehabilitation Group. *The Fallacies of ISI Islamic Caliphate. A Brief Explanation*. Singapore: RRG, October 2014, p. 5.

⁵⁴ In the past, Islamic empires were often led by multiple factions, and real power was held by internal usurpers, such as the Shiite-Buwaihid emirs, who were in effective control over the Abbaside Caliphate in the tenth century. They had a “loyalty”-agreement with the Abbasid caliphs and allowed them to be nominal rulers. The Turko-Persian Seljuks dealt likewise with the Abbasids in the 11th century. – See P. Holtmann, “The Different Functions of IS Online and Offline Pledges (bay’at): Creating A Multifaceted Nexus of Authority”, *Jihadology.net*, 15 November 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/11/15/guest-post-the-different-functions-of-is-online-and-offline-pledges-bayat-creating-a-multifaceted-nexus-of-authority>.

⁵⁵ The concept of an “Islamic State” goes back to the Pakistani theologian Abdul A’la Maududi (1903 – 1979); it was originally conceived as a third way between socialism and democracy.

⁵⁶ Cit. P. Holtmann, “The Different Functions of IS Online and Offline Pledges (bay’at): Creating A Multifaceted Nexus of Authority,” 15 November 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/11/15/guest-post-the-different-functions-of-is-online-and-offline-pledges-bayat-creating-a-multifaceted-nexus-of-authority>.

⁵⁷ W. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), p.113; cit. R. Bennett Furlow, K. Fleischer, S. R. Corman. “De-Romanticizing the Islamic State’s Vision of the Caliphate”. *Center for Strategic Communication Report*, No. 1402, 27 October 2014, p.11-12, <http://csc.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/csc1402-deromanticizing-islamic-state-caliphate.pdf>.

time of Muhammed’s death”.⁵⁸ Many claims of ISIS refer to the Caliphate. The desire to re-establish a Caliphate has been popular in broader Muslim circles for almost a century. It was a bold move of ISIS to address this widespread wish for a new Caliphate. It has certainly helped to increase the stream of young Muslim recruits to Syria and Iraq since mid-2014.

Several ISIS claims refer to the caliphate, including the following.

Claim No. 9:

ISIS claims that the IS-caliphate is the true land of Islam and emigration (*hijrah*) to the land of Islam is obligatory. Whoever joins ISIS will find great rewards in this world and in the hereafter.⁵⁹

Ad 9: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

The claim that those who join ISIS will get heavenly rewards goes back to numerous verses in the Quran which call for fighting and claim that it is binding upon believers to fulfill God’s commands and obey His leadership (*hidaya*). In exchange, believers will gain heavenly rewards in the Hereafter.⁶⁰ However, the IS-discourse is based on an uncompromising, literal and non-contextual interpretation of such verses and can be seriously challenged. Indiscriminate violence and brutal terrorist practices do not deserve any rewards. Credible Muslim opinion makers who interpret these verses in their respective historical and political contexts ought to be involved in any project which challenge the narrative of the Islamic State. In parallel, one should also stress that the sorry history of failed Western policies in Muslim countries must not be countered by attacks against civilians who are not responsible for the misdeeds of some members of political elites. By being self-critical one gains trust and can facilitate the task to inspire Muslim audiences to become more self-critical as well, especially towards inhuman discourses and deeds from members within their own ranks. If the IS-caliphate is indeed the “true land of Islam”, moderate Muslims will find it difficult to square such a “truth” with some of the actual practices of ISIS, such as:

- *War crimes:* the mass killings of Shia prisoners of war and the ethnic cleansing of Assyrian Christians, Turkmen and Shabak Shia; beheading of foreign journalists; killing of non-believers and heretics based on ISIS’ takfir ideology; destruction of places of religious worship that are not also military sites; burning of people in cages and throwing homosexuals from high buildings;
- *Crimes against humanity:* the selling of 5,000-7,000 Yazidi women and children into slavery; attempted genocide of Yazidis whom ISIS wrongfully associated with Satan;⁶¹
- *Human rights abuses:* among others the ill-treatment of civilians, including women and children; abduction and torture of boys from Kobane; the brainwashing of children and the recruitment of child soldiers as young as nine years old; use of people with mental or physical illnesses as suicide bombers; subjecting women to sexual violence and systematic rape.⁶²

Large majorities of Muslims reject the tactics used by ISIS. A Pew public opinion survey held in 2013 found that “[i]n most countries where the questions [regarding legitimacy of suicide bombings in defense of Islam] was

⁵⁸ R. Bennett Furlow, et al, op. cit., p. 1.

⁵⁹ IS online magazine *Dabiq*, issues 1-4.

⁶⁰ Surat al-Tauba (9) is a key example. But the theme of rewards in return for obedience is present in the whole Quran.

⁶¹ “ISIL may have committed genocide, war crimes in Iraq, says UN human rights report”, *UN News Centre*, 19 March 2015, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50369#.VV4Yp2cw-ig>.

⁶² Based on various accounts from the United Nations and the press.

asked, roughly three-quarters or more Muslims rejected suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilians”. And in most countries, according to this survey, the prevailing view is that such acts are *never* justified as a means of defending Islam from its enemies.⁶³

The record of ISIS so far covers the full spectrum of crimes, from individual murder of children to attempted genocide. The gap between the declaratory policy of ISIS – its claim to be the “true land of Islam” – and its actual record of war crimes, gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity on the ground is probably the most powerful argument in efforts to counter the ideological narrative of ISIS. Muslim witnesses to such crimes by ISIS should be given ample voice in counter-narratives.

Claim No. 10:

ISIS claims that there is a wonderful brotherhood among ISIS-followers. Every capable person should rush forward to join this brotherhood and perform emigration (*hijrah*) to the land of jihad, or at least spiritual emigration away from the values of the infidel societies in which many Muslim live.⁶⁴

Ad 10: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

The claim of a brotherhood among the ISIS fighters has elements of truth as it is well known that men tend to bond in battle. However, there are also tales coming from the ranks of ISIS of bitter disputes. Given the fact that Muslims fight Muslims in Syria and Iraq and jihad refers to the defense of the faith against unbelievers, it is difficult to view the conflict in Syria (and its spill-over into Iraq) as a “jihad”. As the Singapore-based Religious Rehabilitation Group, in a brochure over “The Syrian Conflict” writes:

The conflict in Syria has led to confusion about the obligation of jihad among many Muslims. Many Muslims are being misled into thinking that fighting in Syria is an act of jihad. This is not true. The Syrian conflict is a sectarian war among Muslims in Syria. It is about political power and influence and determining who has control of land and resources.(...) It is not about defending the faith of the ummah.⁶⁵

Some of the foreign fighters who flocked to Syria and Iraq have begun to realise this and disillusionment has set in. The tales of those who return home disillusioned are feared by ISIS. More than 100 foreign fighters who tried to make it back home have been executed by ISIS, apparently in an effort to prevent some uncomfortable truths from gaining publicity.⁶⁶ Among those who stay, whether or not the “wonderful brotherhood” remains “wonderful” can also be doubted. What many of these foreign fighters tend to forget are the long-term consequences of wartime traumas on their mental health. Veterans often become depressed and not infrequently suicidal without appropriate psychological counseling. The experience of many Taliban fighters who

⁶³ “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society”. *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life Project*, 30 April 2013, www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politic-society-overview/. There are some countries in which substantive minorities think violence against civilians is at least sometimes justified. This view is particularly widespread among Muslims in the Palestinians territories (40 percent), Afghanistan (39 percent), Egypt (29 percent) and Bangladesh (26 percent). The readiness to accept violence against civilians seems to be context-dependent. It rises in places suffering from brutal state suppression, poverty and long civil-war histories.

⁶⁴ A major claim issued in ISIS-propaganda in the Internet, especially on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. This propaganda claim is reproduced again and again by affiliated grassroots actors as well as by the mother-organisation itself.

⁶⁵ Religious Rehabilitation Group. *The Syrian Conflict*. (Singapore: RRG (Public Education Series), July 2014), p. 2, <http://rrg.sg/images/pdf/home/rrg-syrian-conflict-final.pdf>.

⁶⁶ “IS has executed 100 foreigners trying to quit: report”, *Agence France Press*, 20 December 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/executed-100-foreigners-trying-quit-report-140040461.html>.

became drug addicts, paranoid and depressed should be a warning to foreign fighters joining ISIS. Of course these long-term consequences will not be there for all those foreign fighters ISIS manages to trick into engaging in so-called martyrdom operations.

Claim No. 11:

The IS-caliphate is the true new nucleus of the land of Islam and emigration (*hijra*) to it is prescribed and obligatory. ISIS claims that it is an individual obligation (*wajib ‘ayni*) for all Muslims skilled in Islamic legal, administrative, health and military affairs to join ISIS in order to assist in the construction of a viable state.⁶⁷

Ad 11: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

The call to perform *hijrah* – which means both emigration and withdrawal from an un-Islamic society to a Muslim one – is one of the most powerful instruments in the Islamic tradition as it implies following in the footsteps of the Prophet. ISIS makes clever use of it to lure vulnerable young Muslim to its state-building project.

It is a standard tenet of militant Salafism that jihad is the personal duty of every Muslim.⁶⁸ Yet mainstream Islam only knows five duties; the alleged sixth personal duty to perform jihad is based on later interpretations of jihad by medieval Islamic jurists like Ibn Taymiyya and by modern Islamists like Sayyid Qutb. It is not contained in texts from early “authentic” Islam.

Given the lack of Arabic language and military skills among many foreign fighters, many of those who have joined ISIS have been used as “cannon fodder” in frontline positions and for suicide attacks. The military pressure on ISIS has put its attempts at state-building on the backburner – where it is likely to remain.

Claim No. 12:

ISIS claims that it is capable of hitting Western interests all over the world by means of its affiliates, with the number of highly motivated, dedicated followers growing by the day.⁶⁹

Ad 12: Argumentative elements for possible incorporation into a Counter-Message

This is part of ISIS self-glorifying propaganda and psychological warfare. ISIS’ motto is “Remaining and expanding”. So far ISIS’ direct attacks have been largely limited to Syria and Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, Libya, Tunisia and Lebanon). However, since mid-2014 a number of lone actors appear to have been inspired by ISIS strategic commands. They have perpetrated terrorist attacks in places as far away as Australia and Canada, in addition to those conducted in Belgium and France. This behaviour is in line with ISIS’ “virtual leadership” paradigm, a long-

⁶⁷ IS online magazine *Dabiq*, issue 1.

⁶⁸ “ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organisation”. *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, November 2014, p. 3, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20733/E_101_14_163836165.pdf.

⁶⁹ As exemplified by the carrying out and marketing of several “deterrence attacks” following an ISIS order issued to affiliates via the Internet in September 2014 to attack citizens of the states which participate in the international coalition against ISIS. Examples are the murder of the French citizen Hervé Gourdel by IS-affiliate “Jund al-Khilafa” in Algeria in September 2014 and the murder of an Ansar al-Sharia leader by an ISIS-affiliate “al-Battar Group” in Libya in October 2014. See ISIS’ online magazine *Dabiq* on the command to deter Muslim opponents. See also the ISIS order to attack Western citizens in their own countries: “Abu Muhammad al Adnani the Leader of Islamic State send a Message to the World – YouTube,” accessed 10 October 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4Zj5r3Jadw>.

range command and control pattern, in which ideology and strategic guidance via the media are supposed to inspire, if not guide supporters’ attacks in the West.⁷⁰

However, this strategy of provoking Western democracies backfires against ISIS goal to consolidate its “Islamic States” in parts of Syria and Iraq a viable state. Attacks in the West will only strengthen the resolve of the coalition of more than sixty states that has been brought together by the United States to fight ISIS. This coalition includes Western, neutral and Muslim countries. The escalation potential of these states is infinitely greater than the one of ISIS. By taking on the whole world, ISIS – which might have had a chance of survival as a Sunni state next to a Kurdish and a Shia state in a fragmenting Iraq – is digging its own grave. It might take months or even years but ISIS as a state (not as an underground terrorist movement) looks doomed. Losing ground in Syria and in Iraq, it is likely that ISIS might seek to regroup in other places. On the other hand, its internal divisions might break it up before it can break out. While each of its acts of terrorism has produced terror, even more so, it also produces resistance to terror. Nonetheless, in the short and medium term the group is a major destabiliser in the region. Its apocalyptic belief that the End of Times is near and that the final battle will be fought and won in Dabiq (Syria), accounts for its fanaticism.

ISIS’ military strength and the degree of support it receives from former Baathist officers and Sunni tribes in Anbar is subject to speculation and dispute; one account mentions some 25,000 fighters of which about half are foreigners and the remainder come from Syria and Iraq while others arrive at higher estimates.⁷¹ Of the more than 5,000 foreign fighters who came from Western countries, many have already died, some have decided to remain in the Islamic Caliphate and some have returned while others who wanted to return have reportedly been killed by ISIS to avoid that they could reveal some ugly truths upon return. How high the threat emanating from those who have returned to the West is, is difficult to assess beforehand. The claim that ISIS is “capable of hitting Western interests all over the world”, has so far been an exaggeration.

Conclusion

This exercise of taking a number of ISIS claims and attempting to counter them has shown the potential of this approach – not more. What is needed is a concerted and systematic approach, based on synergetic interdisciplinary teamwork, aimed at developing counter-messages, counter-speech, counter-arguments and counter-narratives. Subsequently, these have to be tested with audiences that have a cultural affinity to the main target groups. As far as Western democracies are concerned, the target group consists of vulnerable young Muslims who might become foreign fighters or domestic terrorists if they are not stopped on their trajectory of radicalisation. After such testing and appropriate re-calibration of texts, counter-arguments and messages like the ones tentatively sketched here might be ready for use by credible Muslim voices who wish to engage terrorist ideologues and their potential followers with rational or faith-based arguments. It is vital that Muslim scholars are involved in all phases of developing such counter-narratives, not just at the delivery end. While the jihadist ideologues themselves might well be beyond their reach due to the fanatically closed minds (“Salafists only listen to Salafists”, as one of them put it), rebellious young men tempted by Salafist jihadi messages might still be susceptible to the voice of reason, appealing to their own self-interest and to the their inner voice of humanity, the voice of their better self which is also the one of the “greater jihad”.

⁷⁰ P. Holtmann, “Online and Offline Pledges of IS: Creating a Nexus of Authority”. *RSIS-commentaries*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CO14239.pdf>. Together with J. Franco, “Pledges to Islamic State: Weak and Strong Alliances”, *CENS-commentaries*, 12 November 2014, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CO14221.pdf>.

⁷¹ “ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organisation”, *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, November 2014, p. 3, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20733/E_101_14_163836165.pdf.

Terrorism is a combination of violence and propaganda. Counter-terrorism has so far mainly targeted the former and neglected the latter. The use of kinetic force against terrorists in the “war on terror” has, in more than a decade of counter-terrorism, in many cases been unproductive and downright counter-productive in other cases. It has been very costly in terms of lives and money lost. On the other hand, efforts to counter the ideology that drives terrorism have not made much progress in all these years, for lack of funding as well as for lack of development of effective and tested soft power instruments that target the hearts and minds of would-be jihadists. It is high time to invest more in developing better counter-messages and more persuasive counter-narratives which appeal to Muslims on both the emotional and the intellectual level.

Since counter-narratives are only defensive, it is even more necessary to develop credible alternative narratives – narratives that can give a new sense of purpose, meaning and hope to those who feel that they have no future in their and our societies. Those in positions of authority have to show them that we do not live in blocked societies where positive change can come only by means of violence. Policymakers have to listen not only to the grievances of young people but also address their hopes and their expectations for the future and they have to enable young people to actively shape their own future in pluralistic, open societies. The destructiveness of terrorism has to be shown to be futile and has to be opposed by a new constructiveness.

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