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**DEFEATING ISIS BY WINNING THE WAR OF IDEAS**

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## Defeating ISIS by Winning the War of Ideas

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### **Introduction**

The United States and its coalition partners have struggled to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). After spending \$11 billion executing almost three years of U.S. military operations against ISIS, the violent extremist organization continues to successfully drive effective attacks in Iraq, Syria, and the rest of the world. Specifically, and most importantly to its cause, ISIS continues to galvanize recruits and inspire lone wolf attacks. ISIS is able to recruit and inspire because it effectively convinces war-torn citizens, marginalized Muslims, and other solidarity seekers that its ideas and cause are just. Its ideas enables its fight. As such, defeating ISIS means defeating their ideas, especially in the eyes of vulnerable target audiences. However, what does defeating ISIS mean? For this argument, the end state is eliminating ISIS's ability to radicalize and inspire attacks around the world, supported by the Islamic Military Alliance conquering ISIS's held territory. Complete eradication of ISIS is not the goal, there will always be individuals who cling to the radical jihadist cause, but defeating ISIS means individuals ignore this call instead of rushing to support it. While the military success is possible in the near term, the recommended solution provided may take 10 years, possibly longer, to achieve the desired end state. Securing allies and coordinating a moderate message is no easy task, and the radical ideology has a few hundred years head start. To develop the proposed recommended solution, research included reviewing published literature, scouring primary sources including ISIS propaganda magazines and videos, and analyzing media reports on ISIS activities. This research demonstrated the need to understand ISIS's historical context, frame the problem faced by the U.S., develop a moderate message by working with appropriate Muslim leaders and states, and to counter the ISIS propaganda machine. This approach leads to a two-part strategy for defeating ISIS by deterring and degrading recruitment, support, and loyalty to

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the Islamic State's cause. First, the U.S. must win the war of ideas against ISIS by convincing vulnerable target audiences the U.S. and its allies' ideas are morally justified against ISIS cause. Second, the U.S. must execute both kinetic and non-kinetic operations to eliminate the Islamic State's ability to produce and disseminate propaganda to vulnerable target audiences while eroding their control of territory to invalidate the ISIS concept of an expanding caliphate.

### **ISIS's Historical Context**

It is vital to understand the history in order to understand how context was removed by radical religious leaders creating the dangerous messaging that has caused so much death and destruction in the Middle East and throughout Western nations. ISIS supports their message by drawing on historical facts while attacking alternative viewpoints as blasphemy. It is easy to attack a moderate viewpoint when your proof is the unquestionable word of God. This explains why moderates face an uphill battle by trying to provide context behind the literal meanings espoused by ISIS found in ancient texts. The compelling ideology of ISIS spread via their propaganda network dates back to the 8th and 9th centuries CE when first opinions and commentary on jihad, known as *Ahkam al-Jihad*, appeared and laid out the rules of Islamic warfare.<sup>1</sup> This jihadist ideology dates back to the time of Prophet Muhammad's wars with the Meccans and Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah radicalized the concept. Born in 1263 CE in Syria and a student of law, Islam and mathematics in Damascus, Taqi al Din Ibn Taymiyyah witnessed the impact the Mongol invasions in Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah demonized Christians and Jews, used the Quran's 70 sword verses as a baseline for the jihadist warlike lifestyle: that is the motivation for the militant Islamists to date.<sup>3</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah has been criticized over his acts, but his supporters like Sayyid Qutb, the modern ideologue of militant Islamist theorist carried his beliefs to the 21st century militant Islamist ideology due to persecution and his subsequent death

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whilst in prison. Sayyid Qutb believed he was the incarnation of Ibn Taymiyyah when languishing in Nasser's prisons from 1954 to 1964.<sup>4</sup> This laid the foundation for the existence and behavior of the Islamist Extremist groups like ISIS to flourish.

ISIS currently stands as Al Qaeda's most important progeny and its greatest nemesis that grew out of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and both groups' objectives, enemies, and tactics are all part of the broader jihadist movement that Al Qaeda so long sought to unify and lead.<sup>5</sup> After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq many jihadist groups proliferated and eventually coalesced around Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. While many Arabic nations such as Egypt and Algeria had experienced jihadist insurgencies, before the U.S. military invasion, Iraq had never experienced such a phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> In March 2015, President Obama stated that, "ISIL is direct outgrowth of Al-Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion, which is why we should generally aim before shooting."<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Powell gave a speech where he provided the international media the name of the alleged leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi grew up in Jordan in an environment with abject poverty and high unemployment rate.<sup>8</sup> The social and material environment shaped his worldview and decision making process. After the death of his father in 1984, Zarqawi indulged in criminal behavior, eventually leading to his arrest and imprisonment for sexual assault and drug possession charges.<sup>9</sup> Upon his release from prison, Zarqawi formed ties with several jihadists such as Salah al-Hami, a Jordanian-Palestine and correspondent for al-jihad, a magazine that disseminated the ideas of Abdullah Azzam, a prominent Palestine Islamic theorist, preacher and military commander who was bin Laden's mentor.<sup>10</sup> Zarqawi became the representative of the new wave of jihadists who came from deeply disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds to rise to high command levels.<sup>11</sup> Zarqawi was instrumental in building a base for Al Qaeda in Iraq and laid the

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foundation for the subsequent emergence of ISIS. Osama Bin Laden gave Zarqawi money to start his organization, but Zarqawi at first refused to swear loyalty to Bin Laden, as he shared only some of Bin Laden's goals and wanted to remain independent. Eventually, Zarqawi swore an oath of loyalty and his group took on the name Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to signify this connection.<sup>12</sup> Zarqawi and his followers acted with incredible brutality, making their name with videotaped beheadings.<sup>13</sup> This was a tactic that its successor organization would also use to shock and generate publicity. Despite Zawahiri's misgivings, Zarqawi's strategy seemed to work well, as Al Qaeda in Iraq mounted a broad insurgency and for several years controlled some of the Sunni-populated parts of Iraq. AQI's indiscriminate violence against Iraqi Sunnis led them to resent and fear the group, leading to a backlash that, when combined with the U.S. troop surge in Iraq that began in 2006, hit AQI hard and killed al-Zarqawi via air strike.<sup>14</sup>

When one jihadist leader dies, there is always another person ready to assume the leadership void. In this case, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rose to the helm of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2010 after serving a 4-year sentence in the U.S. prison facility Camp Bucca.<sup>15</sup> Sufficient evidence exists that this prison was the birthplace of ISIS. At least most of the top leaders of ISIS served time at Camp Bucca, including the man who would become the group's leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The U.S. officials that worked at Bucca expressed concerns that prisoners were radicalized whilst at Bucca describing the prison as "a pressure cooker for extremism." Furthermore, it was at Bucca where a powerful alliance between the Islamic extremists and the Ba'athists loyal to Saddam Hussein came to existence.<sup>16</sup>

After taking power in 2011, al-Baghdadi cut off ties with al-Qaeda and changed the name of the group to the Islamic State in Iraq.<sup>17</sup> When the Syrian conflict broke out in 2011, al-Baghdadi sent some fighters to Syria to build an organization there. Syria was in chaos, and the

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Iraqi jihadists established secure bases of operations there, raising money and winning new recruits to their cause. AQI forces, now calling themselves ISIS faced less pressure in Iraq with the departure of U.S. forces at the end of 2011 after the Obama administration withdrew the U.S. forces.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki put in place a series of disastrous policies to bolster support among his Shi'ite base, employing extreme sectarian rhetoric and systematically excluding Iraqi Sunnis from power. A violent government crackdown further alienated the Sunni community and al-Baghdadi's organization regained popular support and its legitimacy in Iraq, replenishing its ranks.<sup>19</sup> It also increased its attacks on government targets and security forces, stepping up assassinations in particular, and launched several high-profile prison breaks that humiliated the Iraqi government and freed many of the group's most experienced cadre.

At the beginning of 2014, the group sent forces into Iraq claiming it was defending local Sunnis and restored its presence in cities like Fallujah. In Syria, the group took over large sections of territory, benefiting as the Syrian regime focused on targeting groups that are more moderate while the Syrian opposition as a whole remained fractious. The group changed its name again in the summer of 2014 to the Islamic State and, supported by other disenfranchised Sunnis, swept across Iraq. Exploiting their mobility and high morale, they shocked Iraqi government forces, capturing broad swaths of territory in Sunni-dominated areas of the country; killing large numbers of Iraqi soldiers, police, and others associated with the government; and capturing equipment the United States had provided to the Iraqi military. Over 20,000 Iraqis were killed in the first 8 months of 2014, and almost two million were displaced.<sup>20</sup> Since then, ISIS has continued to produce and inspire suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria and have conducted

many successful attacks around the world including the U.S., this is a symptom of the problem, which requires further development.

### **Framing the Problem**

While U.S. military operations have undoubtedly impacted the Islamic State's ability to execute their operations effectively, it has certainly not resulted in the group's defeat as it continues to drive attacks in Iraq, Syria, and the rest of world. Today the U.S. military primarily engages in and relies on kinetic operations to disrupt, degrade and defeat the Islamic State. In the current fight against the violent extremist organization, the U.S. military campaign known as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) has produced over 18,700 U.S. and coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria supported by over 142,000 aircraft missions since the campaign began on August 8, 2014.<sup>21</sup> The campaign's airstrikes have achieved measurable success. According to U.S. Central Command, OIR airstrikes have killed, destroyed, or severely damaged over 31,900 Islamic State targets to include high value individuals, fielded forces, lucrative oil-producing facilities, and heavy equipment, vehicles and weapons.<sup>22</sup> The campaign's kinetic effects have enabled Iraqi and Kurdish forces to effectively deny the Islamic State 56 percent of their previously held territory in Iraq and 27 percent of its territory in Syria.<sup>23</sup> The above evidence demonstrates the United States and coalition success to disrupt ISIS operations and degrade their capabilities. Yet, despite the military campaign's success, reaching culmination of an ISIS defeat has proven problematic. Today the Islamic State continues to produce "scores" of suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria each month and conduct and inspire successful terrorist attacks around the world to include the United States.<sup>24</sup> In Iraq, ISIS violence resulted in over 18,000 deaths and over 36,000 wounded in Iraq just between January 2014 and October 2015.<sup>25</sup> In 29 other countries, ISIS has conducted or inspired more than 140 terrorist attacks that resulted in at least 2,043

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people killed and thousands more injured.<sup>26</sup> The United States in particular has been a repeated target of significant ISIS-inspired attacks with the San Bernardino, California shooting on December 2, 2015, which left 14 killed and 21 injured; and the Orlando, Florida nightclub shooting on June 12, 2016, which left 49 killed.<sup>27</sup> Both attackers pledged allegiance to ISIS.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, ISIS-inspired violence in the United States continues into 2017. On January 6, a former National Guardsman fatally shot five and wounded six people at the Fort Lauderdale International Airport and claimed the attack was executed on behalf of ISIS.<sup>29</sup> While U.S. military operations has significantly disrupted and degraded ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the group continues to conduct and inspire attacks around the world. Its attacks are enabled by its ability to recruit and inspire.

In order to defeat the Islamic State, the United States must counter their ability to recruit fighters and inspire lone wolves. To achieve this the United States must win the “war of ideas” or, in other words, prove its idea and cause are justified and worth killing and dying for.<sup>30</sup> The Islamic State is able to recruit and inspire because they are winning the war of ideas over vulnerable target audiences. It has successfully convinced war-torn citizens, marginalized Muslims, and other solidarity seekers that its idea and cause are just. In interviews with ISIS defectors, it was found that the idea of the Islamic Caliphate was compelling and powerful, and while some recruits understood that ISIS would never achieve its goal, the idea nevertheless remained as one to hope for.<sup>31</sup> The idea advertised by ISIS has resonated with tens of thousands of people, which enables it to sustain its fight effectively in the face of U.S. military operations. Defeating ISIS requires the United States to win not only on the battlefield, but win the hearts and minds of possible recruits and lone wolves.

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The Islamic State wins the war of ideas because it disseminates effective messaging that provides a sense of purpose, belonging, and/or meaning to vulnerable Muslims and solidarity seekers who feel unconnected and neglected by their society and/or government. ISIS effectively tailors its messaging to exploit psychological factors among differing demographics.<sup>32</sup> As a result, its messaging captures a wide-range of target audiences enabling it to effectively recruit more fighters and inspire more lone wolves. For Muslims in western countries that feel dragged between their nationality and religion and, as a result, feel marginalized, ISIS exploits their desire for understanding their situation by messaging the idea of irreconcilable differences between the West and the Islamic world.<sup>33</sup> While it further drives the wedge between the West and Islam, ISIS projects its content in a way that appeals to marginalized Muslims, opening the door to radicalization. It exploits vulnerable Muslims' desire for belonging by offering them a sense of purpose—a chance to fight for a cause.<sup>34</sup> ISIS also targets vulnerable women. ISIS messaging offers women seven promises: the possibility to fulfill their religious duty, become important state builders, experience deep and meaningful belonging and sisterhood, to live an exciting adventure in which they can find true romance, as well as being increasingly influential.<sup>35</sup> Messaging of these promises has proven effective with the migration of over 1,000 women from Europe to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS.<sup>36</sup> Finally, ISIS targets those that are economically distressed and/or emotionally unfulfilled. ISIS exploits the conditions of those struggling financially or without family by offering a “real life” with a salary, job, wife, and house.<sup>37</sup> Those that feel disappointed with their lives due to economic or emotional struggle could fall victim to ISIS messaging. ISIS messaging is sophisticated, attracting several target audiences. It wins the war of ideas because it effectively advertises a sense of purpose, belonging, and meaning to vulnerable target audiences.

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The key for the United States to win the war of ideas is to prove its side represents a truly just cause worth killing and dying for over the other side. In an effort to win the war of ideas, an actor should meet one of two elements of criteria for just cause war as called for by international law and just war theory: 1) self-defense by force if victimized by aggression; and 2) defense of others by force if victimized by aggression.<sup>38</sup> Aggression represents action which violates the rights of states and/or people to live with security and freedom.<sup>39</sup> The protection of human rights is the foundational basis of the two elements of just cause war. Brian Orend, author of *The Morality of War*, identifies the most important five human right entitlements: 1) physical security, or life and freedom of threats to it; 2) material subsistence; 3) personal freedom; 4) elemental equality or non-discrimination; and 5) social recognition as a person and rights-holder.<sup>40</sup> The United Nations published a human rights study conducted in Iraq which revealed the Islamic State's violation of every one of Orend's prescribed human right entitlements: 1) it has killed over 18,000 and wounded over 36,000 innocent Iraqi civilians; 2) it has destroyed Iraqi civilians' homes and businesses; 3) it has abducted 3,500 Iraqi women and children for sexual slavery and forced recruitment; 4) it has discriminated against and killed anyone not strictly adhering to its form Islam; and 5) it has targeted homosexuals for killing.<sup>41</sup> The above evidence provides the United States' with just cause for the defense of Iraqi citizens' human rights against ISIS attacks. It meets the second element of criteria for just cause war. In addition to the defense of the Iraqi people, the United States has just cause to defend itself from the Islamic State. The physical security and lives of American citizens are threatened by the Islamic State. Since 2014, seven ISIS-inspired attacks have occurred in the United States resulting in 68 deaths and 33 wounded.<sup>42</sup> The United States, hence, meets both elements of criteria for just cause war against the Islamic State. Just cause for war contributes significantly to winning the

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war of ideas. Attempting to convince target audiences of just cause without having genuine just cause can prove unsuccessful or backfire. “Nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising.”<sup>43</sup> The lack of genuine just cause in the Islamic State’s war is a deficiency that can be exploited to discredit their message. The United States, on the other hand, has a valid just cause for war which enables it to successfully resonate its message without question.

Winning the war of ideas against ISIS cannot be accomplished without the support of the U.S. military. As such, the U.S. military must identify ISIS ideology as an enemy center of gravity. Carl von Clausewitz defined the center of gravity as “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends, and the point against which all energies should be directed.”<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz referred to the enemy’s forces and leadership as the most important centers of gravity.<sup>45</sup> Despite the overwhelming military victories as a result of Clausewitz’s approach, identifying forces and leadership as centers of gravity against non-state actors such as the Islamic State does not succeed. First, the Islamic State does not depend on its forces as its hub of power to keep its attacks going. The U.S. military and coalition have killed over 50,000 Islamic State fighters to date since the war began without avail to their defeat.<sup>46</sup> The Islamic State rejects the loss of life as tragic and demoralizing and instead praises their dead as martyrs for its cause. Second, the Islamic State does not depend on its leadership to continue its attacks. No evidence suggests that killing the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, would lead it to their defeat. On the contrary, a center of gravity study published in the Joint Force Quarterly on the Islamic State proposes that removing al-Baghdadi might promote him to martyr status and galvanize his followers behind a new leader.<sup>47</sup> Even al Qaeda still operates in war-torn countries like Syria and Yemen five years after the death of Osama bin Laden. President Clinton started attacking Al Qaeda in the 90s after the first World Trade Center bombing, however, even after

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20 years of killing Al Qaeda leaders and fighters, they're still mounting effective terror campaigns across the world. The Islamic State's hub of power, in which everything depends on and gives drive to its cause, is its ideology. The Islamic State depends on its ideology for three critical capabilities: 1) its ability to recruit followers; 2) its ability to garner support for its ideology; and 3) its ability to command and control across several countries.<sup>48</sup> These critical capabilities sustain the Islamic State's fight. Without support for its ideology, the Islamic State loses volunteer recruits, support of affiliated and inspired personnel around the world, and loyalty of existing fighters operating in Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the world undermining its command and control. The U.S. military must identify ideology as an Islamic State center of gravity and focus its efforts against it. U.S. military contribution in this regard enables winning the war of ideas to deter recruitment, support, and loyalty to ISIS cause and ultimately result in their defeat. In conjunction with framing the problem, the appropriate message must be produced that will resonate with the target audience of Western Muslims susceptible to radicalization.

### **Developing a Moderate Message**

The United States and its partners against ISIS are starting to realize the effects of winning the war of ideas specifically by support to modern Muslim ideology and messaging attributed to influential Islamic leaders such as clerics, imams, scholars and policy-makers. The 9/11 Report: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, written in 2004, recommended the U.S. form a global alliance with partners in the Middle East to counter the influence against radical Islamic ideology.<sup>49</sup> The commission realized that the U.S. was unable to combat radical ideology through the Defense or State Department alone, but instead needed influential leaders within the Arab region willing to contest extremist ideology in favor of a more

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moderate message. This recommendation has turned out to be foretelling, and is even better understood and appreciated now than it was 13 years ago when it was written. One such influential Muslim leader who has voiced his support for moderate Islamic ideology is the current President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Recently al-Sisi spoke to Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest and most respected Islamic universities in the Middle East, and implored the Muslim scholars, clerics and imams to push back on the radical, extremist ideology that is “tearing the Islamic nation apart.”<sup>50</sup> Al-Sisi challenged the Muslim religious leaders to revolutionize their thinking, and to lead their followers in a way that the entire world would no longer consider Islam a religion of murder, killing and destruction. He concluded his thoughts by telling the imams that they were responsible before Allah for their actions, and that the “Islamic [world was] being torn, destroyed and lost...by [their] own hands.”<sup>51</sup> Al-Sisi is part of a growing assembly of partner Arab nations becoming more vocal about defining and supporting moderate, religiously tolerant Islamic ideology. Indeed, the ideological and theological differences between moderate and radical Islamic belief are distinct, and the U.S. objective of successfully winning the war of ideas must become the central strategy to defeating ISIS. Therefore, a proper understanding of moderate Islamic ideology is imperative to comprehend, so that it can more effectively be supported and encouraged.

Understanding religion as a continuum can be helpful; imagine one end of the spectrum as the most conservative perspective or belief of a particular faith, and likewise, the opposite end as the most extreme, radical perspective of belief. Where one believes truth to exist about a particular religion, determines in large part if they have a conservative, moderate or radical perspective of their faith. This applies to all of the world’s major religions, and helps explain why there are both conservative and extremist actions and beliefs on the part of all faith-based

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organizations. Since the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the predominant Islamic religious perspective that has propagated the most attention in the Middle East for many years, is radical Islam. However, recently, moderate voices of reason and tolerance are beginning to emerge, as is the case with the foundation of the Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) in 2015 – a coalition of 41 Islamic nations formed by the leadership of Saudi Arabia to “fight the Islamic disease of extremism.”<sup>52</sup> With the foundation of an Arab alliance like the IMA, in addition to regional Muslim leaders like Al-Sisi, the fundamental beliefs of moderate Islamic ideology are beginning to be communicated, albeit slowly. Sheikh Muhammed Al-Yaquoubi, a well-respected moderate Islamic scholar and religious leader, wrote an open letter to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015 explaining the errancies of the extremist Islamic State, and reaffirming the fundamental Islamic beliefs that the majority of Muslims believe. These moderate Islamic beliefs include for example (not an exhaustive list): consensus must be reached by all Muslims regarding the caliphate, rather than dictated from those who do so without consultation (such as ISIS); it is acceptable to have differing thoughts and opinions on matters; killing the innocent is forbidden, as is harming or mistreating Christians, Yazidis, Jews or any ‘people of the Scripture;’ jihad is a defensive war – not offensive, and includes the right cause, purpose and rules of conduct; it is not acceptable to declare people non-Muslim unless they themselves declare it; religious freedom is accepted, as is allegiance to the state and the equality of men and women; forced conversion, slavery, denying women’s rights, rape, torture, and jihadi groups are all forbidden.<sup>53</sup> Though many Muslims have been branded as “radical extremists,” the reality is the actual number is much lower and Al-Yaquoubi’s moderate beliefs are the consensus of much of the Islamic world, according to a recent Pew Research poll published in 2017.<sup>54</sup> Consequently because of his contrary beliefs to al-Baghdadi, as well as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, al-Yaquoubi was

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exiled from his home in Syria despite being recently recognized as one of the top most influential Muslims by Georgetown University and the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center of Jordan.<sup>55</sup> In actuality, nonviolent and non-extremist moderate Muslims have the most to lose against radical groups like ISIS, who are distorting the Islamic message by incorrectly and inaccurately exegeting the martial passages of the Quran to justify their own heinous actions.<sup>56</sup> For example, one of the verses of the Quran exploited most often by extremist groups is Quran 2:191, “Kill them wherever you find them.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, Mufti Ismail ibn Musa Menk, a moderate Islamic scholar and also one of the top most influential Muslims listed by the organizations above, strongly criticizes radical groups who take this verse out of its historical context and erroneously apply it to justify modern day actions. He says,

When terrorists like ISIS pick up the Quran and say that it preaches violence, no, the Quran is the farthest from violence and terrorism! They have not understood the Quran, it has verses of history that terrorists translate as commands for today, but nay they are not commands...they were instructions for another time. None of us should interpret these verses the way [ISIS] wants us to interpret them. Islam is full of peace, it means peace, it stands for peace.<sup>58</sup>

The moderate Muslim world, including leaders like President Al-Sisi, Sheikh Al-Yaqoubi and Mufti Menk are beginning to realize that the “superglue of radical ideology” as Gerges calls it, is what cements organizations like ISIS together, and the most effective way of combating extremism is by successfully winning the war of ideas.<sup>59</sup> Radical Islamic ideology must be defeated by coordinated, strategic initiatives involving several methods, including a massive counter-propaganda campaign run through the U.S. Defense and State Departments, as well as funding and supporting our moderate Islamic alliances and partnerships in the Middle East.

### **Propaganda**

ISIS propaganda is very professional looking and closely managed to convey a consistent radical message, which must be understood in order to realize why previous efforts have failed

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so an effective campaign can be produced. Reviewing examples how ISIS and the United States have developed and disseminated propaganda along with the outcomes provides the opportunity to draw conclusions about the difficulties involved with the moderate message coming from the United States. ISIS propaganda resulted in at least 30,000 people abandoning their lives in the West for *hijrah* or migration to the caliphate.<sup>60</sup> One way ISIS disseminates their propaganda is through heavy usage of Twitter. Even though Twitter occasionally bans ISIS accounts for violating their terms of service, it does not slow ISIS down at all. ISIS has two significant methods to work around Twitter banning their propaganda accounts.

First, ISIS uses an account @ActiveHashtags which puts out a daily tweet of hashtags that people can then search for and see what ISIS seems important for that day. This might be information about battles, executions, or success stories from individuals who have migrated to the caliphate. People can then search for the hashtags published by @ActiveHashtags and obtain more information on these daily trending topics. The idea is that these hashtags change daily so any attempts to block or censor them prove futile.

The second method ISIS uses to control twitter involves an Android app written by Palestinians named “Dawn of Glad Tidings” or commonly referred to as Dawn. Thousands of ISIS supporters have downloaded and installed this app, which allows ISIS to send tweets through their user’s accounts without the user having to do anything. If a user’s account is banned, they can just create a new one and ISIS automatically can continue sending out tweets without any disruption. ISIS supports can use their Twitter accounts as they normally would, with occasional ISIS tweets being sent on their behalf. While the app is no longer available on the official Google Play store, anyone with a rooted Android phone could easily install the app.

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Having a rooted or jailbroken phone is commonplace in less developed countries as people cannot afford regular app costs and are used to installing pirated apps.

Countering ISIS propaganda is possible through the usage of multiple methods. The first method is a denial of service effort where any ISIS website, Twitter account, Facebook page, etc., is overtly attacked with the intent of preventing anyone from reading or further disseminating their content. However, there are a few drawbacks from utilizing this method. First, it violates fundamental principles of freedom of religion and freedom of speech held dear by most western liberal democracies. A large portion of ISIS propaganda involves disseminating religious quotes from the Quran or other religious figures. Preventing this message directly contradicts the freedoms western liberal democracies enjoy and claim to want to spread throughout the Middle East, even if the propaganda attempts to incite violence. Second, by shutting down every online ISIS presence, the intelligence collection capability is eliminated. Knowing who is viewing and spreading propaganda and understanding how their communication network is setup can lead to a better plan for defeating ISIS. Third, trying to shut down every ISIS presence online is a hugely labor intensive effort and ISIS is highly capable of creating new websites or new social media accounts just as quickly as they can be eliminated.

Another method to counter ISIS propaganda is to disseminate moderate Muslim messages that counter the radical ISIS ideology. Attempts in the past from the Department of State and Defense have had minimal success. The Shared Values campaign from the State Department was launched shortly after September 11th, 2001. The concept was to dispel the idea that American Muslims were persecuted by portraying them as living happily in the United States. Each of the five videos focused on a specific individual employed as a Baker, Journalist, Firefighter, Teacher, or Doctor, and provided a heartwarming story of how they succeeded in

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places such as Toledo, Ohio. The commercials were intended to be ran in foreign Muslim markets during Ramadan, but saw opposition with government-run television channels in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan refusing the ads.<sup>61</sup> The concept of a tolerant America is impossible to convey in the face of stories about maltreatment of Muslims at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay prisons, in addition to news reports of harassment and discrimination prevalent on American and foreign news wires. It only takes a few people to tarnish the image of America.

A second campaign by the State Department's Global Engagement Center called "Think Again, Turn Away" attempted to use a more graphic approach by focusing on the horrors of living within ISIS's borders. The campaign centered on a Twitter account sending six to seven tweets a day to spread the counter jihadist message and to engage or argue with prominent ISIS twitter accounts. A failed example of this type of engagement was on September 11th, 2014, when an Australian cleric and leader within the Syrian jihadist movement tweeted, "On this day, in 2001, the USA's largest economic shrine, the idol of capitalism was brought to the ground..the toll of injustice is hefty."<sup>62</sup> The Think Again, Turn Away account responded with "Nobody's a bigger fan of the fruits of capitalism than so-called #ISIS Caliph" along with a picture of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi wearing a Rolex watch. However, the failure here was the Australian cleric was not part of ISIS and instead part of the al Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra front within Syria who was opposing Baghdadi's attempts to merge al-Nusra with ISIS. Engaging with an al Qaeda cleric in this manner legitimizes their efforts by providing a much larger audience than they would otherwise enjoy and has unintended effects by criticizing someone the cleric already disliked and regularly criticized himself. This sort of engagement is very complex and can too easily backfire if conducted by individuals without a deep understanding of the differences between each radical jihadist group and their leaders.

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A third effort is Central Command's Web Ops anti-ISIS campaign or military information support operations. In total, approximately 120 individuals are working Web Ops with the focus on their Digital Engagement Team (DET). "The 11-member DET includes native-born speakers of Arabic, Urdu, Russian, Farsi, Dari and Pashto. Their job, officials said, is to represent [CENTCOM] in those languages and tailor their messaging to regional news cycles: Arabic in Arabic-speaking countries, Dari and Pashto for Afghanistan, Farsi for Iran, Russian for the Central Asian states, and Urdu for Pakistan."<sup>63</sup> The Web Ops approach consists of, "disrupting' adversary propaganda, exposing adversaries' hypocrisies and crimes through engagements with at-risk target audiences, and mobilizing the adversaries' opponents to more effectively combat the adversary online." This idea sounds great, unfortunately, the execution has been ineffective, and CENTCOM received information requests from members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government reform after numerous media reports detailing problems with the program.<sup>64</sup> The letter from the House Committee noted problems "where employees mistook words and ISIS recruiters laughed and insulted them. In one particular instance, Web Ops employees repeatedly referred to the Palestinian Authority as the 'Palestinian salad.'" Additionally, former employees reported to the media that the Web Ops data was being manipulated to make the program look more effective than it actually was. Additional controversy includes an Inspector General investigation along with a \$500 million Northrop Grumman contract for psychological operations to run parallel to Web Ops. The accusations of analysts with minimal experience in counter-propaganda, lack of fluency in needed languages, and minimal understanding of Islam, are devastating if true and would explain the poor results demonstrated in the ideological war against ISIS.

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The last United States counter-propaganda effort reviewed is run by United States Cyber Command's Joint Task Force Ares. JTF Ares was created after the Obama administration including Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter criticized Cyber Command's efforts against ISIS. Carter directed, "I have given the Cyber Command in the counter-[ISIS] fight really its first wartime assignment."<sup>65</sup> Minimal open source information exists about JTF Ares, but the commander, Army Lieutenant General Edward Cardon, spoke to an Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association meeting in October of 2016 about their efforts to "strike at [ISIS]'s sophisticated use of technology to recruit, make financial transactions and disseminate propaganda."<sup>66</sup> Lt Gen Cardon continued saying, "The beauty about Ares is, we just have one mission to work. We work on ISIL problems. It sharpens options [and] policies, and there's a lot of discussion about what we should and shouldn't do. Every mission we do is breaking new ground and setting the way forward." This task force directly supports the Joint Forces Commander, Lt Gen Sean McFarland, leading the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and provides the ability to task and launch cyber attacks just as he uses airstrikes.

Moderate Muslims are also attempting to counter the radical jihadist message online. The first effort is the creation of Haqiqah magazine which translates to "reality" in Arabic is designed to counter the ISIS magazines Dabiq and Rumiya. Haqiqah is published by a group of moderate imams based in the United Kingdom and attempts to expose the realities behind ISIS. This is a similar concept as the State Department's Think Again, Turn Away campaign, but demonstrates a much deeper understanding of Islam that is only possible through a group of Muslim scholars. Explaining how ISIS has corrupted Islam and celebrated indiscriminate mass murder may serve to convince westerners to not give up everything to join the caliphate. Haqiqah has only published two issues and the effectiveness of the campaign remains to be

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seen.<sup>67</sup> Another similar example comes from Imam Omar Atia, based in Evansville, Indiana. He started Reclamation Studios which produced a video series called “not in His name.”<sup>68</sup>

According to their website, “We created the “not in His name” series to provide specific evidence that these perverse acts are in total violation of the tenets of Islam, including the holy scriptures and the example of the Prophet.” Again, having a religious leader who understands Islam is key to ensuring a counter ISIS message makes sense. These twenty videos focus on lessons of Islam that go against the things ISIS is doing.

Analyzing the methods and success of countering ISIS propaganda online leads to a few conclusions. First, without a fundamental understanding of Islam, languages, geopolitics, terrorist groups and their leadership, and motivations of western Muslims who are radicalized, any counter-ISIS campaign will most certainly fail. The primary target of a campaign to counter ISIS should target the same individuals who ISIS targets, western Muslims who are unhappy and open to radicalization, including willingness to conduct terrorist attacks, or to migrate to the caliphate and join ISIS. Joint Task Force Ares is best suited to continue conducting cyber attacks against ISIS while deconflicting intelligence gathering requirements through Cyber Command. However, given the level of distrust of the United States government, it is unlikely that any counter ISIS message is well received in the Muslim world. A more effective strategy is to quit engaging ISIS in social media and online as it only serves to legitimize their efforts. Support should be provided to moderate Muslims who understand the region and can craft a more compelling message at a local level. A western Muslim living in Europe or Africa is much more likely to be influenced by a local actor such as a cleric or community leader. These local actors should be supported by Joint Task Force Ares in an indirect method. Perhaps information is collected that indicates someone is susceptible to radicalization. This information could be

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passed to a local actor who could intervene by providing a more attractive moderate message while attempting to solve any other issues making the individual susceptible to radicalization in the first place. Arguing via Twitter and publishing YouTube videos just does not have the same effect as one on one engagement by someone in a position of authority. Based on the historical context of ISIS, a framing of the problem, developing a moderate message, and understanding pitfalls associated with countering ISIS's propaganda, a solution is presented to defeat ISIS.

### **Recommended Solution**

Defeating ISIS by deterring and degrading recruitment, support, and loyalty to the Islamic State's cause requires a two-part strategy. However, this solution is not a short-term panacea. There is no simple way to undo years of radical religious education nor overcome damage done by 26 years of U.S. led war in the Middle East. This solution will take at least 10 years, as it will take time securing allies and moderate leaders for the U.S. to support in this war of ideas.

First, the United States must win the war of ideas against ISIS by convincing vulnerable target audiences the U.S. and its partners' ideas are morally justified. The U.S. must continue to fund and support organizations like Task Force Ares that stand best suited to conduct counter-propaganda and cyber-attacks against radical ISIS messaging. As Gerges has identified, "ISIS's weakest link is its poverty of ideas," and the U.S. must help to exploit this vulnerability through all cyber and propaganda means possible.<sup>69</sup> Moderate Islamists have begun to decry the misappropriation and extreme religious interpretation of radical Islamic thought, and strategic groups like JTF Ares can help to propagate the more tolerant and appealing message of moderate Islam. In particular, JTF Ares could wield a devastating blow by contributing to the effort of delegitimizing and ruining ISIS's claim of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria. They can help exploit

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the embarrassing reality that no recognized Muslim scholar, cleric or religious leader has given any credibility whatsoever to ISIS's erroneous declaration of a caliphate, thus rendering it illegitimate.<sup>70</sup> In addition to funding and supporting strategic U.S. counter-propaganda organizations, there also needs to be a coordinated effort to do likewise with the initiatives of our Middle Eastern allies. No one is in a better position to speak more authoritatively or influentially for the moderate interpretation of Islam, than our moderate Islamic partners from around the world. Recently, 350 Muslim leaders from 87 countries gathered in Abu Dhabi to attend a conference designed to thwart groups like ISIS and promote peace in Muslim societies.<sup>71</sup> Opportunities like this are beneficial, and it is in the best interest of the U.S. to help fund and support initiatives of moderate Islamic leaders and governments, such as those of the United Arab Emirates, the IMA, Egypt and Jordan in combating Islamic extremism. Financial resources not only need to be allocated to funding non-kinetic information cyber warfare and counter-propaganda efforts of moderate Muslim nations, but also of funding and training kinetic Muslim military coalitions.

Second, the United States must execute both kinetic and non-kinetic operations to eliminate the Islamic State's ability to produce and disseminate propaganda to vulnerable target audiences while eroding their control of territory to invalidate the ISIS concept of an expanding caliphate. Based on accounts of captured ISIS propagandists, the details of how their propaganda machine works is clear. The 48 official media offices ran by ISIS carefully control the message. They task photographers and propagandists with traveling each day to locations to film or record things from executions, mock battles, personal narratives, or other stories in support of their goals. Often an execution will take all day to film with propagandists providing cue cards to be read while obtaining multiple angles before the final sword falls for maximum

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cinematic effect. These accounts are edited and turned into professional products rivaling western media outlets in quality of production. By targeting this propaganda network with kinetic and non-kinetic efforts the coalition could degrade ISIS's ability to turn their radical ideology into an attractive and consumable product. Furthermore, the current operations of the Iraqi army in Mosul, as well as the development of a militarized IMA serve as potential examples of how the U.S. could capitalize on moderate Muslim initiatives in combating radical ideology. The coalition led by the Iraqi army has had success with pushing back ISIS fighters which came dangerously close to the Iraqi capital in 2014. With the U.S. in a supporting role, the Iraqi coalition has retaken ground and appears capable to expel ISIS from Iraqi territory within the next year. The key is to have Muslim armies leading the kinetic and non-kinetic efforts to avoid falling into the ISIS apocalyptic ISIS propaganda which foretells the end of times battle on the plains of a small city named Dabiq outside Damascus, Syria, where Western armies will be defeated. A stated goal from ISIS's propaganda is to antagonize the West through lone wolf attacks to draw their armies into this pitched battle in Dabiq where success is guaranteed with the Western armies burning in hellfire. A significant amount of ISIS propaganda represents this concept through images of foreign fighters engulfed in flames. With the U.S. working in a supporting relationship with the IMA, success can be achieved in eroding ISIS territory without achieving ISIS's apocalyptic objectives. Additionally, reducing ISIS's territory serves to invalidate their claim of a caliphate. The caliphate is supposed to have authority over all Muslims in the world and if the media constantly shows their borders shrinking then their ability to recruit additional Western Muslims to the ISIS cause becomes much more difficult as they are seen as a failing effort.

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This recommended strategy, like any strategy, requires assessing to validate its meeting of the end state. The United States must assess the war of ideas to ensure it is winning it. However, assessing the war of ideas is not practical since ideas are not tangible. It is easier to measure the effects of kinetic operations as objective analysis can tell whether or not an enemy facility was destroyed or whether an enemy high value individual was killed. It is harder to measure the hearts and minds as to whether or not messaging resonated. How then can the United States tell if it is winning the war of ideas? Robert Reilly, author of *Assessing the War of Ideas during War*, explains that the winning the war of ideas is told by the way in which a target audience expresses what is right or “good,” and by the way it defines what is legitimate and what is not.<sup>72</sup> Hence, if a target audience understands U.S. cause as legitimate, then U.S. messaging has resonated and it is winning the war of ideas. To assess its war of ideas against the Islamic State, the U.S. must assess the effectiveness of its messaging against those caught in the middle of the conflict and vulnerable to support the Islamic State—war-torn citizens and marginalized Muslims and other solidarity seekers around the world. To measure its success, the U.S. must examine certain indicators: Has ISIS recruitment of fighters decreased?; Have ISIS-inspired attacks around the world decreased?; Have the number of followers of ISIS propaganda decreased?; and Have the number of followers of moderate Islamic messaging increased? Answers to these questions will provide indications on whether or not the U.S. is winning the war of ideas. The United States and its partners’ messaging has resonated when vulnerable target audiences behave in a manner conducive to the U.S. and partners’ cause.

### **Conclusion**

ISIS’s ideas, projected by its sophisticated propaganda, enables them to sustain an effective fight. Its ideas are the hub of its power, which radicalizes vulnerable target audiences

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for recruiting fighters and inspiring lone wolf attacks. The defeat of ISIS requires the defeat of their ideas with an end state of eliminating their ability to recruit and inspire while eliminating their territory serving as their power base. The center of gravity is the radical jihadist ideology that must be supplanted with a more attractive message. The United States and its partners must take on a two-part strategy to defeat ISIS. It must first win the war of ideas by convincing vulnerable audiences targeted by ISIS that the U.S. and its allies' ideas are morally justified against ISIS cause. To this end, the U.S. must leverage and support moderate Muslims around the world to develop a more attractive message and use it to counter ISIS's ideology. Second, the United States must execute both kinetic and non-kinetic operations in conjunction with the Islamic Military Alliance to eliminate ISIS's ability to produce and disseminate propaganda to vulnerable target audiences while eroding their control of territory to invalidate the ISIS concept of an expanding caliphate. This is not a short-term solution, and may take 10 years to achieve substantial results. However, as discussed, continuing to focus on just killing leadership and fighters is a failed effort as seen with the campaign against Al Qaeda. Combating ISIS ideas on multiple fronts and supporting the IMA with kinetic support will deter and degrade ISIS's ability recruit followers and inspire attacks, ultimately resulting in their defeat.

Notes

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