Lighting the Path:

the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)

The media products of the revolutionary movement known as the Islamic State (also ISIL, ISIS, Daesh) have received a significant amount of attention from analysts and journalists alike. While extremely helpful, most of this effort is focused at performing content analysis of fairly recent products. As part of the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication (CTSC) project's effort to better understand propaganda messaging in the 21st century, the author of this Research Paper examined primary documents and other media published by the Islamic State movement during its entire existence in order to develop a history of the media department since 2003. The framework for analysis focused on the interaction between key media leaders, the ever-expanding structure and institutions, and the process of innovation used to experiment with different media techniques in different phases of the group's evolution. Based on this history, the paper presents six observations about the media department and its role in the larger movement – in the hopes that this knowledge will be helpful in efforts to combat this particular group and its inevitable imitators in the future.

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Introduction[1]

"...[it will be] the new beacon that will light the path of the monotheists, and revive the negligent minds so that they may join the caravan of jihad..." al-Furqan Establishment, Ministry of Information of the Islamic State of Iraq, 20 October 2009

Scholars affiliated with the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project have produced a series of papers on the history of propaganda, lessons learned from past strategic communications campaigns, and on how to disrupt extremist online recruitment efforts.[2] This paper attempts to add to these excellent resources by using the case study method to explore the so-called Islamic State's (IS) media enterprise – the history and the ideas behind it, the people that ran it, and the infrastructure that by 2015 could produce over 200 unique propaganda products a week.[3] There is little question that this effort is far-reaching and effective, as demonstrated by its influence on the second largest foreign fighter migration in history. To those interested in combating IS in the information domain, a thorough understanding of its media evolution is a mandatory undertaking.

The IS movement started precariously with a few stateless individuals operating far from their homelands and grew into one of the most successful and far-reaching insurgent groups in history, and its media department has no peer in the past or present. While there has been excellent research into the content, quantity, and quality of the products IS produces, little has been written about the history and evolution of the enterprise itself. While its operations are no doubt complex today, their formula for success has always been relatively straightforward: start with carefully constructed narratives, add some righteous people, and invest heavily in infrastructure to produce a superior product – a formula that helped recreate an "Islamic State" in the heart of the Middle East.

Influence operations are a key component for insurgencies, particularly revolutionary movements like IS that are attempting to alter all elements of the political order in addition to the social, legal, religious, and economic systems in the polity to which it belongs. Throughout history, insurgents have used media to recruit, fundraise, justify, claim credit, and transmit psychological warfare and terror.[4] The importance of this

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[1] My silent partner in this project is a courageous journalist who shares my interest in the evolution and history of the IS movement, particularly its media enterprise. This was a joint project in every respect, but due to the hazards of his profession and his travel in multiple areas influenced by this particular group, we have chosen to keep his identity anonymous. The primary author assumes all responsibility for the research in this report. We thank Haroro Ingram and Nibras Kazimi for their insights into the IS's information operations and politico-religious doctrine, respectively; Charlie Winter, Aaron Zelin, and J.M. Berger for their pioneering work on the group that we readily used; and the two anonymous reviewers whose input substantially improved the quality and accuracy of this report.

[2] H. Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7*, no. 6 (2016); H. Ingram and A. Reed, "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7*, no. 4 (2016): J.M. Berger, "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7,* no. 5 (2016), all available at http://icct.nl/topic/counter-terrorism-strategic-communications-ctsc/.

[3] IS published 123 different media releases from 24 different provinces during the week of April 18-24, 2015. See A. Zelin, "Picture or it Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445; Charlie Winter's examination counted 892 distinct events in a single month in June/July 2015. See C. Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate*, Quilliam (2015), p. 12, https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf.

[4] T. Rid and M. Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport and London: Praeger Security International, 2009), pp. 135-6.

effort is indisputable to actors large and small, and yet the results of strategic communications campaigns are quite varied.

How did IS distinguish itself in this field, and grow from a cast of dozens to hundreds of contributors, scriptwriters, photojournalists, online moderators, videographers, and managers? What was the process of innovation, what inspired it, and what can we learn from this evolution?

Russell's study of innovation in American units in Iraq (2005-2007) and how they developed new organisational capabilities while in a protracted irregular warfare campaign distilled the following commonalities: a strong intellectual preparation for a complex environment, leadership that was comfortable in devolving authority to lower levels, and operators that displayed a corresponding sense of initiative in an organisational structure that encouraged experimentation and allowed for the occasional failure. Senge called these learning organisations: groups of people that continually seek out self-improvement and are responsive to the demand signal from the environment.[5] This examination of IS's media evolution borrows from this idea of innovation during irregular warfare to focus on the people, ideas, and structure that made up the IS media enterprise, while tracing the interplay of factors that brought the movement to prominence in 2014 after many years of trial and error.

This case study is divided into four parts that mirror the stages of development of the IS movement: early growth (2002-2006), defeat and adjustment (2006-2010), expansion to caliphate (2011-2014), and its inevitable contraction (2015- present).[6] Each part outlines the general situation of the movement during each particular period and the role that the ideas, people, and enterprise played in the development of the phenomenon we see today. In Part V, we present six observations about the IS media organisation in the hopes that distilling its true nature will lead to the development of an effective strategy that produces a more permanent and stable peace for a very important area.

Part 1: What's Past is Prologue (2002-2006)

The IS movement began as a small group under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist who had established a camp in Afghanistan that collected displaced fighters and families from the Levant in the late 1990s[7]. Zarqawi led the group into Northern Iraq after being ejected from Afghanistan by U.S. forces in 2002. A Salafi-

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[5] J. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa, Iraq, 2005-7* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p 192; P. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1990), pp. 3-11.
[6] These phases roughly match the author's description of the IS movement's evolution according to Maoist phases of revolutionary warfare in "The New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State movement (2002-2016)", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2016), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523.
[7] The Levant refers to Greater Syria, including Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

jihadist[8] group of Iraqis in the Kurdistan region[9] hosted Zarqawi's men for a time as he established a network throughout Sunni Arab Iraq and Syria in the days prior to the American-led invasion of Iraq.[10] This effort continued after the invasion until Zarqawi made his first strikes in the late summer of 2003, striking at the United Nations, the Jordanian Embassy, and the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf with large car/truck bombs. The strikes killed the head of the United Nations mission in Iraq and the head of the Shia Hakim family among scores of others, a tremendous first effort that created an earthquake of political consequences.[11] The attacks went unclaimed – leaving mystery and confusion in their wake.[12]

Zarqawi did not claim these attacks, despite serious temptation, because his group's ability to produce effective media operations was non-existent. To succeed, Zarqawi needed to increase visibility both nationally and internationally in order to gain people, funding, and legitimacy in an environment that was seeing a tremendous growth of Sunni resistance groups (i.e. future competitors). Although the group had existed since 1999, it now had to create a local media organisation from scratch in order to accomplish these objectives.[13]

Early Inspiration

Zarqawi's leadership was able to draw on ideas from recent jihadi experiences in the development of the new media office. One inspiration was Abdullah Azzam's exhortation to the global Muslim community to "join the caravan of martyrs" and travel to Afghanistan to fight against the atheist Soviets. The recreation of the global jihadi community witnessed during this time period resonated with Zarqawi's group, many of whom had experienced jihad in the South Asian country.[14] The contemporary jihadi efforts in Chechnya and Hezbollah's fight against Israel witnessed an increased use of graphic battlefield video footage for broadcast to friend and foe alike, a more modern update of the concept "propaganda of the deed."[15] Zarqawi's cohort quickly saw the potential of replicating this effort in the developing internet medium, which would be a slight update from the way hand copied audiotapes were used in the decade before.[16]

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[8] The Salafi movement is a politico-religious ideology that stresses strict adherence to the original texts and practices of the early, pious Muslims, or Salaf. Salafi-jihadists is a general term referring to a subset of militants that adhere to the Salafi spectrum and advocate its implementation using coercive methods instead of politics. *Takfir* is a concept that supports the excommunication of apostate Muslims by certain authorities. The Islamic State movement is made up of a unique blend of Salafi/jihadist/Takfiri/revolutionaries. For an excellent discussion on the dangers of using these terms loosely, see T. Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or revolutionaries? On religion and politics in the study of militant Islamism", in R. Meijer, eds., *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): pp. 244-266.

[9] This group was Ansar al-Islam, later called Ansar al-Sunnah. Zarqawi was able to recruit several key leaders away from the group for his own movement that became IS.

[10] M. Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2014, 2nd Edition), pp. 207-214.

[11] J. Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Double Day, 2015), pp. 106-114.

[12] B. Ghosh, "Twelve years on, remembering the bomb that started the Middle East's sectarian war", *Quartz*, 28 August 2015, http://qz.com/476191/remembering-the-bomb-that-started-the-middle-easts-sectarian-war/.

[13] While Tawhid wal Jihad had to create its own local office in a new group that was restarting after its journey from Afghanistan into Iran and then Kurdistan, its birthing pains were eased by the fact that a robust global jihadist media and cyberspace network existed to reach down and help the nascent media office. See H. Rogan, *Al Qaeda's online media strategies: from abu Reuter to Irhabi 007*, Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, 2007, https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/07-02729.pdf.

[14] A. Azzam, "Join the Caravan", 1987.

[15] N. Bolt, *Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); A. Exum, "The Spectacle of War: Insurgent video propaganda and Western Response, 1990-present", *Arab Media and Society* (May 2008), pp. 3-4, http://www.arabmediasociety.com/articles/downloads/20080510194225_AMS5_Andrew_Exum.pdf.

[16] H. Rogan, *Al Qaeda's online media strategies* (2007), p. 15.

The growth of the internet allowed jihadists to greatly expand their prospective audience at low cost. Jihadist theorist Abu Musab al Suri commented on the dynamics of the new media and its paradigm change in his epic tome *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*: it changed the audience from the elite to the masses, communicated a popular purpose (the call to jihad to protect Muslim communities), injected passion and emotion into what had been an academic discussion, and moved from clandestine distribution to an open system.[17]

The opportunity to tap into an expansive worldwide audience angered by the American-led occupation of Iraq allowed Zarqawi's group to move to the centre stage, where the unique ideology of the future IS could be marketed more effectively than ever to the global Salafi trend. Certainly Zarqawi's vision for his movement was not a dominant or popular version in the greater jihadi community and was highly contested, reflecting the deep ideological differences exposed during the post-Soviet Afghan era.[18] Zarqawi's media department would become the instrument of change for the norms of the Salafi jihadi movement, especially concerning the use of violence and the principle of takfir (excommunication). What Zarqawi was intuitively attempting is known as shifting the Overton window, a political concept that refers to how ideas that lie beyond the range of acceptable beliefs can be popularised and normalised through repetitive discourse to the point of eventual inclusion by audiences outside the fringe.[19]

From Imitation to Innovation

Zarqawi's first media interaction as leader of the group, named Tawhid wal Jihad (TwJ) was an audiotape released in January 2004 called "Join the Line."[20] The speech poignantly eulogised one of his closest comrades during the American-led invasion and called for Muslims to join the jihad in Iraq – a blatant imitation of Azzam's call during the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan for Muslim men to join the caravan of martyrs.[21] The file was released on a popular jihadist website attributed to Zarqawi with no mention of the group.[22] By April he announced the "formation" of his group on an audio file released to jihadist websites that also retroactively claimed the very first attacks from 2003, along with the horrific attacks on Shia pilgrims in early 2004 that killed and wounded hundreds of civilians.[23] The group's "Information Department" began releasing regular messages and strategic leadership statements, while the "Military Wing" made its own releases regarding military operations. On rare occasions, subordinate brigades authored their own statements.

TwJ's subsequent release of a series of execution videos is one example of the use of the Overton shift to normalise the killings of civilians and other enemies of the group.[24] These first decapitations were strongly criticised and censored outside of jihadi circles, and inside them as well. The shock effect of killing on camera, an act that earned Zarqawi the nickname "Sheikh of the Slaughterers," sparked rebukes from al Qaeda central (AQC) leadership who thought that this type of violence poisoned the al Qaeda

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[17] Ibid., pp. 28-29.
[18] M. Hamid and L. Farrell, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).
[19] J. Lancaster, "Brexit Blues", *London Review of Books 38,* no. 15 (2016).
[20] The name means monotheism and struggle in Arabic.
[21] His partner Abdul Hadi Daghlas had been killed in an American bombing of the Ansar al-Islam camp early in the war.
[22] The website was alansar.com, the world's first jihadist forum and subsequently chased offline.
[23] P. Benson, "CIA: Zarqawi tape 'probably authentic'", *CNN.com,* 7 April 2004, www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/04/07/zarqawi.tape/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD.
[24] "Biographies of Eminent Martyrs: Saif al Ummah", *Al Qaeda in Iraq,* translated by Evan Kohlmann, retrieved from http://www.globalterroralert.com.

brand for the average Muslim. While this opinion seemed to capture conventional wisdom, one researcher tied these videos to a surge in recruits to the movement after the two battles of Fallujah in 2004.[25] Another more localised example of shifting the Overton window was the media department's use of cameramen who trailed slightly behind suicide bombers and captured gory footage of dead civilians in Shia areas, which was then marketed to Iraqi Sunnis angry about the ethnic cleansing of their own areas by Shia militias and rogue police units.[26]

Zarqawi's group was not insensitive to the resultant charges of excessive violence. In the early days, the group experimented with credit claiming and credit avoiding.[27] One study of large bombings in Shia areas of Baghdad found that after an early experience of blowback in both Iraq and external audiences, the media department stopped claiming any terror attack with large numbers of civilian casualties.[28] This reluctance to claim Iraqi Shia civilian deaths faded by 2007, most likely due to the successful shift of the Overton window.

While the name Tawhid wal Jihad accurately expressed the values of the organisation, its natural marketing appeal was limited in an environment crowded with diverse resistance groups to the American-led occupation. In January 2004, Zarqawi applied to his former sponsors in Afghanistan for acceptance as an official branch of al Qaeda, which would help him with external funding for attacks and boost his brand. Initially hesitant to accept Zarqawi, al Qaeda relented by October and Zarqawi fought the second battle of Fallujah under a new banner called al Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers – although they were better known as "AQI."[29]

For most of 2004 and all of 2005, the "media wing" posted strategic leadership statements by Zarqawi, defences from external critiques, verbal attacks against rival groups or individuals, or denials and counteraccusations onto friendly jihadist forums or hacked internet sites. The "military wing" of TwJ posted a majority of the statements, which were celebrations of the attacks by the "knights of monotheism" on a host of "cowardly" enemies: the Americans ("crusaders"), the "apostate" Iraqi government and Kurdish Peshmerga, and rival Shia militias – Mahdi ("devil") Army and the Badr ("treachery") Corps.[30] This line of messaging served to affirm Zarqawi's wisdom in taking on a powerful array of foes and ingrained this political worldview into the movement's DNA for good.[31] To keep the new and hot brand authentic, TwJ and later AQI regularly reminded its growing audience to only look for authentic statements posted by its official spokesman, a man named Abu Maysara al-Iraqi.[32]

[25] T. Tonnessen, "The Islamic Emirate of Fallujah", *International Studies Association conference paper*, 16-19 March 2011, https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxqaWhhZGlzbXN0dWRpZXNuZXR8Z3g6NTgzN2RkM2UzNmE3OGI4Yg.

[26] M. Alexander, *How To Break a Terrorist: The US Interrogators who used brains, not brutality to take down the deadliest man in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

[27] B. Hoffman, "Why terrorists don't claim credit", *Terrorism and Political Violence 9*, no. 1 (1997).

[28] C. Whiteside, "The Smiling, Scented Men: The Political Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq, 2003-2013", dissertation, *Washington State University* (2014), pp. 146-7.

[29] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Pledge of Allegiance to al-Qaeda", in *Mu'asker al-Battar*, Issue 21, October 17 2004, translated by Jeffrey Pool, *Jamestown Foundation*, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=27305#.Vpcp0_GlY7A.

[30] C. Whiteside, "The Smiling, Scented Men: The Political Worldview of the Islamic State of Iraq, 2003-2013" (2014).

[31] Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, "Harvest of prosperity", *Al Fajr Media*, audiotape released 17 March 2009.

[32] Tawhid wal Jihad, Statement released on 20 July 2004, translated by Evan Kohlmann, retrieved from www.globalterroralert.com.

A Face behind the Screen

The first spokesman for the movement was a young Iraqi from Baghdad and an active member of the underground Salafist networks during the late Saddam period, which resulted in his imprisonment by the regime's intelligence services. Born into a Shia family in Kazimiyah, Baghdad, he was a convert to Salafism and sought out an extensive education in this trend, including memorisation of the Koran, study of the Hadiths and Islamic jurisprudence, and rhetoric and debate. Among his instructors was the famous Subhi al-Badri – a relative and teacher of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and a noted anti-Shia polemicist[33] - as well as Muharib al-Jabouri, who would eventually succeed Maysara in the same position.[34] Maysara was one of the earliest Iraqi recruits into TwJ, and Zarqawi selected him for the spokesman position because of his ability to accurately communicate the doctrinal elements of the movement's ideology in the highly critical environment of the Salafi-jihadi trend. As a young student (less than 24) with recent university experience, he was uniquely computer savvy with connections that helped connect the movement to an international audience on the internet, something greatly enhanced by the fall of the Saddam regime and the introduction of internet service providers in Baghdad. This effort was assisted by the preexisting network of jihadist sympathisers outside of Iraq who would help publicise and spread the statements on multiple hosts.[35]

The tremendous effectiveness of the young spokesman did not go unnoticed by U.S. authorities, and a vigorous effort was made to suppress his connection to the rest of the world. These efforts were largely fruitless, as the TwJ spokesman was always one step ahead, using the latest Silicon Valley file sharing technology to spread video links on anonymous or hacked websites.[36] In a little over a year's time, U.S. officials went from laughing at Saddam's information minister "Baghdad Bob" to being bested by a millennial Iraqi with part-time internet access in a café.

Maysara served as the official spokesmen and deputy emir of the media department for over two years before he was finally killed in a U.S. raid, making him an early casualty of cyber "warfare."[37] The coalition's failure to combat Zarqawi's online messaging in the cyber domain forced a change in strategy, and the U.S. moved to prioritise the kinetic targeting of a media wing it could not impact in cyberspace. It is highly probable that U.S. electronic surveillance of the internet cafés of Baghdad led to Maysara's death,[38] which neither the US nor Zarqawi's group commented on in the late spring of 2006.[39] The famous but faceless internet spokesman simply vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared.

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[33] M. Barber, "Meet the Badris", *Syria Comment* weblog, 13 March 2015, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/meet-the-badris/.

[34] Islamic State of Iraq, "Number Forty-Six of the Biographies of Eminent Martyrs: Abu-Maysarah al-Iraqi", *Al-Furqan Establishment,* disseminated on jihadist websites by the Al-Fajr Media Center.

[35] A. Cha, "From a Virtual Shadow, Messages of Terror," *Washington Post*, 2 October 2004, p. A1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1570-2004Oct1.html.

[36] Ibid.

[37] While cyberspace has been in existence for decades, cyber warfare is a relatively new phenomenon. Here it is defined as the infliction of death and destruction by means of the cyber medium. Although a computer did not kill him, he was most likely tracked down through the use of hacked computers that identified him or one of his subordinates. Maysara's bio/eulogy mentions that his picture was shown to friends in prison to verify his identity, indicating that the US knew who they had killed.

[38] Operators went through the trouble of injecting a key-tracking virus into each computer of several internet cafés in order to discover who was uploading videos to the jihadist sites. See the whole story in S. Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

[39] S. Peterson, "Document released by Iraq's government appears to show that Al Qaeda in Iraq feels vulnerable", *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June 2006, http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0616/p01s04-woiq.html.

Heralding the Proto-Caliphate

After a year and a half of absorbing smaller groups into the fold, Zarqawi's AQI orchestrated a merger with some other similar Salafi-styled groups into a political front known as the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), in preparation for the establishment of a future caliphate.[40] That AQI was the dominant group is easily discernable by looking closely at the media department's transition from AQI to MSC in January, and later to the Islamic State of Iraqi (ISI) in October 2006. Abu Maysara went from being AQI's spokesman one day to becoming MSC's the next, without a pause in statements and just a change in logo and letterhead, and with little explanation of the media transformation. The popular magazine and video series remained the same, and the "Biographies of the Prominent Martyrs" series just continued the same numbering sequence it had begun when it was the TwJ media wing (by 2011 the series was up to issue 48 before the media unit officially ended the series, which has since continued under a slightly different, unnumbered series).[41]

As impressive a splash as the early media department made on both the jihadi community and the rest of the world, the actual infrastructure was rudimentary and lacked depth. As late as the summer of 2006 the media group was a small, highly centralised cell that maintained close ties to Zarqawi. The evolution of the Coalition Special Operations Forces into an efficient man-hunting machine chasing Zarqawi meant that the media became a target simply due to its close proximity to the leadership.[42] The task force hunting the AQI leader captured a group of five men in April 2006 in Yousifiyah who later described themselves as high-level leaders in the MSC, including the minister of information, and their interrogations led to the death of Zarqawi in an airstrike.[43] The killing coincided with a significant disruption of MSC media output, and exposed a very urgent and existential need for additional layering and bureaucracy if the department was to survive future strikes.[44]

During this period, a man called Abu Ammar al-Dulaimi released several statements under the title of spokesman of the MSC.[45] While brief in appearances, Abu Ammar is notable for his role in protecting the identity of the newly announced emir of the MSC, Abu Abdallah al-Baghdadi, by reading the leader's speech for him in an audio release posted on the internet in July 2006. As a result, Abu Abdallah's true identity was concealed from voice identification for years and when Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was named the first emir of the Islamic State of Iraq in October of that year, Abu Abdallah seemed to disappear as suddenly as he had appeared.[46] This mystery lasted until 2016, when a coalition air strike killed IS deputy Abu Ali al Anbari. IS's newsletter *al Naba* subsequently revealed that Abu Ali was in fact the mysterious Abu Abdallah, and his

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[40] N. Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, Vol VII,* Hudson Institute (July 2008), http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1137/20080701_kazimicaliphateattempted.pdf.
[41] "Biographies of Eminent Martyrs' Number 48: Abd-al-Aziz, Atiq al-Atiq, Abu-Suhayb al-Najdi", *Al-Furqan*, 15 September 2011, posted on *Sanam al-Islam Network.*
[42] S. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013).
[43] M. Alexander, *How To Break a Terrorist: The US Interrogators who used brains, not brutality to take down the deadliest man in Iraq* (2008).
[44] J. Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes", *International Security 38,* no. 4 (2014), pp. 7-38.
[45] Abu Abdallah al-Baghdadi (read by Abu Ammar al-Dulaimi), "This is what Allah and His Messenger Had Promised Us", *Media Commission of the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC),* audio file posted to the *Islamic Renewal Organization* online, 1 July 2006.
[46] In fact, with the absence of an explanation of what happened to Abu Abdallah al Baghdadi, most analysts assumed that Abu Omar had changed names – adopting the name of one of the Rashidun (early caliphs) as the chosen proto-caliph. Instead, Abu Omar was chosen as a replacement for Abu Abdallah (who later went by Abu Ali al Anbari, Abu Ala al Afri and Haji Iman) once the latter was captured and imprisoned.

disposition concealed because he had been detained by the coalition around the time of the death of Zarqawi, leaving the movement leaderless. This very important fact was unknown to the United States, thanks to the role spokesman Abu Ammar had in protecting Abu Abdallah/Abu Ali al-Anbari's identity.[47] The media department had access to important secrets, and the loss of Zarqawi influenced the department to think deeply and become more involved in efforts to protect the identity of Zarqawi's replacements. This would have huge import in 2013, when an extremely influential Abu Ali al-Anbari influenced the effort to expand IS into Syria from Iraq – following his timely parole from prison some time in 2012.[48]

Part II: The Struggle to Realise an Islamic State (2006-2010)

On 15 October 2006, a man by the name of Muharib al-Jabouri – on behalf of the media department of the Mujahideen Shura Council - announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an event deliberately timed to coincide with the Ramadan period.[49] The announcement of the long planned "state" was facilitated by the timely death of an increasingly polarising Zarqawi and meant as a political gambit - along the lines of a fait accompli - to pressure rival insurgent groups to join an IS that was peaking in both popularity and territorial control in Sunni areas.[50] The transition was heralded by a video that symbolised the union of Sunni Iraqi tribes with the jihadist groups under the MSC. Zarqawi's movement was now being transformed into a state-like structure.[51] The proposed state, led by an Iraqi named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (political leader) and Zarqawi's former Egyptian deputy Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (military leader), signaled the transformation from an insurgent group with regional cells to a shadow government with regional provinces (wilayats) that contained identical functional bureaus matching those at the national level.

The leaders of IS created this structure in order to enforce leader preferences and priorities within the movement, such as the application of violence and the management of resources.[52] Known as an "M-form" hierarchy, the emirs at the wilayat level had significant autonomy to execute policy and guidance developed at the central level, while the central level controlled shared resources (such as foreign fighters) and excess revenue collected from its subordinate units. According to one RAND research report using captured AQI/MSC documents, the list of functional bureaus in the 2006 structure included: administration, "movement and maintenance", "legal", "military," "security," "medical," "spoils," and "media."[53] The impact of this bureaucratisation on the

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[47] Thanks to "Mr. Orange" for the tip: https://twitter.com/Mr0rangetracker/status/760778215350738944; see: Islamic State, "Sheikh Abu Ali al Anbari, accepted by God," *al Naba*, no. 41, 16 August 2016, http://jihadology.net/2016/08/02/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-41/.
[48] al Naba, no. 41.
[49] N. Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted", (July 2008), http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1137/20080701_kazimicaliphateattempted.pdf.
[50] Unlike other insurgent groups that had a dispersed and uneven influence throughout the country, AQI was a truly national network that focused its efforts in certain key cities where they were running Islamic mini-emirates in parts of those cities, including al Qaim, Ramadi, and Baqubah. See M. Silverman, *Awakening Victory* (Philadelphia and Newbury: Casemate, 2011) for an example of AQI/ISI's control and state building efforts in Ramadi in 2006-7.
[51] B. Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside Al Qa'ida in Iraq*, Combating Terrorism Center (2009), p. 4, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaida-in-iraq.
[52] J. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*: *Managing Violent Covert Organizations*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 89.
[53] B. Bahney, H. Shatz, C. Ganier, R. McPherson and B. Sude, "An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq", *RAND Corporation* (2010), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1026.pdf.

centralised media department was to formalise the relationship between local media units and the central or "state" level.

The physical disruption of the IS media office increased in 2007, coinciding with the organisation's reduced public support and military setbacks. The man tapped to replace Abu Maysara as the group's official spokesman in mid-2006 was a familiar figure to those in the media department: Maysara's former religion teacher, Muharib al-Jabouri.[54] The MSC's deliberative body selected Muharib to announce the formation of the new IS and serve as its new spokesman for several reasons.[55] Jabouri was a member of the same Salafi circuit that produced Maysara and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and he had a legal and religious education including a doctorate from Saddam University. From 2003-2006, Jabouri led his own insurgent group called Saraya al-Ghareeb (battalion of strangers)[56] and hence was not a Zarqawi protégé, but instead a key representative of the conservative Sunni groups Abu Omar and the Shura Council were trying to court so assiduously.[57] His new position was reflective of the division of spoils from the merger, and he was one of the few members of IS to use his own name instead of a *kunya* for protection. The reasons for this are unknown, but he might have been too well known; it is also possible that his prominent position with the Islamic State would have helped recruiting efforts with the influential Jabouri tribe, which had flirted with the coalition and Iraqi government to an increasing extent.[58]

The continuity of highly educated spokesmen with impeccable Salafi pedigrees had proved to be a constant with this movement, a characteristic that remains to this day. But along with the appointment of an influential spokesman was the corresponding announcement of a new media emir, a man of tremendous influence and reputation in order to match the responsibilities of a growing media establishment under the new state-like structure developing during 2006.[59] The new emir, Abu Zayd al-Mashadani, would be a memorable choice for many reasons.

Mashadani[60] had originally been a leading Iraqi jihadi in Ansar al Sunna who left to join Zarqawi in 2005, along with notables Abu Talha al-Ansari (first Wali of Mosul), Omar Bayizani, and Abu Ali al-Anbari. Mashadani's stature was such that he was one of the three candidates short-listed to replace Zarqawi after his death in 2006, and his appointment as media emir demonstrated the importance the department had in the new proto-state.[61]

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[54] According to the Abu Maysara biography (Prominent Martyrs #45), Muharib (also known as Abu Bakr) al Jabouri was his religious teacher. Religious knowledge seems to have been a requirement for the position in order to assist the emirs like Zarqawi and Abu Omar and Hamza with the habitual religious references in their speeches, as well as conduct quality control on the Islamic content of all releases.

[55] Murahib's participation in the announcement signified many things including unity of a disparate set of groups and agreement on a very risky political strategy. Nibras Kazimi correctly pointed out at the time the immense and bold step being taken by the jihadists of the Islamic State, calling it a proto-caliphate in "The Caliphate Attempted", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (2008). This step would inspire the coming backlash.

[56] The "stranger" code word is a common Salafi term that roughly equates to a "warrior-monk" image.

[57] T.H. Tønnessen, "Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State", *Perspectives on Terrorism 9,* no. 4 (2015), p. 50; Abu Omar al Baghdadi remembered Muharib as a one of the key members of the Shura Council and a founder of IS who had been martyred - in the speech "The Promise of Allah", Islamic State of Iraq, September 2008.

[58] V. Salama, "Iraqi Tribe risks huge sacrifices in siding against ISIL", *The National* (UAE), 28 March 2015, http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/iraqi-tribe-risks-huge-sacrifices-in-siding-against-isil.

[59] The first cabinet of IS announced in April 2007, posted om Jidhadology.net: http://jihadology.net/2007/04/19/video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-shaykh-mu%E1%B8%A5arib-al-jaburi-the-first-cabinet-selection-for-the-islamic-state-of-iraq/.

[60] Abu Zayd was also known as Abu Muhammad al Mashadani. See A. Tamimi, "A complete history of Jamaat Ansar al Islam", (December 2015), http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/12/a-complete-history-of-jamaat-ansar-al-islam.

[61] A. Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi by Abu al-Waleed al-Salafi", (January 2016), http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/an-account-of-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-islamic-state.

The new leadership appointments in the media department were desperately needed in a busy environment of political mergers and the frenzied activities of the military units in 2007 that relied on local media offices to produce more products that were vetted and edited at the central level. To add to this pressure, a series of coalition raids in the summer of 2007 took its toll on the central media office. One of these operations discovered a media centre near Samarra belonging to the newly established video production company al-Furqan, which contained 65 hard drives with 18 terabytes of data, 500 compact discs of material, and twelve computers. The facility had the capability to mass-produce 156 CDs in eight hours and had a fully functioning film studio with first class equipment.[62] In all, over eight separate media offices were destroyed all over Iraq in mid-2007.[63] While this disruption caused substantial gaps in video releases, IS's planned decentralisation of media offices allowed it to continue to produce operational summaries and leader statements without fail, demonstrating the resiliency that would bring them through the tough times in the coming years.[64]

The Serious Spokesman and the Serial Liar

The transition to statehood, while aspirational (if not fantastical) from a territorial control measurement as the fortunes of the movement waned, was much more concrete from an institutional perspective. Muharib al-Jabouri introduced the concept of the "institutional spokesman" of IS in the video in which he announced the birth of "the State," an attempt to create the image of a true competitor to the Iraqi government in Sunni areas. Gone were the martial props of an insurgent group; Muharib replaced these with a desk, laptop, microphone, and the formal Arabic dress of a sheikh. These details were meant to convey for the first time the public routinisation of the IS movement.[65] Muharib also recruited quality people to work on the editing of IS propaganda, including future caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[66]

One study of Iraqi insurgent media during this time period found that compared to other groups, IS media projected a more comprehensive operational picture of its activities around the country through the publication of composite statements of attacks by wilayat (province) instead of singular attacks, and was the only group that consistently produced strategic communication from the leadership. A snapshot of insurgent statements for March 2007 highlights the way in which IS was diverging from common practice due to its increasing centralisation and expanded structure:

[62] K. Bergner, "Situational Update", *MFNI-Iraq*, 18 July 2007, www.MNF-Iraq.com.
[63] B. Roggio, "US targets AL Qaeda's al Furqan media wing in Iraq", *Long War Journal*, 28 October 2007, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/10/us_targets_al_qaedas.php.
[64] B. Roggio, "Hunting al Qaeda in Iraq's propaganda cells", *Long War Journal*, 28 November 2007, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/11/hunting_al_qaeda_in.php.
[65] H. Ingram and C. Whiteside, "Don't kill the Caliph: The Islamic State and the pitfalls of leadership decapitation", *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2016, http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/dont-kill-the-caliph-the-islamic-state-and-the-pitfalls-of-leadership-decapitation/.
[66] A. Hashem, "The many names of Abu Bakr", *al Monitor*, March 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/03/isis-baghdadi-islamic-state-caliph-many-names-al-qaeda.html.

Group	Statements of Military Operations	Geographical Composite Statements	Strategic Communications
Islamic Army of Iraq	241	6	1
Mujahideen Army	136	2	1
1920s Brigade	0	0	3
Ansar al Sunnah	180	2	4
Islamic State of Iraq	71	74	15

Table 1: Insurgent statements March 2007, data from Kimmage and Ridolfo (2007)[67]

Examples of the strategic communications included denials of false media reports, criticism of the Maliki administration, an announcement of a new military campaign, a description of IS "programmes" and fundamentals, and one clarification of its own messaging. The important point here is that the clear differences in the use of media between the Islamic State and its Sunni rivals was becoming clear at this critical juncture.

The relentless pursuit of the media as a target by coalition special operations forces led to the death of Muharib al-Jabouri in the spring of 2007, but the efforts to create functioning local media outlets continued to be fruitful. By May 2008, the ministry of information of the Islamic State of Iraq released a video featuring the spokesman of Ninawa province speaking in front of two cameras in the formalised setting of a cable news anchor – the first video to give a voice to a province vis-a-vis the state.[68] Provinces had been reporting their own monthly rollups of military operations since the announcement of IS and its official provinces, but that was a basic evolution of standard procedures in place since the MSC media office grew tired of reporting an ever increasing number of events scattered all over the country, and started organising the reports by geographic region.[69] Nonetheless, as IS lost their grip on key sanctuaries in Anbar, Diyala, and Babil province, the more the media office was relied on to create the impression of a functioning state.

Jabouri's death roughly coincided with the capture of his boss, media emir Abu Zayd al-Mashadani, and they were the first two cabinet members of the newly proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq to be killed or captured.[70] Jabouri's impact was such that he was

[67] D. Kimmage and K. Ridolfo, "Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Idea", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (2007), data compiled from chart on p. 10, http://docs.rferl.org/archive/online/OLPDFfiles/insurgent.pdf.
[68] "Words from the Media Spokesman of Wilayat Ninewa", *Islamic State of Iraq*, 1 May 2008, can be found on A. Zelin's Jihadology website with English subtitles, http://jihadology.net/2008/05/01/video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-words-from-the-media-spokesman-of-wilayat-ninawa/.
[69] C. Whiteside, "Smiling Scented Men" (2014), associated database of statements. IS started releasing some reports by city and province after October 2006. Before then, each report included attacks from around the country within random periods. By mid-2007 most are reported by provinces, with exceptions for high visibility attacks and suicide bombings.
[70] Aymenn al-Tamimi captured this defector's take on IS, which included an acknowledgment that Mashadani had been captured by the US: http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/an-account-of-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-islamic-state.

later eulogised by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as one of the founders of IS.[71] Mashadani's interrogation was also impactful, producing intelligence about the organisation that has influenced analysts to this day, albeit in a detrimental fashion. According to the chief U.S. military spokesman, Mashadani revealed deep divisions among IS between foreigners and local fighters, and attested to the fact that Abu Omar al-Baghdadi – the newly declared emir of IS – did not exist; in fact, the U.S. press release claimed that IS was a "virtual" internet creation.[72] Instead, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Zarqawi's long-time deputy and a figure well known to the coalition, was the real leader of the group and hiding behind a fake Iraqi creation named Abu Omar, according to Mashadani's confession.[73] Mashadani told his adversaries what they wanted to hear, while protecting the identity of his new emir in what can only be described as one of the most successful deception operations in recent times.[74] Once the liability used to kill the leadership of the organisation, the media office was now protecting it using the best tools at its disposal: information.

Once the font of stability for the IS movement, the media office had now been through three spokesmen in a year and possibly as many emirs by the end of 2007, and some of its major media facilities found and destroyed. To impart some stability to the unit, Abu Omar al Baghdadi chose a former advisor to Zarqawi, Abu Zahra Ali al-'Isawi. Isawi was a Fallujah native recruited by the legendary TwJ recruiters Abu Anas as-Shami and Abu Muhammad al-Lubnani in the earliest days of the movement. Captured during the coalition manhunt for Zarqawi, he escaped from prison and joined up with his old comrades in the new IS in 2007. His biography stresses the immense responsibilities of managing the department during the decline of the "state" after 2008. This workload no doubt took the form of editing material from both the central and provincial media offices. By 2009 he too had been killed by coalition special operations, although without fanfare by either side.[75]

The Third Wave

IS announced its second cabinet in September 2009, including a new Minister of Information named Professor Ahmed al-Tai,[76] but the position of spokesman to replace Muharib al-Jabouri was not mentioned. Instead, IS recycled quotes from past emirs and spokesmen, especially the recently deceased Jabouri.[77] Part of the rationale for this was undoubtedly security related, but also probably part of an effort not to overshadow their emir Abu Omar, whose prestige while presiding over a declining insurgent group was lower than his charismatic predecessor, Zarqawi. As such, Abu Omar delivered the majority of the organisational strategic communications.

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[71] Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, "For the Scum Disappears Like Froth Cast Out", *al-Furqan Media Production*, 5 December 2007.
[72] F. Baker, "Al Qaeda in Iraq Duped Into Following Foreigners, Captured Operative Says", *U.S. Department of Defense* (18 July 2007), http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=46764.
[73] Charts that accompanied the DOD press release can be found here:
http://archive.defense.gov/DODCMSShare/briefingslide/309/070718-D-6570C-001.pdf.
[74] M. Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014* (2014), p. 287. If the coalition was publically claiming that Abu Omar was fake and openly sourcing Mashadani, it must have uncovered the truth in short time because the hunt for Abu Omar al Baghdadi was in full form by the summer of 2007 as evidenced by passages from Silverman's *Awakening Victory* (2011). One US special operator told the author that he was involved in the hunt for Abu Omar in 2009, interviewing his relatives in Haditha for clues to his whereabouts.
[75] Al-Furqan, "Biographies of the Prominent Martyrs: Issue 46", *Abu Zahra al 'Isawi*, 18 July 2010.
[76] "Second Cabinet Reshuffle", *Islamic State of Iraq*, September 2009, http://up1430.com/central-guide/pencil/elit/the_sum/the_sum_3/pages/emir/13/index.php.
[77] Muharib was quoted in several of these, but one example was this early video series from *al Furqan*, "Rising From the Dead", 9 March 2010.

While occasionally used as the punch line for rivals poking fun at a translucent IS, Abu Omar deserves some credit for selecting the future leadership of the current movement, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and many others. His choice to send a new release from Camp Bucca to the media department would shape it for the next seven years. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani was a Syrian who swore allegiance to Zarqawi in 2002 and fought in the second battle of Fallujah before being captured and jailed. His release five years later and return to the organisation was an example of the cyclical flow of the different generations of fighters in the movement, and Adnani belonged to the prestigious group of early adopters. [78] Adnani was not just an original "plank owner" in the movement;[79] his reputation for religious zeal, integrity, and his memorisation of the Koran had impressed both Zarqawi and Abu Omar according to his biographer.[80] Furthermore he was a Syrian who had stuck with the Iraqi based movement into what Adnani called their time in the desert, and there is no doubt that the leadership watched for any future opportunity to expand beyond their logistical activities in Syria – a Sunni majority country with its own sectarian cleavage that bordered Iraq.[81] This knowledge base and reputation as a lifelong Salafi adherent fit the pattern of Abu Maysara, Muharib al-Jabouri, Abu Zayd al-Mashadani, and Zahra al-'Isawi.

Just months after Abu Omar's assignment, Adnani's distinctive voice appeared in a series of long and ambitious al Furqan videos, starting with one against the Kurds released in January 2010, [82] another released in March, [83] and a third released in September. [84] These videos were important elements of Abu Omar's vision of promoting the idea that IS "remains,"[85] especially during a period when the leadership worked to reenergise its former fighters - who were largely staying home and refraining from operations for a variety of reasons.[86]

The year 2010 marked the nadir of the IS movement, which had flown so high in 2006. Iraqi forces captured the emir of Baghdad - Manaf al-Rawi - in the spring, and he subsequently gave up the location of Abu Omar and Abu Hamza as well as dozens of leaders around the country. [87] The evisceration of the leadership structure in 2010 pushed the organisation further underground for a well-needed retooling, something requiring some tough introspection.

[78] Abu Turki bin Mubarek al-Binali, "A Biography of IS Spokesman Abu Muhammed al Adnani as Shami", edited and translated by Pieter Van Ostaeyen, 1 November 2014, https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/11/02/a-biography-of-is-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami/.

[79] A plank owner is a naval term referring to the original crew of a newly commissioned ship.

[80] A. Binali, "A Biography of IS Spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani as Shami" (2014).

[81] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, "And Those Who Lived In Faith Would Live Upon Evidence", *Jihadology.net*, by A. Zelin, 21 May 2016, http://jihadology.net/2016/05/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-al-shami-and-those-who-lived-in-faith-would-live-upon-evidence/.

[82] "Suicide Bombing at Peshmerga base", *Al Furqan*, 11 January 2010, via: https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/site-intel-group-1-13-10-isi-crusher-peshmerga-video.html.

[83] "Raid of the Prisoners", *Al Furqan*, 30 March 2010, via: https://archive.org/details/Gazwat-Alaseer1.

[84] "Raid of the Prisoners II", *Al Furqan*, 8 September 2010, via: https://archive.org/details/GhzwAssir_02.

[85] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State billboards and Murals of Tel Afar and Mosul", *personal blog* (2015), http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/the-islamic-state-billboards-and-murals-of-tel.

[86] Islamic State of Iraq, "Letter to Emir of Faithful from Abu Ibrahim", *Captured Records Research Center*, document number AQ-MSLF-D-001-681.

[87] "Interview with Al Qa'ida's Baghdad Governor, Manaf al-Rawi", *Al Arabiyah Television*, 14 May 2010.

Part III: Expansion to Caliphate (2011-2014)

The measure of the decline of IS at this point is usually constructed from reports of its leadership losses: just 8 of 42 leaders were at large in 2010.[88] However, while the decapitation campaign was putting tremendous pressure on the upper parts of the structure, the grass roots were reorganising and conducting a vicious campaign against the Sunni Sahwa militias allied to the Iraqi government to win back their coveted sanctuaries in Iraq.[89] IS's loss of significant operational capability to conduct widespread guerilla warfare forced the leadership to rely on suicide bombings (there were 75 in Iraq that year) as well as special operations – such as the seizure of Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, resulting in the death of dozens of Christians in the assault during mass.[90]

These acts of semi-desperation were claimed by IS media, and driven by the leadership's strong need to establish that the movement was still alive and capable of resisting the Iraqi government and its coalition allies. This rebuilding phase set the conditions for a movement resurgence from 2011 to 2014 that saw new initiatives by al-Furqan, which created the popular video series "Clashing of the Swords" (beginning in June 2012) and the "Windows upon the Land of Epic Battles" (2013). The combination of original battle footage with original nasheeds (Islamic a cappella songs) as a score achieved breakout success for IS.[91]

It is hard to know what the inspiration for these changes was, but we do know that Mohammad al-Adnani began to play a more influential role in the media organisation after his 2010 narrations. The voice behind al-Furqan videos in 2010, by January 2011 he appeared in "The Spring of Anbar."[92] In that video, Adnani is shown both in the role of preacher during a doctrinal lesson and of trainer during military drills in the Iraqi western province. Adnani spoke (with face blurred) in another video released by al-Furqan in July eulogising Osama bin Laden[93] and sang (face masked, no name indicated) in a third video by al-Furqan celebrating five years of IS shortly thereafter.[94] After these anonymous appearances, al Furqan's first official mention of Adnani's name as spokesman was in a speech released in August 2011, "Indeed the Islamic State will remain."[95] In that speech, Adnani warned the Sunni Sahwa militias allied with Maliki that IS had prioritised dealing with traitors first and foremost:

> How long are you going to live in fear? No one among you dares to leave his house, travel, or even sleep peacefully in his own home.

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[88] BBC News, "US says 80% of al Qaeda leaders in Iraq removed", *BBC News,* 4 June 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10243585.

[89] C. Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare", *Small Wars & Insurgencies 27*, no. 5 (2016), pp. 743-776, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287 .

[90] B. Fishman, "Fall and Rise of Islamic State of Iraq", *New America Foundation Policy Paper* (August 2011), p. 6, https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4343-redefining-the-islamic-state/Fishman_Al_Qaeda_In_Iraq.023ac20877a64488b2b791cd7e313955.pdf.

[91] A. Fernandez, "Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks", *Brookings Institute* (2015), p. 8, https://www.brookings.edu/research/here-to-stay-and-growing-combating-isis-propaganda-networks/.

[92] "The Spring of Anbar", *Al Furqan*, 17 January 2011, via: https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Latest-Multimedia-from-Islamic-State-of-Iraq-ISI/site-intel-group-1-17-12-isi-video-anbar-spring.html.

[93] "Eulogy for Osama bin Laden", *Al Furqan*, 19 July 2011, via: https://archive.org/details/RethaAlEmamMnRboiDawlatAlIslam.

[94] "ISI celebrated five years since establishment", *Al Furqan*, 21 August 2011, via: https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/isi-video-celebrates-five-years-since-establishment.html.

[95] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Indeed the Islamic State will Remain", *Islamic State of Iraq*, 7 August 2011, via: https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Latest-Multimedia-from-Islamic-State-of-Iraq-ISI/isi-spokesman-stresses-continuity-of-groups-mission.html.

> When will you enjoy peace again? How long are you going to stay alert day and night? Do you think we will go away? Do you think we will cease to exist or get bored? No! Repent quickly before it is too late, for the results of the battle have been already decided, and it is only a matter of days!

The public acknowledgment of the IS's new official spokesman, as well as an open campaign of assassination against the Sunni "traitors," is an indicator of the rising confidence of the leadership of IS in 2011. Interestingly, at this point Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi still had not made his first audio speech, which did not happen until July 2012.[96]

New Formats and a New Hit: a Nasheed of The Defiant[97]

If the media unit was getting closer to its breakthrough in the highly influential video category, success certainly did not come easy. While IS media had produced videos since 2004, five years later the videos had improved in professional quality but not in content, consisting of tedious political broadsides against their enemies that mostly contained outtakes from Western and Arab media. New leadership of the ministry changed the format, and by August 2012 the release of "Salil as Sawarim 2" (The Clashing of the Swords) demonstrated a new formula made up of brief interviews, sharp transitions between scenes, a logical script sequence with scenes from training camp, leadership speeches, close up battle footage, executions of the enemy, close-ups of mutilated enemy casualties, loading of captured booty, and ending with the honouring of their own martyrs. The narration is tight, with elimination of all dead time common in previous releases (which for instance showed men cooking, doing dishes or sitting in a room just doing nothing).

While the more recent history of the media department has been a closely guarded secret outside of the public spokesman role, there is some reporting about the officials that have been involved in managing the department since 2013, if not before then. In addition to spokesman Adnani, an oversight council of three prominent figures made decisions on policy and content: the Syrian militant Amr al-Absi, Saudi Bandar Sha'lan, and Dr. Wa'el al-Rawi, with Rawi serving as the media emir.[98] Neither of the first two was on the oversight council for their media expertise, and serve as an example of the IS's inclusion of multinational consultation on their many oversight boards. This vision usually runs contrary to various caricatures of the movement and its leadership practices, a factor that continues to lead analysts and reporters astray.

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[96] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "But Allah will not allow but that His light should be perfected", *al Furqan*, 21 July 2012.
[97] The hit was Salil Sawarim (Clashing of the Swords), which was not only a hit video series, but scored with a very popular nasheed (Islamic a cappella song). Lyrics translated by Aymenn al Tamimi, "Clashing of the Swords – New ISIS nasheed from Ajnad Media", *Aymenn's personal blog* (June 2014), http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/06/clashing-of-the-swords-new-isis-nasheed-from.
[98] The media council of three executives is mentioned by Abu Al Waleed in Aymenn al-Tamimi, "An account of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi by Abu al-Waleed al-Salafi" (2016).

While Amr al-Absi was critical in IS's expansion into Syria before he was killed by a drone strike in 2016,[99] and Bandar Sha'lan is little known,[100] it was the secretive Dr. al-Rawi who was most likely the driving force behind much of the IS media's transformation since 2012. In addition to the changes in the basic design or formula for video formats, the council adopted a change in philosophy to expand its consumer base. Long relegated to posting to a narrow audience in the jihadi community, the media department embraced the popularity of social media and other methods of reaching new audiences, in contrast to their previous "top down websites" and jihadi forums.[101] A result of this new policy was the creation of almost a dozen central media organs with diverse purposes, mediums, and target audiences.

The first, named *al-I'tisam,* jumped into the social media domain and began disseminating Islamic State of Iraq products on Twitter and other social media platforms in 2012, the first time media products were released outside traditional, semi-closed jihadist circuits. While not the first jihadist group to do so, their popularisation and development of online cadres produced synergistic effects in recruitment, foreign fighter flow, fund raising, and improved brand image. J.M. Berger noted that unlike previous eras where new information technologies either improved the speed of communication or enhanced community sharing, the new online social media uniquely combined both functions. The use of emotionally charged and highly ideological content leveraged the speed and community aspects of the medium to achieve what Berger noted was a form of social contagion – in this case, of the millenarian type.[102]

This new push outward was also exemplified by the creation of *Al-Hayat Media Center,* which publishes material in languages other than Arabic - a longtime dream of jihadist theorists such as Abu Musab al-Suri.[103] Another recently created media centre, *al-Furat*, focuses on the non-Arab contingents that have joined the IS movement and ensures the products are targeted to their respective populations at home.[104] *Al-Ajnad* produces religious songs (nasheeds) that were featured in several popular video releases and eventually became extremely popular tunes on social media outlets, as ring tones, and as the score for many homemade jihadist products. The use of nasheeds in the background of videos was not a new innovation for jihadi groups, and Zarqawi's group used one as early as 2003 in a videotape of a suicide bomber saying his farewell.[105] What was new was how these original and catchy tunes went viral in the early phases of the IS resurgence, thanks to the phenomenon described above.

[99] Amr al-Absi was a Syrian Salafi militant and former detainee of the Assad regime in Syria who was freed in June 2011 during the demonstrations. Born in Saudi Arabia, al-Absi had significant ties to the Salafi networks in multiple countries. Al-Absi joined with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to help form the Syrian half of what would become the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. It is possible he was killed earlier in 2015. See C. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 134.

[100] K. Orton, "Governing the Caliphate: Profiling Islamic State Leaders", *The Henry Jackson Society* (2016), p. 61, http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IS-leaders-report.pdf.

[101] A. Zelin, "The State of Global Jihad Online: A qualitative, quantitative, and cross-lingual analysis", *New America Foundation*, January 2013, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-state-of-global-jihad-online.

[102] J.M. Berger, "The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion", *Perspectives on Terrorism 9*, no. 4 (2015), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/444/html.

[103] T. Joscelyn, "Graphic promotes the Islamic State's prolific media machine", *Long War Journal* (25 November 2015), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/graphic-promotes-islamic-states-prolific-media-machine.php.

[104] A great example of this is C. Winter, "Signs of a Nascent Islamic State Province in the Philippines", *War on the Rocks* (25 May 2016), http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/signs-of-a-nascent-islamic-state-province-in-the-philippines/.

[105] M. Ware, *Only the Dead See the End of War*, documentary, Home Box Office (2016), http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/only-the-dead-see-the-end-of-war/index.html.

Another evolution of standard practice was the creation of a weekly online newspaper named *al-Naba,* which served to package the multitude of reports and short stories that had been published sporadically in the past in a regularly published compilation of IS military activity and other stories. The establishment of the *A'maq News Agency* was an attempt by IS to create an "independent" service that produces "scoops" by movement insiders to sway a target audience that might be hostile or sceptical of Western or regional media outlets.[106] Ironically, in practice *A'maq* serves as an allegedly legitimate source for these same international print and cable outlets to cite, which in turn amplifies the official message of IS. This venture into a grey zone version of the information wars could be the IS's boldest experiment to date. Finally, and no less importantly, *al-Bayan* was created to manage radio broadcasts in the ever-growing territory of IS.[107] It is IS's ground game, and the use of kiosks to market propaganda to locals, which often goes unmeasured in any assessment of the efficacy of IS media.[108]

The current flood of releases of all formats from IS media outlets is a byproduct of this recently expanded structure and the long professionalisation of its workers and staff, combined with technology that facilitates peer to peer interaction and encrypted software that has fueled an expansion of outlets for viewers attracted to either the message or the spectacle. Most of this is happening at the wilayat level. According to researcher Thomas Joscelyn, IS's annual report released by *al-Naba* newsletter for 1436 AH (Oct 2014-Oct 2015) summarised media output from all of its different formats:[109]

Media Source (type, location)	Videos	Audio	Nasheed (religious songs)	Koranic Recitations	Magazines	Photo Reports	Images
Wilayets (all, provincial media outlets)	710					1787	14000
Al Furqan Media (video focus, central)	7	6					
Al Hayat Center (foreign language, central)	15		13		18		
al Ajnad (audio, central)			45	99			

Table 2: Media output October 2014-October 2015

Further analysis of one week (April 2015) of IS media by Aaron Zelin found that the products primarily focused on Iraq and Syria despite the fact that only 19 of the 33

[106] A. Kassirir, "The Rise of an ISIS affiliated Media Unit: A'maq", *Flashpoint* (2016), https://www.flashpoint-intel.com/the-rise-of-an-isis-affiliated-media-unit-amaq/.
[107] C. Winter, "Documenting the Virtual Caliphate" (2015), p. 16.
[108] T. Golson, "Islamic State's Local Propaganda Key to Understanding Appeal", *World Politics Review*, 18 May 2015, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15791/islamic-state-s-local-propaganda-key-to-understanding-appeal
[109] T. Joscelyn, "Graphic promotes the Islamic State's prolific media machine" (2015).

claimed provinces are located in parts of these two countries; the majority (88%) were visual (mostly pictures) as opposed to text – a change from 2007 where text was dominant; and overwhelmingly (78%) locally produced at the provincial level. Another interesting finding was that out of 123 releases by official outlets that week, almost half of them (60) were not related to IS violence or military operations. Instead, these messages focused on governance, religious norms, and promotion of the caliphate.[110]

Part IV: Remaining (baqiya), but Contracting (2015 – Present)

Much like its experience in 2006-8, the return of the IS movement to prominence has resulted in active resistance, this time by an even larger coalition of Sunni militant groups, hostile local governments, and foreign interventionists. On 7 September 2016, Dr. Wa'el al-Rawi was killed in a precision strike near Raqqa, Syria.[111] This strike was most likely related to two previous strikes: one on 6 September that killed al-Rawi's media deputy for Syria and Iraq – Abu Harith al-Lami, and a strike on 30 August which killed the public face of the IS for so long - Abu Muhammad al-Adnani.[112] This dual elimination of the spokesman and media emir marks the third time since 2006 that the spokesman and the media emir were killed or captured within a short period of time of each other.[113] There isn't a lot yet to write about the almost unknown al Rawi, but based on past media eulogies of their past leaders, and the archived material that is frequently released after key deaths, there will be more to write about him in the future.[114]

In comparison, Adnani - who served as the public face of the media department and was a first generation fighter and Camp Bucca veteran – is much better known. Adnani's influence as the spokesman for IS during its return to prominence had expanded much beyond his role as media attack dog.[115] Whether it was directed at the Sunni of the Sahwa or his former boss in al Qaeda, Adnani was the sharp-tongued, emotional firebrand of IS behind the seemingly imperturbable Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Once again, IS had a leader in the media organisation who transcended simple videos and messages, and performed crucial functions for the larger organisation.

Rukmini Callimachi's investigative reporting revealed that Mohammad al-Adnani was also involved in coordinating terror attacks to reinforce the IS's strategic communications.[116] Rukmini reported that:

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[110] A. Zelin, "Picture or it Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output" (2015), pp. 85-95.
[111] U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Airstrike Against ISIL Senior Leader", *U.S. Department of Defense*, Release No: NR-326-16 (16 September 2016), http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/946983/statement-from-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-airstrike-against-isil-se.
[112] C. Winter, "6. Context: Abu al-Harith al-Lami, formerly in charge of #Iraq/##Syria media, killed 6 Sept & Dr Wa'il, "information minister," killed 7 Sept", *Twitter*, 5 October 2016, https://twitter.com/charliewinter/status/783626508963311616.
[113] D. Raineri, "Another proof that US apparatus has pierced Islamic State security wall: killed elusive chief of media Wael al Rawi", *Twitter*, 16 September 2016, https://twitter.com/DanieleRaineri/status/776857986941718528.
[114] IS media released a statement acknowledging the death of their information minister (abu Mohammad al Furqan, an alleged alias of Dr. Wael al-Rawi) on 10 October 2016, https://twitter.com/Raqqa_SL/status/785562692509659136. It is possible that they were different people and that al Rawi is still alive, according to Nibras Kazimi, email correspondence, 1 November 2016.
[115] E. Schmitt, R. Callimachi and A. Barnard, "Spokesman's Death will have Islamic State turning to its 'Deep Bench'", *The New York Times,* 31 August 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/middleeast/syria-isis-adnani.html?_r=0.
[116] R. Callimachi, "How ISIS built the machinery of Terror under Europe's gaze", *The New York Times*, 29 March 2016, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html.

through the coordinating role played by Mr. Adnani, terror planning has gone hand-in-hand with the group's extensive propaganda operations — including, Mr. Sarfo (an ISIS defector) claimed, monthly meetings in which Mr. Adnani chose which grisly videos to promote based on battlefield events…There's a vetting procedure,' he said. 'Once a month they have a Shura — which is a sitting, a meeting — where all the videos and everything that is important, they start speaking about it. And Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is the head of the Shura.[117]

While former counter-terrorism officials have echoed Adnani's role in external operations, it would be wise for us to take this information with a grain of salt as the primary sources are from defectors and prison interrogations, and this media department has a history of deliberately feeding misinformation to protect key leaders' identities and locations.

That being said, the outsized influence and different roles of Adnani has been a common characteristic of senior leaders of IS. Zarqawi's successor, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, had been a small group insurgent leader, security official, sharia committee member, provincial emir, Shura Council member, and chief of staff before being elected the first emir of the Islamic State of Iraq.[118] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi also started as an insurgent leader, and was a sharia advisor, media adjunct, regional emir, and special courier to Abu Omar and Abu Hamza. It seems like Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's journey from fighter, to prison leader, provincial leader, media spokesman, and external operations leader was part of a serious grooming since 2009 for future leadership opportunities.[119] The Aleppo Province media unit's use of the title Qurashi in Adnani's official death announcement is a posthumous indicator that he was in the running to possibly replace Abu Bakr if needed.[120]

The Media Department Today

The effect of the killings of both leaders of the media department is hard to predict or assess, particularly since we know so little about one of the characters – and the one who was made most of the executive decisions. What we learned about the media department in its previous phases of evolution could not be pieced together until now, and even then this is a partial picture and probably mistaken in some aspects, based on the available material released by an organisation that has perfected operational security in the face of an overwhelmingly technically oriented and abnormally efficient killing apparatus. Furthermore, even when its physical infrastructure and key personnel was under significant pressure, the department was able to continue its vital mission of producing products designed to create the perception of a vibrant and dynamic movement – even when it decidedly was not.

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[117] R. Callimachi, "How a secretive branch of ISIS built a global Network of Killers", *The New York Times,* 3 August 2016, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html.

[118] H. Ingram and C. Whiteside, "Don't Kill the Caliph! The Islamic State and the Pitfalls of Leadership Decapitation" (2016).

[119] F. Hanoush, "ISIS Spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani", *SyriaSource,* via The Atlantic Council, 26 August 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/isis-spokesman-abu-mohammad-al-adnani.

[120] Both Abu Omar and Abu Bakr claimed Qureyshi ties in their family tree to provide legitimacy to the emir/caliph position. See: Islamic State (Aleppo Province), "Martyrdom of the Mujahid Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Spokesman of the Islamic State", translation by *SITE intelligence group* (2016): https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/is-announces-death-of-spokesman-abu-muhammad-al-adnani.html.

It would be a mistake to think that adversaries interested in defeating the IS movement could adopt some of these organisational principles as a way to improve counter-messaging or impact the radicalisation or recruitment of disaffected youth around the world who hear the Salafi-jihadist siren call. Instead, this case study and history offers clues to identity, vulnerabilities, and patterns of behavior that could be harnessed in the overarching global campaign to defeat this particularly odious group of revolutionaries. The following section presents a handful of critical insights into the IS movement's media department, consolidated from a lengthy case study, in the hopes they are useful for policymakers and analysts alike.

Part V: Analysis and Discussion

"When promoting its military related activities, IS projects an image of always on the march."-Aaron Zelin [121]

"The basic tactic…is constant activity and movement." - Mao Tse-Tung [122]

In the deluge of IS propaganda, it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. ICCT fellows Charlie Winter, Haroro Ingram, and J.M. Berger have produced tremendous products on the logic, content, themes, and reach of the IS influence campaign as well as steps to combat it. This report reflects an effort to step back and take a longitudinal view, one that generalises trends in the evolution of the institution and people that have produced tens of thousands of media products since the very beginning. IS's media strategy is like its military strategy: intentional, broad, comprehensive and most of all – patient. The seven-year IS campaign designed to subvert the Sahwa, Iraqi security forces, government officials, and Shia militias was executed in a decentralised manner featuring thousands of attacks that individually made little impact in the news.[123] Yet these attacks were given top bill in IS's media campaign to amplify and signify the increasing power of the insurgency, while creating conditions for a sudden collapse of its enemies. These military victories, memorably marked by media spectacles like the Speicher massacre videos – filmed by the Salahuddin Wilayat combat camera media teams - in turn created more opportunities for the IS media to directly communicate with its friends and enemies.[124] Yet, no examination of individual videos or statements, however instructive, will give us the answers needed to combat the threat of IS to peace and security in many regions of the world.

Instead, this paper presents six general observations of the IS media enterprise, based on this case study of its structural evolution, prolific leaders, and the ideas they had.

1) Simply, They Are Who They Say They Are:

More specifically, what the leadership of IS has learned in their media experimentation is that credibility is important in an ideological struggle, and to camouflage in any way

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[121] Quote from A. Zelin, "Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output", *Perspectives on Terrorism 9*, vol. 4 (2015), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/html.

[122] M. Tse Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare,* translated by Samuel B. Griffith II (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1992), p. 78.

[123] C. Whiteside, "The Return of Revolutionary Warfare" (2016).

[124] S. Stalinsky and R. Sosnow, "The Islamic State establishes 'media points' in Syria, Iraq, Libya to indoctrinate caliphate citizens and enhance its cyber activities on the ground: a one year review", *MEMRI's Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor*, 1 October 2015, http://www.memrijttm.org/the-islamic-state-isis-establishes-media-points-in-syria-iraq-libya-to-indoctrinate-caliphate-citizens-and-enhance-its-cyber-activities-on-the-ground-a-one-year-review.html.

their doctrine and methods (manhaj) would be counterproductive to achieving their political goals. It is an absolute priority. IS itself blurs the lines on the role of the leadership vis-a-vis that of the media, since they have long ago ensured that the two think exactly alike. They have achieved what many organisations struggle to achieve, by developing a core of humans who think enough alike that policy making and strategy execution become much simpler when compared to say, the United States government and its bureaucracies that are more interested in fighting each other than a common foe.[125] Media releases become more important than the action they are reporting, a true realisation of the concept of propaganda of the deed. In complex environments like Syria, Iraq, and Libya, the simple, consistent, and comprehensive message broadcast in tremendous volume, selling attractive products like stability and order, becomes a heuristic for humans who are craving normalcy in the midst of chaos.

To a large extent, IS simplifies the world and its complex human interactions for its prospective Sunni constituents. "We are the righteous, the true and prophetic methodology." They are the Rafidha (Shia), Salibiyin (crusaders), murtaddin (Sunni not aligned with them), and Jews. And the chief marketers of this message - the religiously trained spokesman like Abu Maysara, Muharib, and al Adnani – are the ones that are tasked with bending reality to fit the above narrative.

2) The Media Department is the Special Operations of The Islamic State:

It is interesting that the United States has a special operations force that is the best in the world, and its man-hunting operators have risen to the top of the command structure more than ever before. In contrast, IS puts its most talented commanders into the media department. It is quite remarkable how the movement has always gravitated toward educated professionals with doctorates (Muharib, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Tai, al-Rawi), politically connected leaders from newly coopted insurgent groups (Mashadani, Muharib), and future potential emirs/caliphs (Abu Bakr, al-Adnani) to enhance the appeal of its influence campaign, a critical area of revolutionary warfare.[126]

Like U.S. special operations forces, the media department's rapid growth, decentralisation, and successful product launches have produced an inexorable mission creep for the leadership to manage. Adnani's likely involvement in external terrorist operations was briefly discussed in this report as one example; J.M. Berger's extensive analysis on IS recruiting and grooming of future members online points toward a fine blending of the two functions – recruiting and media -that is hard to peel apart for outside investigators.[127] While an analysis of the recruitment of people from outside of the core territory of IS is beyond the scope of this report, it is undeniable that the decision to disseminate products on popular social media sites has produced the bait for recruiters to greatly increase their ability to reach prospects. While media has always been used for recruiting purposes, online approaches that are centred on discussions of media products has drastically impacted time-tested techniques and made them more prolific, efficient, and effective. The media department's innovation

[125] T. Greentree, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan", *Journal of Strategic Studies 36,* vol. 3 (2013).

[126] C. Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare" (2015).

[127] J.M. Berger, "Tailored Online interventions: The Islamic State's recruitment strategy", *CTC Sentinel*, 23 October 2015, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tailored-online-interventions-the-islamic-states-recruitment-strategy.

has most likely inspired its new clients (volunteer online recruiters), whose inputs and demands undoubtedly impact and shape future products in a beneficial and productive feedback loop.

3) The Media Department is the First Line of Operational Security:

IS is often described as a network, which is slightly misleading. The movement was exclusively a network when it was first establishing itself, but by 2006 it had transformed itself into a hierarchy and bureaucracy to defeat the massive decapitation campaign opposing it. By dispersing its overly centralised command structure into a more decentralised provincial run system with central oversight on certain issues, it could replace leaders taken off the battlefield while still controlling the quality of operations. [128] The media department, as usual – particularly because of its close connection to the leadership - was at the centre of this effort.

Growth of the organisation meant expanded capabilities and increased production for the media department, and a measure of resiliency when it lost key personnel or facilities. At the same time, the media was the vulnerability that could lead man-hunters back to the leadership who needed to interact with the department for strategic messaging. The IS movement for the most part solved this problem, and both Abu Ammar al-Dulaymi and Abu Zayd al-Mashadani protected their leadership from exposure – including after one had been captured.[129] To wit, when Zarqawi's successors (Abu Omar and Abu Hamza) were found and killed outside of Tikrit in 2010, it was a front line commander who gave them up – not someone from the media department. Certainly this dynamic has changed little in the modern IS. Adnani was making speeches long before Abu Bakr felt it safe to get more exposure, and after the announcement of the caliphate, it was al-Adnani who shared most of the operational level decision-making with Abu Ali al-Anbari. Both are now dead, but Abu Bakr is still alive.

The obsession with protecting the leaders from too much exposure changed over time to be sure. After Zarqawi's death, which can be traced back to his interaction to the media department, Abu Omar and Abu Hamza adopted a zero-images and videos policy, and we know this because even now, six years after, IS has not released so much as a video of either of them. Both traveled around Iraq extensively for years, working on persuading Sunni tribal leaders and other insurgents to return to the IS fold, and could not afford to be identified.[130] The same thing goes for Abu Ali al-Anbari in 2006, who was so little known that he was held captive and then released without knowledge of who he really was. Now dead, you would think that videos would surface to celebrate these instrumental members of the state – but to date those have not appeared.

After 2011, there seems to have been a change in this policy of absolute secrecy. Some of this could be attributed to the absence of coalition special operations, or because the leaders sensed that they were stronger and closer to achieving their goals of true statehood than ever before. Whatever the reason, the need for high quality

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[128] This thought owes a great deal to J. Shapiro's *The Terrorist Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), where he argues that groups like the Islamic State sacrifice some operational security to overcome the principal agent problem of managing subordinates for maximum efficiency and efficacy. This is especially true in revolutionary warfare, or war among the people.
[129] The intentional use of Abu Ammar al Dulaymi wisely protected Abu Ali al Anbari's actual position when captured in the summer of 2006 during the MSC era.
[130] Interview (Spring 2016) with U.S. special operations officer tasked with finding Abu Omar and Abu Hamza in 2009.

propaganda has influenced this change in policy, and IS media takes risk to capture footage of key leaders and store it for later use.

Indeed, under Abu Bakr's reign, the media department not only was allowed to shoot footage of senior leaders, but recently released footage of a post-prison Abu Ali al-Anbari, as well as photo stills from unreleased videos of Abul Mughira al-Qahtani (Abu Nabil al-Anbari) and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani – all after their death.[131] All three were key emirs of the Islamic State in Iraq and Libya, and the original videos have yet to be released.[132] The media department did release new outtakes in a recent video of Abul Mughira al-Qahtani murdering cadets in Tikrit, a year after the massacre – which means he had originally been edited out of the previous Speicher releases to protect his identity.[133]

The intentionality of summoning film crews for a genocidal massacre, then releasing excerpts of the incident piece meal for strategic effect – while still protecting the identity of the emirs – is a level of expertise that arguably has not been seen in propaganda campaigns of the past. What the world can expect is more of the same: IS most likely has footage from inside the Bataclan concert hall, the church near Rouen where the priest was slaughtered, or more footage from Camp Speicher and other events. This footage is being kept in a strategic reserve.

4) For the Islamic State Media, Experimentation and Failure are Key to Success:

IS has demonstrated over and over again in this case study that it often acted as a learning organisation, continuing to experiment with techniques and philosophies concerning the presentation of their narrative and accomplishments. While IS cannot claim to have invented any of the successful formulas that have contributed to their media success, its process of trying new methods and discarding ones that were unsuccessful was documented throughout this report.

The use of intense, up close combat footage, execution videos, martyr farewells, biographies of martyrs, operational summaries, and original music were not invented by the IS, and all of these techniques had been in use by the media department as early as 2003 and 2004. But each concept has been refined and used in different combinations, in different formats (written or visual), until the media workers and their supervisors were satisfied that they had a product that met a specific desired end state. The ability to mass-produce copies of these formulas is a tribute to the immense structure that accompanied the work of a growing raft of skilled individuals.

The experimentation is most obvious in the way the media department presented its image of IS to the world. Early on, it leaned heavily on the image of the group as a militant band of brothers focused on maximising terror in their enemies while shoring up support from its base. Later, the pressure upon IS to prove that it was a functioning state in 2007 led it to artificially mimic Western and Arab media outlets – an idea that

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[131] D. Raineri, "Somewhere there is a video of Abul Mughirah al Qahtani at an empty racecourse in Libya", *Twitter*, 30 March 2016, https://twitter.com/DanieleRaineri/status/715289153555021824.

[132] Abu Mughira was sent to be the emir of the Libyan theater for the Islamic State, where he was killed in a drone strike in Derna, then an Islamic State controlled city.

[133] Abu Mughira (Abu Nabil al Anbari) had been the emir of Saluhiddin Province and directed the Speicher massacre of Shia Iraqi cadets – at least according to the outtakes now made available by the Islamic State. This makes it clear it was not spontaneous massacre executed by local tribes.

fell flat due to its inauthenticity. By 2011 that format was gone, replaced by a newer, more exciting tempo, exemplifying combat as the true legitimacy of the jihadist.[134]

Today, IS's adoption of formerly independent Salafi movements in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have led to the exportation of this expertise in strategic communications, video editing, and branding. Today the adoption of that 2012 standard in producing videos and media releases is a telling sign to the world that a group or a territory is being absorbed by IS – as seen in the case of Boko Haram in Nigeria. Also, the adoption of that 2012 standard format is often the most explicit confirmation for most observers that a territory is a functioning wilayat of IS – as the much improved media productions of the Libyan or the Yemeni Islamic State demonstrate.

That standard format also generates continuity and that is valuable for a group intent on creating the impression of an ineluctable historical progression to a lasting Caliphate. The subtle message is that they can keep tolerating military defeats and keep replacing their commanders and soldiers, as long as the stream of official and high quality videos continues unabated.

5) Controlling The Message is a Goal unto Itself

IS's desire to expand required an intensity and quantity of messaging that might have invited failure due to a lack of control. The key question was, and still is, how does the media department increase output from around 1000 releases a year to almost that much in a single month? The biography of Abu Zahra al-'Isawi illustrated that the editorial workload in 2008-9 was more than enough, and that was during a period of declining fortunes and media output. The workload in the current environment must be dizzying.

Omar Alhashani recently looked at this question of quality control as part of an analysis of IS media's execution videos. First, in an age of ubiquitous cameras, laptops and connectivity, authenticity and brand protection is a key management concern. The media department serves a key role in validating media, disputing fakes, and developing external surrogates who can assist in policing frauds.[135] To maintain control of subordinate franchises, the department must fight the decentralising effects of the internet and reconstruct the hierarchy in a new form to be effective in message quality control.[136] One way the central office found to influence its subsidiaries was to set the parameters for ultra-violent videos that was emulated and replicated by lower levels after an appropriate time lag. Much like the "Overton window," here the media leadership created the boundaries of acceptable levels of violence and justified their use with religious citations, in effect virtually training its subsidiaries. In fact, some of this conforming pressure involves competition between provinces, a dynamic that can be seen in the "top ten" video section of any *Dabiq* magazine.[137]

134 N. Kazimi, "Where is the 'Strategic Depth' of the 'Islamic State'", *Talisman Gate, Again blog*, 23 November 2015, https://talisman-gate.com/2015/11/23/where-is-the-strategic-depth-of-the-islamic-state/.
135 O. Alhashani, "Imagining the Islamic State: A Study of Style, Creative Autonomy, and the Internet's Role in the Jihadi Media Production", unpublished thesis, *Reed College* (May 2016), pp. 16-7. Used by permission of the author.
136 O. Alhashani, "Imagining the Islamic State: A Study of Style, Creative Autonomy, and the Internet's Role in the Jihadi Media Production" (2016), p. 106.
137 O. Alhashani, "Imagining the Islamic State: A Study of Style, Creative Autonomy, and the Internet's Role in the Jihadi Media Production" (2016), pp. 106-7.

6) The Media Department and the Future:

This final observation will serve to conclude this paper. What does the aforementioned double change of skin (from guerrilla to institutional and back to guerrilla) say about the most likely trajectory of the media production of the IS in the future? The former leadership of the media department has balanced their presentation of the caliphate's institutions and its success in governance with an acknowledgment that their enemies are always plotting against them and that the fighters of IS are prepared for never-ending insurgency. For every video explaining something esoteric like the fiscal regime of the IS, there is another video from the frontline, complete with suicide bombers driving ad-hoc armoured vehicles like machines right out of a science fiction movie. The death of Dr. Wa'el al-Rawi and Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, while impactful, will create the opportunity for someone else to manage what has been an outstanding example of an insurgent media enterprise to date, and will most likely continue to be in the future.

There is every indication that the men of the current generation of IS (since 2010) are more grounded in reality than those in the past, and they prefer to present themselves more like a state in progress than the rigid, definitive version of it. This way, they maintain some of the necessary elasticity to face the looming regression to their past of guerrilla fighters and to absorb the inescapable losses of leaders and territory. They will soon readjust their rhetoric, adapting their words to the facts on the ground. Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani said as much in the last speech before he died:

> Were you victorious when you killed Abu Mus'ab, Abu Hamzah, Abu 'Umar, or Usamah? Would you be victorious if you were to kill ash-Shishani, Abu Bakr, Abu Zayd, or Abu 'Amr? No. Indeed, victory is the defeat of one's opponent … were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? … And victory is that we live in the might of our religion or die upon it. It is the same, whether Allah blesses us with consolidation or we move into the bare, open desert, displaced and pursued.[138]

The IS movement was defeated in 2006-8, but obviously not permanently. The larger question after the next defeat of IS – this time of its caliphate - will once again not be about whose media is better, but instead, whose governance is? Will the future political leaders of the Sunni areas of Syria and Iraq be able to craft and transmit a narrative that is more attractive than the soon to be out "in the desert" IS movement; one that fulfills what Ingram calls the Sunnis' *pragmatic* needs for food, water, shelter, and jobs, as well as their *perceptual* needs related to their identity as the dominant political actors in the Sunni majority areas?[139] Influence campaigns do not produce anything of value in these regards, but do convey narratives that speak to which possible solutions could work, as well as narratives that judge the success or failure of any government's efforts to provide for its people.

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[138] Abu Mohammad al Adnani al Shami, "And Those Who Lived In Faith Would Live Upon Evidence", *Jihadology.net*, ed. by A. Zelin, 21 May 2016, http://jihadology.net/2016/05/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abumuhammad-al-adnani-al-shami-and-those-who-lived-in-faith-would-liveupon-evidence/.
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Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)

Craig Whiteside
November 2016

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