

4-2017

# Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theater Propaganda Operations

Charlie Winter

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# CENTER ON IRREGULAR WARFARE AND ARMED GROUPS



## Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theatre Propaganda Operations

Charlie Winter

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# **Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theater Propaganda Operations**

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# WINTER: EVALUATING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S IN-THEATER PROPAGANDA OPERATIONS

## Message from the Editors

In 2008, the Naval War College established the Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Groups (CIWAG). CIWAG's primary mission is twofold: first, to bring cutting-edge research on Irregular Warfare into the Joint Professional Military Educational (JPME) curricula; and second, to bring operators, practitioners, and scholars together to share their knowledge and experiences about a vast array of violent and non-violent irregular challenges. This case study is part of an ongoing effort at CIWAG that includes symposia, lectures by world-renowned academics, case studies, research papers, articles, and books. Our aim is to make these case studies part of an evolving and adaptive curriculum that fulfills the needs of students preparing to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 world.

This case study by Charlie Winter makes use of primary source documents to present the in-theater propaganda strategies of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Although much attention has rightly been paid to their online recruiting and social media campaigns, their in-theater strategies are equally compelling and strategically targeted. The author uses a three-part framework—*message*, *messenger*, and *media*—developed by Naval War College professors Marc Genest, Andrea Dew, and Sally Paine in another study on strategic communications, to assess the intent and effectiveness of ISIS's in-theater propaganda. Winter makes a compelling case, through evidence and teaching questions, that this strategy is both deliberate and effective, especially when ISIS controlled and limited access to the internet and outside media.

This has far-reaching implications for areas in Syria and Iraq that were under ISIS control. What deeply embedded ideas did children and teenagers internalize from this indoctrination media? What long-term repercussions does this hold for stability and security in these areas? The study also raises the questions of which other armed groups might adopt these effective methodologies and under what circumstances in-theater propaganda campaigns might be disrupted. As ISIS and al-Qaeda continue

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to inspire and sponsor new franchises around the globe, the issue of how to control access to counter-narratives becomes more urgent; this first look at in-theater strategies provides the basis for further research and investigation into the in-theater and online competition for ideas and influence around the world.

It is important to note two critical caveats to this case study. First, the opinions found in this case study are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Naval War College, or CIWAG. Second, while every effort has been made to correct any factual errors in this work, the author is ultimately responsible for the content of this case study.

We hope you find this case study useful, and look forward to hearing your feedback and suggestions for how you can contribute to the Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Group's mission here at the Naval War College.

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### Author Biography

**Charlie Winter** is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, where his research specialises in insurgency, Arabic-language propaganda, and innovation, with a focus on on- and offline strategic communication. He is pursuing a PhD in War Studies at King's College London, exploring the weaponisation of images in warfare. He also is an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – the Hague and regularly advises governments and appears in international broadcast and print media.

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## I. Introduction

“Hello, I’m John Cantlie, and today we’re in Mosul in Iraq. As the war between the Islamic State and the U.S.-led coalition continues, the Americans have launched a surprising new tactic against the *mujahidin*. Using their \$30 million F-18s and \$100,000 missile systems, they have begun targeting—not tanks, not trucks, not even the *mujahidin*—but Islamic State media kiosks.

“This used to be one such media kiosk, targeted and destroyed the other day on this busy high street. The kiosks are used to distribute pamphlets and information regarding the Islamic State, and serve to expose some of the lies and propaganda that the Western media continues to peddle in their never-ending mission to tarnish the image of the Islamic State. It’s not much to look at because it cost about \$50 to build, and now it’s been flattened by the collective might of the American war machine.

“And one has to ask oneself, why bother? Is it a ruse by the CIA to somehow undermine the Islamic State’s message to the Muslims of Mosul, and therefore somehow diminish their control of the city? Is it, perhaps, to strike fear into the hearts of the *mujahidin*, thereby abandoning any ideas to build another dozen kiosks to replace this one?”<sup>1</sup>

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“My media operative brother, let it be known that your verbal jihad is not limited to speech alone, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic State, “John Cantlie talks about the American airstrikes on media kiosks in Mosul city,” *A’maq News Agency*, 19 March 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqIDeN\\_e\\_YE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqIDeN_e_YE).

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comprises speech, composition, printing, audio recording and preparing scenarios for video recording and so on. All of this requires a significant amount of effort. Let it also be known that, for you, verbal jihad is more important than jihad of the sword.”<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of its capture of Mosul in 2014, the so-called Islamic State came to present a unique security threat to its adversaries around the world: in the space of a few years, it had managed to attract tens of thousands of new supporters from as many as 86 nations,<sup>3</sup> inspire self-starter terrorism with far greater frequency than al-Qa’ida,<sup>4</sup> and become a household brand that enjoyed a regular slot in the mainstream media.<sup>5</sup> In all this, its propaganda machine played an integral role.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, subverting it became a central objective of the international coalition that was formed to degrade and destroy the group in 2014.<sup>7</sup> However, coalition member states tended to be overly fixated on the *online* presence of

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<sup>2</sup> Islamic State [Author’s translation], “Media operative, you are a mujahid, too,” *Himma Library*, April 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at [https://archive.org/details/mojahed\\_ilamee\\_is](https://archive.org/details/mojahed_ilamee_is).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Barrett et al., “An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq,” *The Soufan Group*, December 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Islamic State was tied to dozens of terrorist plots or attacks against the West between 2014 and 2017. “#Terror gone viral: Overview of the 75 ISIS-linked plots against the West, 2014-2016,” *Homeland Security Committee*, March 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://homeland.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Report-Terror-Gone-Viral-1.pdf>; also, see Ray Sanchez et al., “ISIS goes global: Over 60 attacks in 20 countries,” *CNN*, 21 January 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/>.

<sup>5</sup> Barrett et al., “An updated assessment.”

<sup>6</sup> Abu ‘Abdullah al-Masri, “Chapter X: Administration of media,” *Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State*, trans. by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, published by *The Guardian*, 7 December 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/islamic-state-document-masterplan-for-power>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the topic of propaganda was a key feature in President Barack Obama’s remarks at the Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism in September 2015. “Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism,” *The White House Briefing Room*, 29 September 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/29/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-countering-isis-and-violent>.

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propaganda, an issue that persistently distracted them from what was arguably developing into a more intractable communications conundrum—the group's *offline* propaganda operations in Syria and Iraq.

This case study shows that during its formative years as self-proclaimed caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's group used propaganda to perpetuate its existence, consolidate political control, and expand its strategic depth in a manner that was highly reminiscent of past totalitarian regimes. To analyze this, we have to consider that the tens of thousands of official photo reports, videos, audio messages, magazines, and chants produced by the Islamic State between 2014 and 2017 were not intended merely for Internet consumption; rather, they were also aimed at a domestic audience, the people over whom the Islamic State ruled.<sup>8</sup> Hence, while most of our attention has been focused on the threat posed by returnee foreign fighters or self-starter terrorists, we must now also contemplate the long-term implications of the Islamic State's systematic indoctrination operations in Iraq and Syria, and consider how they stand to affect local, regional, and international security for years to come.

The analysis that follows is based predominantly on Arabic-language primary source materials—propaganda, interviews with activists in Iraq and Syria, and official documents. Considered together, these allow for a detailed exploration of the Islamic State's offline communication strategy. The study proceeds as follows: after a brief theoretical discussion in which I frame the organization as a totalitarian proto-state, I investigate its media strategy from four angles: infrastructure, medium, messenger, and message. First, I examine how the Islamic State disseminated propaganda in its heartlands between 2014 and early 2017, focusing in particular on the role of *nuqat i'lamīyya* (literally “media points”) and al-Bayan Radio. Next,

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Stalinsky and R. Sosnow were among the first to note and discuss this internal propaganda in “The Islamic State (ISIS) establishes ‘Media Points’ in Syria, Iraq, Libya to indoctrinate caliphate citizens and enhance its activities on the ground: A one-year review,” *MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series* 1190, October 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://cjlabs.memri.org/analysis-and-special-reports/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-2/>.

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I discuss its full spectrum approach toward propaganda, one that incorporated a wide range of media. Then, I explore the group's policy of censorship and information monopoly, paying special attention to its gradualist war on satellite television and free access to the Internet. Lastly, I analyze the "reality" constructed by its propagandists, and discuss the consequences of its most comprehensive approach towards shaping the narrative space.

It is clear that the Islamic State long had a highly nuanced approach towards domestic public diplomacy, one that was set to have lasting reverberations on an international scale, even though it remained under the radar for years. With this in mind, in the conclusion I consider what might happen in the aftermath of the Islamic State's military defeat, and discuss the importance of undermining this most subtle yet stubborn facet of its insurgent governance.

## II. The Islamic State as a Totalitarian Proto-State

In 1965, at the height of the Cold War, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski published an analysis of totalitarian dictatorship. Although it was originally intended to present a framework for evaluating the structure of Cold War states, it provides an uncanny blueprint for understanding the Islamic State's propaganda strategies and successes.<sup>9</sup> According to their theory, in order to qualify as totalitarian, a ruling elite must possess the following characteristics: an elaborate ideology; a single mass party led by one man; a policing system based on terror; a near-complete monopoly of arms; a centrally controlled economy; and, crucially, control of the mass media.<sup>10</sup>

In the wake of its caliphal upgrade in June 2014, the Islamic State met all of these criteria, albeit to varying degrees of sophistication: an austere interpretation of salafi-jihadism underwrote its politics;<sup>11</sup> a cultic "caliph" led it;<sup>12</sup> its intelligence apparatus was diffuse, potent, and ruthless;<sup>13</sup> it strove and, for the most part, succeeded, to hold the monopoly on violence in its heartlands;<sup>14</sup> its economy was centrally administered by a formal ministry, the Diwan Bayt al-Mal;<sup>15</sup> and, it was in pursuit of absolute

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Cole Bunzel, "From paper state to caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Institution*, No. 19, March 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Matt Bradley, "ISIS declares new Islamist caliphate," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2014, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-declares-new-islamist-caliphate-1404065263>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Islamic State, "Allah will suffice you against them II," Euphrates Province Media Office, July 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://jihadology.net/2016/07/27/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-and-god-will-be-sufficient-for-you-against-them-wilayat-al-furat/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jay Akbar, "ISIS barbarians use meat cleaver to chop off hand and foot of two suspected thieves as hundreds of men and young boys," *The Daily Mail*, 2 July 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3146928/ISIS-barbarians-use-meat-cleaver-chop-hand-foot-two-suspected-thieves-hundreds-men-young-boys-watch-on.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Borzou Daragahi, "ISIS declares its own currency," *The Financial Times*, 13 November 2016, accessed 4 May 2017 at <https://www.ft.com/content/baf893e0-6b4f-11e4-9337-00144feabdc0>.

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control over the mass media.<sup>16</sup> So, while it may be true that for structural reasons al-Baghdadi's caliphate was never as intensely despotic as, say, the regimes of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, or present-day North Korea, its state-building project seemed to be crafted along similar totalitarian lines. For that reason, the group can usefully be understood as a totalitarian *proto*-state, one that strove to realize the trappings of Friedrich and Brzezinski's model over the course of its first few years as a caliphate.

With this in mind, it serves to briefly touch upon how past totalitarian regimes have used propaganda. When applied in this context, propaganda is more than just a tool for persuasion. If leveraged alongside fear, it offers the ruling elite a way "to impress its formula on the masses" while concurrently undermining their very ability to resist—as French philosopher Jacques Ellul put it, propaganda can be used to "attack the individual, break down his resistance, [and] make his decisions for him."<sup>17</sup> In this sense, it is both a carrot with which to buoy the morale of supporters, and a stick with which to coerce adversaries into submission. If executed effectively by the totalitarian state, propaganda offers a way to substitute spontaneously formed public opinion with the "official image of the world," and undermine dissidence in its most nascent stages.<sup>18</sup>

From 2014 onwards in its heartlands in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State adopted a communication policy akin to the above. Indeed, al-Baghdadi's organization seemed to be working towards the very same strategic ends as totalitarians of bygone years, apparently hoping to use a cocktail of information, disinformation, and censorship to crush dissent and establish its ideological permanence. In the following pages, I explain how and why this came to be, making occasional reference to the means by

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<sup>16</sup> See al-Masri, *Principles*, trans. by al-Tamimi.

<sup>17</sup> John R. Palmer, "Theories of social change and the mass media," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 5 (1971), 145; Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, 1965, trans. by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner, New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1973, 18.

<sup>18</sup> C.W. Cassinelli, "Totalitarianism, ideology, and propaganda," *The Journal of Politics*, 22 (Feb. 1960), 93; Paul Kecskemeti, "Totalitarian communications as a means of control: A note on the sociology of propaganda," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 14 (1950), 224.

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which propaganda was used in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. As will be seen, similarities abound between the Islamic State's strategic communication operations and those of Hitler's Third Reich.

### III. The Infrastructure

In January 2017, the Islamic State released a video documentary about its defense of the city of Mosul.<sup>19</sup> Coming 100 days after the campaign to recapture the city was first launched, the video was typically over-produced—rich in computer-generated graphics and synth-assisted chants. Reminiscent of the group's other Mosul-related propaganda, the focus of the video was its industrialized use of suicide operations. What made it remarkable, though, was a segment in which it focused on the “knights of the media” that had taken up arms, cameras, and suicide vests to fight in the city.

Of particular note was an interview with a pre-adolescent media worker who relayed to the camera that he had joined the Islamic State some nine months earlier. He spoke in detail of his training and development in the organization, a narrative that was accompanied by never-before-seen footage from inside one of the Islamic State's so-called “institutes” for media training, a scene of highly disciplined, militaristic education. For the first time, Islamic State students of propaganda could be seen on film, wearing military garb and sitting at desks, listening to their instructors as they prepared the drone systems in front of them for battlefield surveillance and media production. In those brief seconds, the astonishing sophistication of the group's propaganda infrastructure was laid bare for all to see.

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In 2016, the Islamic State released a series of videos documenting its institutionalized war on satellite dishes.<sup>20</sup> As well as focusing on what

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<sup>19</sup> Islamic State, “The knights of the ministries,” *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 24 January 2017, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://heavy.com/news/2017/01/new-isis-islamic-state-video-knights-of-bureaucracy-mosul-iraq-wilayat-ninawa-modified-weaponized-drones-bombings-airstrikes-uncensored-video/>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for *IHS Markit*.

<sup>20</sup> Islamic State, “Destroying the satellite devices,” *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/8tu1dBs1>; Islamic State, “Protect Yourself and

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was being taken away, the propagandists spoke of what they were filling the resultant information void with. They showed portacabins decked out with widescreens and projectors, and media officials were depicted handing out copies of the official newspaper to passersby, while another operative briefed the cameras on the ever-evolving activities of al-Bayan Radio, the official station that operated across the Islamic State's heartlands in Iraq and Syria for much of 2014, 2015, 2016, and some of 2017. This same official concluded the video by saying that the Islamic State was working to make a private "media point" out of every "Muslim house in the caliphate."

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"When you walk on the streets of Raqqa, there are big screens that are showing beheadings. They have, you know, the projectors and we are walking in the streets and just watching these videos."<sup>21</sup>

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In the early summer of 2014, the Islamic State began its efforts to wrest control over the information space in its heartlands once and for all. It spearheaded this initiative with the establishment of a devoted infrastructure for propaganda dissemination, a way for it to fight, "on an internal front, to bring the truth" to the local population.<sup>22</sup> The two most

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Your Families from a Fire," *Khayr Province Media Office*, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/uWaFHbp2>; Islamic State, "And Let the Believers Be Cautious Regarding the Prevention of the Dish and Its Destruction," *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/G3Pc0rYy>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of these videos for IHS Markit.

<sup>21</sup> Excerpt of interview between unidentified wife of Islamic State member and CNN's Arwa Damon. See Arwa Damon, "Female commander fighting to liberate Raqqa," *CNN*, 22 June 2017, accessed 23 June 2017 at <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2017.06.22.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Islamic State, "The media point: a window inside the media of the Islamic State," *Al-Naba' XXI*, 8 March 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://archive.org/details/bedr27>, 13.

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important components of this infrastructure were the *nuqat i'lamiyya* (literally, “media points”)—makeshift propaganda offices that were often nothing more than shipping containers equipped with projectors, printers, and plastic chairs—and al-Bayan Radio.<sup>23</sup> In this section, I explore the instrumental role these institutions had in allowing the Islamic State to market itself to the millions of Syrian and Iraqi civilians over which it ruled between 2014 and 2017.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding their rudimentary nature, media points, which were present across the Islamic State’s territories as early as spring 2015, were potent tools with which to expose civilians to the caliphate message. As well as screening its films, they served as satellite publishing houses at which propaganda was printed and circulated. For example, the organization used media points in Syria and Iraq to disseminate all 50 issues of its 12,000-

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<sup>23</sup> Islamic State, “Aspect of the work of the media point in the city of Raqqa,” *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 19 April 2017, accessed 19 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15owb>; Islamic State, “Aspect of the work of the media office in the province – the media point,” *Khayr Province Media Office*, 8 March 2017, accessed 8 March 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/149yq>; Islamic State, “Establishing a media point in the city of Tadmur,” *Homs Province Media Office*, 5 June 2015, accessed 10 April 2017 at <https://khlafabook.wordpress.com/2015/06/05/%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84/>; Islamic State, “Opening a media point in the city of Sirte,” *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 2 September 2015, accessed 10 April 2017 at <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?530075-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%AF%D8%A9/page956>; Islamic State, “A screening of *Allah and His Messenger spoke the truth* at the media point in the city of Raqqa,” *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 22 April 2017, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://store6.up-00.com/2017-04/149288054523111.jpg>.

<sup>24</sup> Eli Berman and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Why ISIL will fail on its own,” *Politico*, 29 November 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/11/why-isil-will-fail-on-its-own-213401>.

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word weekly newspaper, *al-Naba'*, in 2016.<sup>25,26</sup> It also used media points as digital distribution structures, facilities at which to burn electronic magazines onto compact discs and flash drives before giving them out to passersby free of charge.<sup>27</sup> These activities were not just limited to towns and cities; the Islamic State also rigged up vans so its propaganda could reach even the remotest areas of Iraq and Syria, a practice distinctly reminiscent of the mobile cinemas that roamed throughout rural Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>28</sup>

Intended as substitutes for conventional news outlets, the Islamic State's media points were the principal tools through which it marketed itself offline. At one and the same time, they were capable of delivering news updates on its domestic and external war effort, projecting its utopian narrative, and entrenching its existence within the local body politic. Attendance was assured both by blatant intimidation and the host population's desire to appear loyal—after all, what better way to feign support for a totalitarian insurgent group than to appear to voluntarily consume its propaganda?<sup>29</sup>

Although it was already deeply entrenched by 2015, the media point project was a relatively novel innovation.<sup>30</sup> According to a written feature

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<sup>25</sup> As of 19 December 2015, *al-Naba'* has been disseminated in electronic form, too, through the Islamic State's official propaganda disseminator, *Nashir*.

<sup>26</sup> Islamic State, "Distributing the weekly *al-Naba'* newspaper to ordinary Muslims," *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 19 November 2016, accessed 10 April 2017 at <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/57406>; Islamic State, "Distributing *al-Naba'* and video materials in south Shirqat," *Dijla Province Media Office*, 23 July 2016, accessed 10 April 2017 at <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/47966>; Islamic State, "Distributing *al-Naba'* in the city of Tal'afar," *Jazira Province Media Office*, 14 April 2017, accessed 14 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15j5i>.

<sup>27</sup> Interview between the author and activist from Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017; interview between the author and Waleed al-Fahdawi, Ramadi-based member of al-Bu Fahd tribal militia, 4 June 2017; and interview between author and Khaled al-Homsi of the Palmyra Coordination Committee, 31 May 2017.

<sup>28</sup> See for example, the final sequence of Islamic State, "Raiding the villages to spread guidance," *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 4 May 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/KyiRyY1F>; see also David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*, London: Routledge, 2002, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Interview between the author and Waleed al-Fahdawi, 4 June 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 12-13.

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in the Islamic State's newspaper, the first point was established in spring 2014 in the town of al-Bab in Aleppo province, geared towards disseminating news in an environment that was "lacking in communications mechanisms."<sup>31</sup> Its declared aim was to "present media in all of its forms to the ordinary people" of the region.<sup>32</sup> Quite literally, the propagandists intended it to be a "coupling link" between the Islamic State organization and the people over whom it ruled.<sup>33</sup> After its early successes in al-Bab, the project became "one of the rudiments of [the Islamic State's] domestic media," proliferating rapidly ahead of June 2014's caliphate declaration.<sup>34</sup>

By March 2016, the organization claimed that it had as many as 60 individual media points in Nineveh province—with 25 in the city of Mosul alone—and a further 39 in Dijla province.<sup>35</sup> In Raqqa, the symbolic seat of the caliphate, activists asserted that there were "many in the city and its environs."<sup>36</sup>

Media points did not just emerge in places that the Islamic State considered to be its heartlands. For example, soon after the Islamic State captured Palmyra in Syria and Ramadi in Iraq in 2015, it set up media points on thoroughfares in both cities.<sup>37</sup> In Palmyra, just days elapsed before Islamic State officials were broadcasting propaganda to the civilians remaining in the city.<sup>38</sup> In overtly military contexts, then, media points seemed to be a way to normalize and entrench the group's rule in areas where its power had not yet been consolidated.

Complementing the media point project was al-Bayan Radio, the Islamic State's FM station, another institution that was set to become a

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<sup>31</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 12.

<sup>32</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 12.

<sup>33</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 12.

<sup>34</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 13.

<sup>35</sup> Islamic State, "The media point," 12.

<sup>36</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Interview between author and Khaled al-Homsi, 31 May 2017; interview between author and Waleed al-Fahdawi, 4 June 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Interview between author and Khaled al-Homsi, 31 May 2017.

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critical part of the propagandists' everyday operations from 2014 onwards. Its most important product was the official daily bulletin, which provided a World War II-style overview of the previous day's military exploits and enabled the organization to tactically respond to enemy propaganda.<sup>39</sup> In some places, listening to it was optional.<sup>40</sup> In others, media officials forced al-Bayan upon the local population by playing it on media point loudspeakers for all to hear.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to overstate the importance of the radio station—by 2017, it had become a vehicle for defensive *and* offensive information operations, a way for the group to directly engage with and repudiate reality on a regular, systematic basis.<sup>42</sup>

When it comes to the infrastructure behind the Islamic State's propaganda operations, similarities between it and past totalitarians abound. Take, for instance, the Third Reich, which notoriously recognized the importance of stacking the media cards against civilians by co-opting local media structures to dictate official news. In 1930s Germany, radio sets, attendance at theaters, and tickets to cinemas were all heavily subsidized by the Nazi state, as its propaganda machine attempted to “manufacture a consensus where one did not previously exist.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, at the height of the Blitzkrieg, its military campaigns were offset with offensive radio propaganda geared toward undermining the potential for resistance in the target population.<sup>44</sup> When the Islamic State was spreading across Iraq and Syria in 2014 and 2015, it adopted a largely analogous strategy. As it

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<sup>39</sup> In a November 2015 issue of *al-Naba'*, the Islamic State published an al-Bayan Radio infographic detailing nine FM radio stations—one in Libya, four in Syria, and four in Iraq—and three operations centers—one in Syria and two in Iraq. Islamic State, “Bayan Radio Infographic,” 30 November 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://dawaalhq.com/post/33205>.

<sup>40</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>42</sup> At the time of writing, al-Bayan Radio bulletins are disseminated in Uyghur, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Russian, French, and English. In the eleventh issue of *al-Naba'*, an al-Bayan Radio infographic notes the 12 “most important programs” for Rabi' al-Awwal and Rabi' al-Akhr 1437. See Islamic State, “*al-Naba'* XI: Wait, we are also waiting,” 29 December 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://dawaalhq.com/post/34790>.

<sup>43</sup> Welch, *The Third Reich*, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Welch, *The Third Reich*, 124.

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advanced, it systematically took control of communications technology and fought ferociously to seize radio stations, from which it would broadcast news bulletins straight from the battlefield.<sup>45</sup> Evidently, both totalitarians—both the Nazi regime and the salafi-jihadist proto-state—considered media infrastructure to be a sound investment, a way to communicate ideology and construct reality on a lasting basis.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Alleged ISIS gunmen in Libya ‘seize radio station’,” *AFP*, 13 February 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/02/13/Alleged-ISIS-gunmen-in-Libya-seize-radio-station-.html>.

<sup>46</sup> In February 2015, for example, Islamic State fighters captured a public radio station in Sirte, Libya. Within hours, they were using it to transmit excerpts from speeches by Abu Muhammad al-‘Adnani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and calling upon their enemies to defect. See “Alleged ISIS gunmen in Libya ‘seize radio station’,” *AFP*.

## IV. The Medium

“Propaganda must be total. The propagandist must utilize all of the technical means at his disposal—the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing[.] There is no propaganda as long as one makes use, in sporadic fashion and at random, of a newspaper article here, a poster or a radio program there, organizes a few meetings and lectures, writes a few slogans on walls; that is not propaganda.”<sup>47</sup>

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In May 2016, the Islamic State’s media office in Aleppo province released a video entitled *Raiding the Villages to Spread Guidance*.<sup>48</sup> It presented a case study into Islamic State outreach in the region’s most remote villages, thereby providing important insight into the bureaucratic and logistical structures behind the group’s local recruitment efforts. It began with a media official claiming that there had been, in the months prior to filming, a sudden surge in new recruits to the Islamic State that was a result of two things: first, Islamic State propaganda; and, second, the campaigns of the Office of Proselytization and Mosques, one of which would be the subject of this video.

The account followed a team of recruiters as they traveled to a number of mud brick villages, where they were shown engaging in what was termed “the first stage of proselytization”—distributing leaflets throughout the villages, putting particular focus on children. Next, footage cut in showing a mosque in which dozens of prepubescent boys were

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<sup>47</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Islamic State, “Raiding the villages to spread guidance,” Aleppo Province Media Office, 4 May 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/KyiRyY1F>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for IHS Markit.

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gathered for a “primary” course. They could be seen learning the Qur’an by rote, being taught how to write, and playing educational games, before the camera cut to an interview with an official who claimed that, in the last five months alone, roughly 70,000 of these “cubs” had attended courses delivered by him and his associates.

Next, a different official was filmed speaking about the courses that were delivered specifically to women. He claimed that some 40,000 female supporters had attended them in the last few months alone, resulting in a situation in which mothers were signing their own children up to the Islamic State’s military forces, and encouraging them to volunteer for suicide operations.

On the tenth and final day of the campaign, the newly assimilated villagers were shown collectively pledging allegiance to the caliph. After the ceremony was concluded, a “*da’wa* caravan”—a colorfully decorated truck equipped with loudspeakers—was shown hosting a celebration in the village square, complete with comedy, singing, and copious amounts of boiled sweets.

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Even prior to 2014, the Islamic State had begun to adopt what has been described by Ellul as a “total” propaganda strategy.<sup>49</sup> It did not just communicate with civilians through audiovisual media published on an occasional basis. Rather, its propaganda cadres worked constantly to embed themselves and their organization within the local population, using all means of communication. Taking this into account, the group’s propaganda efforts can be divided into two broad and overlapping categories.

The first is “consumed propaganda.” This comprises all media that was watched, listened to, or read, and included the Islamic State’s documentaries, current affairs features, radio programs, photographic

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<sup>49</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 9.

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reports, newspapers, magazines, operation claims, theological literature, infographics, posters, billboards, and so on. The second category, which relied upon direct engagement, is the Islamic State's "performative propaganda." Primarily delivered by officials working in the Media Ministry, Office of Proselytization and Mosques, Education Ministry, and Hisba Police, this kind of propaganda comprised choreographed interactions between the Islamic State and its civilian population. Most of the time, performative propaganda operations occurred at public spectacles like executions and amputations, as well as town fairs, mosque sermons, and school lessons. This category also includes propaganda that was not staged as such, but spread by word of mouth—the Islamic State's equivalent of the Nazi "whispering campaigns," or *Mundpropaganda*.<sup>50</sup>

Evidently, the Islamic State recognized the power of physical presence, and that the act of media dissemination could itself become a mechanism of propaganda. With that in mind, the group ensured that its consumed propaganda was persistently iterated and reiterated in the course of its performative propaganda operations, an approach that increased both the durability and sustainability of its indoctrination efforts.

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<sup>50</sup> See Aristotle A. Kallis, *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 139-141.

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Image 1: DVDs being distributed in Tal'afar.<sup>51</sup>



Image 2: Islamic State fighters watching propaganda.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Islamic State, “Aspect of the distribution of Nineveh Province video release *The procession of light* to normal Muslims in the city of Tal’afar,” Jazira Province Media Office, 12 April 2017, accessed 12 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15fzl>.

<sup>52</sup> Islamic State, “Screening videos to those on the frontlines in the east of the province,” Raqqah Province Media Office, 4 May 2017, accessed 4 May 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/168le>.

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Image 3: Poster for documentary about Bayan Radio in Mosul.<sup>53</sup>

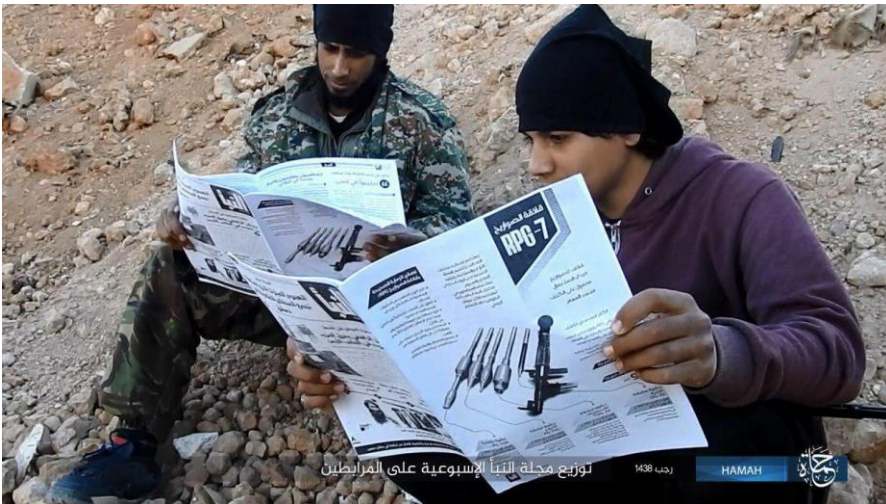


Image 4: Islamic State fighters reading the newspaper in central Syria (note infographic).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Islamic State, “Bayan Radio in Nineveh Province,” Nineveh Province Media Office, 13 April 2015, accessed 4 May 2017 at [https://archive.org/details/bayan\\_radio](https://archive.org/details/bayan_radio).

<sup>54</sup> Islamic State, “Distribution of the weekly magazine *al-Naba'* to those on the frontlines,” Hama Province Media Office, 16 April 2017, accessed 16 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15ksm>.

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Image 5: Newspaper being distributed to civilians in Tal'afar.<sup>55</sup>



Image 6: Da'wa literature being distributed in Raqqa.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Islamic State, "Distribution of the weekly newspaper *al-Naba'* in the city of Tal'afar," Jazira Province Media Office, 14 April 2017, accessed 14 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15j5i>.

<sup>56</sup> Islamic State, "The Da'wa Center—distributing *da'wa* literature to Muslims in Raqqa," Raqqa Province Media Office, 29 March 2017, accessed 29 March 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/14z67>.

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Image 7: A sermon in Mosul.<sup>57</sup>



Image 8: A billboard stipulating rules for womenswear in Damascus.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Islamic State, "Al-Sawwaf Mosque in Mosul," Nineveh Province Media Office, 21 January 2017, accessed 21 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/moswf>.

<sup>58</sup> Islamic State, "Aspect of the work of the Da'wa Office in Yarmuk Camp—preparing and setting up billboards," Damascus Province Media Office, 20 February 2017, accessed 20 February 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/15qnh>.

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Image 9: A public spectacle in Mosul.<sup>59</sup>



Image 10: A mural being painted in Tabqa.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Islamic State, “Whipping a cigarette smuggler in Mosul,” Nineveh Province Media Office, 5 February 2017, accessed 4 May 2017 at <http://store6.up-00.com/2017-02/148629006471483.jpg>.

<sup>60</sup> Screenshot from Islamic State, *Building Blocks*, Raqqa Province Media Office, 5 February 2017, accessed 4 May 2017 at [https://archive.org/details/fff0110101\\_gmail\\_LBRQ\\_201702](https://archive.org/details/fff0110101_gmail_LBRQ_201702).

## V. The Messenger

In 2016, the Islamic State released three videos that focused on the issue of information censorship in Syria and Iraq. The first, produced by Raqqa province's media office, was entitled *Destroying the Satellite Devices*.<sup>61</sup> Next was Nineveh province's *And Let the Believers Be Cautious Regarding the Prevention of the Dish and Its Destruction*.<sup>62</sup> Third was Khayr province's *Ward Yourselves and Your Families Away from Fire*.<sup>63</sup>

The three videos, which lasted between nine and thirteen minutes, closely resembled each other, with each fusing together interviews with religious policemen, media officials, and civilian supporters of the Islamic State. At the beginning of each, the propagandists alleged that the "Crusader coalition" had launched an all-out information war against Sunni Islam in general and the Islamic State in particular. They went on to explain that, because of this, satellite broadcasting—the coalition's "chief weapon" in this war—must cease immediately, and all associated technologies be destroyed.

An official in the Khayr province video was depicted reprimanding parents who permitted their children to watch satellite television, claiming that they were willfully corrupting the next generation of the Islamic State's mujahidin. Another official, this time in Raqqa province, could be viewed castigating the masses for allowing satellite dishes to distract them from the teachings of the Qur'an. Because of satellite television, he held, "corrupt

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<sup>61</sup> Islamic State, "Destroying the satellite devices," Raqqa Province Media Office, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/8tu1dBs1>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for IHS Markit.

<sup>62</sup> Islamic State, "And Let the Believers Be Cautious Regarding the Prevention of the Dish and Its Destruction," Nineveh Province Media Office, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/G3Pc0rYy>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for IHS Markit.

<sup>63</sup> Islamic State, "Protect Yourselves and Your Families from a Fire," Khayr Province Media Office, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/uWaFHbp2>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for IHS Markit.

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practices” like democracy were able to take root among Muslims. For these reasons, their destruction was a shari’a imperative.

After justifying why censorship was necessary, the propagandists went on to examine how the policy was actually being implemented. Throughout all the videos, emphasis was placed upon public consent and cooperation. Gatherings in Mosul showed civilians, young and old, shattering their satellite receivers with glee; likewise, residents of Raqqa were depicted as willing enforcers of the new laws; and supporters in Syria’s Deir ez-Zor governorate could be observed enthusiastically dismissing instruments of “Crusader” propaganda, and announcing that they preferred to consume the Islamic State’s media instead.

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As Ellul noted in 1962, for a totalitarian propaganda strategy to be truly effective, a particular set of logistical circumstances is required.<sup>64</sup> In essence, he held that the ruling elite must strive to be the sole messenger when engaging with an audience. Hence, he contended, totalitarians must exert full control—or something close to it—over the mass media.<sup>65</sup> In the age of digital communication, the totalitarian’s information monopoly cannot stop there; it must comprise all forms of new media as well.<sup>66</sup>

Given the advances in communications technology that occurred in recent years, “true monopoly is now very rare.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the Islamic State still pursued one after announcing its caliphate in 2014. Like any totalitarian movement, external channels of information running against its particular party line posed a long-term destabilizing threat. Hence, from 2014 onwards, the group set about physically removing or ideologically discrediting them. Seemingly cognizant of the fact that immediately

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<sup>64</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory* (6<sup>th</sup> edition), New York: Sage Publications, 195.

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withdrawing civilian access to the outside world would have risked irreparably harming its appeal, it opted for an incremental approach toward censorship. Between 2014 and early 2017, it worked gradually, at times imperceptibly, to inhibit access to the Internet, jam radio signals, and ban satellite dishes (which it at one point condemned as ‘*adu min al-dakhil*—“an enemy within”).<sup>68</sup>

To be sure, it would be wrong to overstate the extent of the Islamic State’s censorship program; even at its height, it was only ever a partial success. In 2017, activists living in Raqqa reported to the author that the Islamic State had legislatively forbidden use of the Internet soon after its capture of the city, but that enforcing the ban was easier said than done and, for that reason, it had out of necessity been more flexible than its laws suggested.<sup>69</sup> That being said, the activists also noted that, while it may have

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<sup>68</sup> On 2 December 2015, the Islamic State’s Department of Hisba released a statement banning satellite TV transmitters due to their insidious spreading of “deceit, lies, and defamation.” By the end of the month, this statement had been officially translated into English and Farsi. In the weeks that followed, *al-Naba’* featured an infographic detailing the seven central evils of satellite transmission, which was subsequently translated into English. Islamic State, “The banning of satellite receivers,” Department of Hisba, 6 December 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/278488>; Islamic State, “The banning of satellite TV receivers,” Diwan al-Hisbah, 30 December 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2016/1/19/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1>; Islamic State, “*al-Naba’* XI: Wait, we are also waiting,” 29 December 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://archive.org/details/nbaa11>; Islamic State, “Purifying the homes of the Muslims from satellite dish receivers,” Hisba Committee, 17 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://www.anapress.net/ar/articles/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1/217792837947810/-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A...-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1>

<sup>69</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

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been relatively easy to access the Internet in early 2014, “it became harder to do so in 2015, and even harder in 2016 and 2017.”<sup>70,71</sup> Indeed, by early 2017, Raqqa’s once myriad Internet cafes had been whittled down to just a handful, each of which was run by Islamic State supporters who recorded customers’ names and facilitated regular police inspections.<sup>72</sup>

The group’s attempts to crack down on satellite television followed a similar trajectory. After months of legal ambiguity on the matter, it began to take a more proactive stance towards the end of 2015, eventually threatening citizens with “severe punishment” if they were caught using satellite dishes.<sup>73</sup> So, once again, while its stated position was long clear, it was quite some time before the organization actually began implementing it.<sup>74</sup>

In Mosul, the situation was similar, though initially less advanced. According to its residents, public Internet cafes faced similar regulations to those implemented in Raqqa, but private Internet usage remained fairly popular.<sup>75</sup> And, again like in Raqqa, measures taken against the use of satellite dishes were piecemeal until the summer of 2016, with many citizens continuing to watch television news surreptitiously in spite of the Islamic State’s efforts to stop them.<sup>76</sup> Notwithstanding this reluctance to bend to the group’s totalitarian will, satellite broadcasting and Internet

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<sup>70</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>71</sup> As an aside, it is worth noting that private Internet access only continued as it did throughout this period because the citizens of Raqqa had already spent years circumventing Assad regime censorship, something that gave rise to an informal network of satellite-powered Wi-Fi that not even the Islamic State could shut down. Michael Weiss, “ISIS’s jihad against WiFi,” *The Daily Beast*, 21 July 2015, accessed 25 May 2017 at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/21/isis-s-jihad-against-wifi.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017.

<sup>74</sup> As signified by the release of Islamic State, “Destroying the satellite devices,” Raqqa Province Media Office, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/8tu1dBs1>.

<sup>75</sup> Heather Murdock, “Staying online in dangerous times,” VOA News, 22 January 2017, accessed 27 June 2017 at <https://projects.voanews.com/mosul/profile/59221-staying-online-in-dangerous-times>.

<sup>76</sup> “Satellite dishes reconnect post-IS Mosul to world,” AFP, 20 April 2017, accessed 27 June 2017 at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/04/iraq-conflict-jihadists-television.html>.

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access were severely hampered over the years, as the Islamic State sought to isolate the civilian population from the rest of the world.<sup>77</sup>

In Raqqa and Mosul, it seemed that the group was relatively cautious, intent on preserving the fragile acquiescence of the local population. The same cannot be said of towns and cities that were of lesser strategic value to it, especially those that were seized after protracted military campaigns. In Palmyra, for example, the Islamic State circumvented any pretense of censorship gradualism and enforced a de facto ban on the Internet by refusing to repair any of the cyber infrastructure that had been so crippled during its seizure of the city in May 2015.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, in Ramadi, it banned the Internet by the same means, though it did eventually permit some limited access alongside mobile telephony, provided it took place in custom-built, Islamic State-administered “halls.”<sup>79</sup> In these facilities, the activities of attendees were carefully monitored, with screens being checked as often as every five minutes.<sup>80</sup>

As a cumulative result of these policies, credible news that ran contrary to the Islamic State’s propaganda was structurally challenged in the group’s heartlands. Whether in Iraq or Syria, verifiable reports about the coalition’s efforts were scarce, and the tidbits that did get past the caliphate firewall were often obscured by Islamic State disinformation. Conspiracy theories ran amok, and confusion as to the coalition's real aims blossomed.<sup>81</sup> Crucially, too, the Islamic State’s official propaganda narrative emerged as the only constant, a point that is revisited in the next section.

To summarize, the Islamic State benefitted from its attempted communications monopoly in three main ways: first, it enabled the group

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<sup>77</sup> Similar to in Raqqa, the Islamic State’s ramped up anti-satellite television measures were signified by the release of the Islamic State, “And Let the Believers Be Cautious Regarding the Prevention of the Dish and Its Destruction,” Nineveh Province Media Office, 31 May 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/G3Pc0rYy>.

<sup>78</sup> Interview between author and Khaled al-Homsi, 31 May 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Interview between the author and Waleed al-Fahdawi, 4 June 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Interview between the author and Waleed al-Fahdawi, 4 June 2017.

<sup>81</sup> “Satellite dishes reconnect post-IS Mosul to world,” AFP, 20 April 2017, accessed 27 June 2017 at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/04/iraq-conflict-jihadists-television.html>.

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to mitigate operational risks presented by the almost ubiquitous mobile phone cameras that were present across its heartlands (photographs could be taken, but not easily uploaded);<sup>82</sup> second, it allowed the Islamic State's central media foundations to narrowly dictate their propaganda line;<sup>83</sup> third, and most important in this context, it limited the access that ordinary civilians had to the outside world. While many fighters were ideologically committed to pursuing the goals of the Islamic State, the majority of people ruled by it in Syria and Iraq were not, and only lived in the caliphate because they had no better alternative.<sup>84</sup> In this sense, they posed a critical, but latent, security risk to the caliphate, which seemingly determined that if it limited the civilian population's ability to access outside channels of information, any rebellious spirit would be derailed almost as soon as it emerged. Particularly in places like Mosul and Raqqa, this approach seemed to pay off—indeed, in spite of persistent coalition backing and communiqués on the matter, there was no mass uprising in either city, even when the Islamic State's position was at its most perilous.<sup>85</sup>

At this stage, it serves to return to the comparison with the Third Reich. Like the Islamic State, the Nazi regime was notoriously “afraid of enemy propaganda” and went to great lengths to undermine and restrict access to channels of information that ran against, or could be seen to run

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<sup>82</sup> As was widely publicized by the coalition in June 2015, photographs could be used against the group in airstrike planning. Louisa Loveluck, “‘Moron’ militant’s selfie leads to US air raid on Isis unit,” *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11652942/Moron-militants-selfie-leads-to-US-air-raid-on-Isil-unit.html>. As journalists moved into territories seized from the group in 2017, it soon became clear that at least some Islamic State fighters were keen amateur photographers. See, for example, Quentin Somerville and Riam Dalati, “The secret lives of young IS fighters,” *BBC News*, 23 June 2017, accessed 25 September 2017 at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/is\\_fighters](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/is_fighters).

<sup>83</sup> Al-Masri, *Principles*, trans. by al-Tamimi.

<sup>84</sup> Berman and Shapiro, “Why ISIL will fail on its own.”

<sup>85</sup> Martin Chulov, “Anti-ISIS resistance group plans to rise up in Mosul, say residents,” *The Guardian*, 19 October 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/19/anti-isis-resistance-group-plans-rise-up-mosul-iraq>.

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against, the party line.<sup>86</sup> Concurrently, it coordinated and centralized official information as much as possible in order to maximize narrative coherence.<sup>87</sup> After it seized Mosul in 2014, the Islamic State adopted a similar approach, albeit one that was inhibited by the situational exigencies it faced. It worked assiduously to disrupt and discredit non-Islamic State information flows, attempting to force new subjects—whether they were supporters or adversaries—to defer to its version of events alone. Notably, its approach was more gradualist in places where its presence was based more upon consent than coercion. In any case, there is little doubt about what the Islamic State was pursuing through the activities outlined above: its media strategists wanted to complement their propaganda infrastructure with a watertight information monopoly.

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<sup>86</sup> Leonard W. Doob, "Goebbels' principles of propaganda," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (1950), 429.

<sup>87</sup> Doob, "Goebbels' principles of propaganda," 430.

## VI. The Message

In early 2017, the Islamic State released a video entitled *Building Blocks*.<sup>88</sup> Produced and disseminated by Raqqa province's media office, the documentary-style film was one of the most fine-tuned manifestations of the Islamic State's utopia narrative to date. After opening with a brief montage of military propaganda—Islamic State soldiers preparing their weapons before operations and firing off mortars into the distance—the video changed tack, shifting its focus away from the martial Islamic State toward the civilian Islamic State. Vivid scenes of sunsets, playgrounds, fishing, and markets cut across the screen, as the narrator spoke of the twin pillars of the Islamic State caliphate—*shura* (consultation) and *shari'a* (law)—before he set out the roles of its various ministries, which covered all aspects of life in the caliphate, whether they were “administrative, judicial, security-related, services-related, religious, or health-related.”

The video went on to showcase the various “building blocks” of caliphal governance in Raqqa. First, there was the Office of Proselytization and Mosques; next was the Education Office, followed by the Traffic Police, Social Welfare Committee, Health Ministry, Emergency Services Office, Street Repair Committee, Bureau for Electricity and Water, Municipal Services, Media Centers, Inspections Office, Transport Department, and Bakeries Administration.

The “important work” of each of these departments was then exhibited in a series of video clips depicting everything from supermarket inspections to fire trucks, traffic police, and schooling. One of the civilian workers interviewed during this vignette announced that, “by the will of God, job opportunities have blossomed, the economy has boomed, and trade has increased.”

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<sup>88</sup> Islamic State, “Building blocks,” Raqqa Province Media Office, 5 February 2017, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/63614>. The author prepared a detailed analysis of this video for IHS Markit.

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The remainder of the video flitted between mosque seminars, roads, water purification stations, and power plants. As the propagandists meandered between these various walks of Islamic State life, they interviewed a series of individuals who alleged that they were elated at their lives in the caliphate, which were, they contended, on the whole more successful and more rewarding than they had been under the Assad regime. One electricity engineer even said: “I worked for 12 years for the regime and, thanks be to God, now I am an employee of the Islamic State. Thanks be to God, the difference is big, both professionally and personally. Now, you get to work with others, other Muslim brothers. Thanks be to God, it’s a big, big difference.”

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While the prevailing media narrative regarding the Islamic State’s message has tended to focus on its brutality, in reality, the organization’s propaganda was always varied, incorporating a complex thematic cocktail of positivity and negativity. Reflecting their totalitarian inclinations, al-Baghdadi’s propagandists worked to refract as many aspects of existence through their caliphal lens as possible. When considered in aggregate, the picture they painted was a complicated fusion of ideas that loosely revolved around three nebulous and non-discrete themes: victimhood, warfare, and utopianism.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps the most potent aspect of Islamic State media were its vivid representations of millenarian utopia—the photographic essays and videos that showed everything from farms and markets to street cleaners and

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<sup>89</sup> See Charlie Winter, “The virtual caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy,” Quilliam, July 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>; and Charlie Winter, “Documenting the virtual caliphate,” Quilliam, October 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://truevisiontv.com/uploads/websites/39/wysiwyg/doctors/jihad/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>.

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maternity wards.<sup>90</sup> While this kind of propaganda almost always went unnoticed in mainstream news coverage, it was instrumental to the Islamic State's appeal, contributing as it did to an unparalleled picture of euphoric, efficient, and functioning "Islamic" rule. It was this offer of a seemingly viable, certainly radical alternative to the status quo that gave the group the edge over its salafi-jihadist rivals, who, lest it be forgotten, were competing for the same scarce resources—namely, recruits and donors.

That being said, it is crucial to recognize that the Islamic State's propaganda was never just geared toward recruiting new members and attracting donors. Rather, it was just as much—if not more—produced in order to sustain the morale of current supporters and convince them that they remained on the right path. To this end, the propagandists used audiovisual media to bolster the perception that their "state" was as contiguous as it was transnational. They constructed an alternate propagandistic reality, one that was conveyed by a persistent stream of multimedia content—at its height, some 35 individual products each day—drawn from a range of locations and focusing on multiple themes.<sup>91</sup> While the scope of its propaganda declined from 2015 onwards, even at its lowest ebb the group was circulating about 20 unique propaganda products each day: in early 2017, for example, it disseminated no fewer than 570 individual pieces of propaganda in a single month.<sup>92</sup>

On any given day—in this case, 12 January 2017—civilians in the caliphate would be force-fed images of anything from theology competitions, industrial pipe factories, and sheep markets to military

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<sup>90</sup> Islamic State, "A Friday market in the village of al-'Aluliyya," Jazira Province Media Office, 28 April 2017, accessed 28 April 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/1618y>; Islamic State, "Agricultural work in the countryside of the province," Raqqa Province Media Office, 18 March 2017, accessed 18 March 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/14171>; Islamic State, "Aspect of the work of the Services Center," Khayr Province Media Office, 18 February 2017, accessed 18 February 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/13m7n>; and Islamic State, "ISHS: Healthcare services," Raqqa Province Media Office, 24 April 2015, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/ZloTFd6Y>.

<sup>91</sup> Winter, "Documenting the virtual 'caliphate.'"

<sup>92</sup> Charlie Winter, "The ISIS propaganda decline," *ICSR Insight*, 23 March 2017, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://icsr.info/2017/03/icsr-insight-isis-propaganda-decline/>.

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operations and bomb sites—and that is not to mention the content emerging from overseas affiliates.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, even in early 2017 after many of its global branches had become dormant, depictions of snowy mountains in Afghanistan, rocket fire in Yemen, ambushes in Nigeria, and intelligence operations in Egypt were almost as ubiquitous as the above.<sup>94</sup>

As its territorial integrity crumbled across 2016 and 2017, the Islamic State's propagandistic claims became much more audacious. Its media officials increasingly indulged in military denialism while celebrating their organization's overseas terrorist "victories" and bundling adversaries together, regardless of whether they were allies or enemies of each other.<sup>95</sup> However, this did not necessarily mean that their efforts were less effective. Regardless of the credulity of the Islamic State narrative, true believers continued to embrace it, just as adversaries appeared to remain inhibited by it. In this sense, the overarching message of the Islamic State's

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<sup>93</sup> An activist in Raqqa reported to the author that "the Islamic State broadcast news and videos from all of its provinces and not just Raqqa." Interview between author and Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, 15 June 2017. See also, Islamic State, "Aspect of the Quran memorization sessions in Tabqa," Raqqa Province Media Office, 12 January 2017, accessed 12 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/12cbs>; Islamic State, "The production of water pipes in the city of al-Bu Kamal," Euphrates Province Media Office, 12 January 2017, accessed 12 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/kertum2>; Islamic State, "Thursday market in the town of Ma'dan to the south of the province," Raqqa Province Media Office, 12 January 2017, accessed 12 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/12cmu>; Islamic State, "Garrisons on the edges of the village of Tal al-Dhahab to the west of Hawija," Kirkuk Province Media Office, 12 January 2017, accessed 12 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/12cbf>; and Islamic State, "Deaths and damage from an American air raid yesterday in New Mosul," A'maq News Agency, 12 January 2017, <http://bit.ly/2joepoE>. See also Charlie Winter and Colin Clarke, "Is ISIS breaking apart?," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2017, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-01-31/isis-breaking-apart>.

<sup>94</sup> Islamic State, "The district of Mamand Achin in Nangarhar," Khurasan Province Media Office, 23 January 2017, accessed 23 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/12pob>; Islamic State, "Targeting Huthi positions with B10 weapons systems in Hama Laqah in Fayqa," Baydha Province Media Office, 6 January 2017, accessed 6 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/1258q>; Islamic State, "The progress of battles in Yubiyya district," West Africa Province Media Office, 30 January 2017, accessed 30 January 2017 at <https://justpaste.it/12xw5>; and Islamic State, "Aspect of the work of the Security Centre in Sinai Province," Sinai Province Media Office, 1 April 2017, accessed 1 April at <https://justpaste.it/152wk>.

<sup>95</sup> Douglas A. Ollivant, "ISIS is losing the war," CNN, 12 March 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/08/opinions/isis-is-losing-the-war-opinion-ollivant/>; and Islamic State, "The global alliance scrutinized and afflicted," Raqqa Province Media Office, 2 December 2014, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/10K60v1H>.

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propaganda was seemingly retarding the free formation of public opinion, a phenomenon discussed at length by Ellul, whose theory of propaganda—discussed below—once again presents a useful aid to evaluate the group's information strategy.<sup>96</sup>

For the most part, the Islamic State's media output was what Ellul would have regarded as “integrative” and “strategic”—that is, delivered with a long-term socializing intent in mind—not “agitative” and “tactical”—that is, disseminated with a view to opposing the status quo and instigating direct action.<sup>97</sup> To a large extent, it appears that it was circulated in Syria and Iraq with the intent of stopping the population from differentiating between the Islamic State's constructed reality and fact.<sup>98</sup> By doing this, the propagandists could work to erase the distinction between the individual and the mass and hobble their current and future ability to engage—or even consider engaging—in dissent. On the one hand, terror could be directed at the “potential enemy” as much as at the overt rebel and, on the other, narrative believability could be cast aside entirely, as the propagandists “mocked those under [their] control” by circulating exaggerated claims of economic plenty, battlefield success, and, in the Islamic State's case at least, religious perfection.<sup>99</sup>

In this sense, the world constructed in Islamic State propaganda was not simply used to convince subjects that the organization was on the right path—it was equally a coercive political weapon. Besides straightforward recruitment, it was leveraged in order to buoy morale among supporters and entrench despair in the hearts of potential dissenters: civilian supporters were able to distract themselves from the iniquities of caliphal rule by looking on at the seemingly stable, fruitful lives of their brethren elsewhere; soldiers losing ground on one front could find inspiration from victories

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<sup>96</sup> See Winter, “The virtual caliphate.”

<sup>97</sup> For more on the application of Ellul's theory of propaganda in the context of Islamic State media, see Winter, “The virtual caliphate.” For further context, see also “Categories of propaganda” in Ellul, *Propaganda*, 61.

<sup>98</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 185.

<sup>99</sup> Aviezer Tucker, *The Legacies of Totalitarianism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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allegedly won hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away; and rebels were deterred by gruesome films in which like-minded associates were burned alive, beheaded, and drowned.<sup>100</sup>

The Islamic State's media strategists shared much with Hitler's propagandists when it came to the essence of the stories they told. Indeed, both were "remarkably ambitious" when it came to constructing reality.<sup>101</sup> In the Nazi instance, domestic propaganda was used to portray daily life as a utopian but sober realization of communal will, the expression of an industrious national community that only grew in defiance and resolve, even as the war progressed and Nazi prospects of global hegemony diminished.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, the Islamic State leveraged information in Iraq and Syria to maintain the morale of military and civilian supporters and, to adversaries with whom such utopian claims did not resonate, used it to brand itself as unstoppable, and ruthlessly efficient.<sup>103</sup>

However, there was one notable distinction: unlike the Nazis, who tended to spread terror by rumor, the Islamic State wore brutality on its sleeve.<sup>104</sup> It is worth ruminating on this because, over the course of the last century, most totalitarian regimes relied on the rumor mill to keep up their climate of fear, occasionally executing dissidents in public in order to

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<sup>100</sup> Islamic State, "You must fight them O muwahhid," Raqqa Province Media Office, 26 November 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://heavy.com/news/2016/11/new-isis-islamic-state-amaq-news-video-you-must-fight-them-o-muwahhid-english-execution-terrorism-knife-attack-slaughtering-tutorial-video-raqqa-syria-uncensored-download-mp4/>; Islamic State, "Making of ilusion [sic]," Khayr Province Media Office, 12 September 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <http://heavy.com/news/2016/09/new-isis-islamic-state-amaq-news-video-the-making-of-illusion-iraqi-army-soldiers-shia-shiite-eid-al-adha-meat-hook-execution-throat-slitting-full-uncensored-youtube-video-download-mp4/>; and Islamic State, "But if you return, we will return III," Nineveh Province Media Office, 19 November 2016, accessed 3 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/5JUNCbOj>.

<sup>101</sup> Welch, "Volksgemeinschaft," 213.

<sup>102</sup> Welch, *The Third Reich*, 135; Speier, "Decline," 358; and Jay Gonen, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism*, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2003, 54.

<sup>103</sup> Welch, "Volksgemeinschaft," 217. For more on Nazi propaganda that was directed toward adversaries, see Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939-1945: Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany*, London: Faber and Faber, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Julius Yourman, "Propaganda techniques within Nazi Germany," *The Journal of Education Sociology* 13 (1939), 156; and Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

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underline it—propaganda was rarely used to overtly terrorize the masses with threats of violence.<sup>105</sup> In the Islamic State context, though, extreme violence was something that the propagandists reveled in. Indeed, besides the executions and amputations that were frequently staged in town squares across its heartlands, the organization produced countless videos in which prisoners of war and civilian hostages alleged to have been spies were flamboyantly put to death—beheaded, exploded, drowned, burned, or dismembered.<sup>106</sup>

Upon reflection, it seems that the Islamic State might have deemed brutality, visualized with Hollywood-esque attention to detail, to be a way to politically outmaneuver its rivals. As Hannah Arendt noted in 1970, civil violence occurs most when political actors want to demonstrate power.<sup>107</sup> It follows that, if a given political actor needed to compensate for structural disadvantages—namely, if it was an insurgent group operating in a highly contested theater—violent propaganda could be used to amplify this demonstration of power. In the Islamic State's case, it apparently determined that encouraging discrete, dispersed pockets of civilians to attend executions and amputations, while a start, did not have sufficient impact. The group appeared to have calculated that, in order to better sustain the proto-state project, its coercive capabilities needed not only to be implied but advertised, too. Thus, it used propaganda to magnify and multiply the meting out of capital punishments, be it to “criminals” or

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<sup>105</sup> As noted in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966; see also Fyodor Vasilevich Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir*, translated by Deborah Kaple, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; and Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>106</sup> Islamic State, “Story of slaughter,” Euphrates Province Media Office, 28 June 2016, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/1yeG306X>; Islamic State, “Killing the apostates in revenge for the monotheists II,” Khurasan Province Media Office, 9 August 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/2cz8RUw1>; Islamic State, “The procession of light,” Nineveh Province Media Office, 3 January 2017, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/L1IVFht3>; Islamic State, “Healing of the believers” chests,” Furqan Foundation, 3 February 2017, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://archive.org/download/AlFurqaanMediaHealingTheBelieversChests>; and Islamic State, “Deterring the spies I,” Dijla Province Media Office, 16 June 2015, accessed 5 May 2017 at <https://videopress.com/v/zorr50Lu>.

<sup>107</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970, 56.

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“traitors.” In sum, the ability to mass-mediate acts of brutality was just as instrumental to the Islamic State as the acts of brutality themselves.

## VII. Conclusion

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State became the new *bête noire* of salafi-jihadist terrorism. In a matter of weeks, it went from being a relatively unknown entity to one that was perpetually in the headlines, globally notorious for the extent of its military might and brutality. While this was in no small part due to its capture of large swaths of Iraq and Syria—most notably the city of Mosul—the role of online propaganda in projecting and amplifying its menace was undeniable. For that reason, in the immediate aftermath of its advances, the group's online media operations were scrutinized by governments, academics, and journalists alike. However, this scrutiny, while prudent, was too myopic, and ended up distracting observers from what was happening in the caliphate heartlands, where, in a manner distinctly reminiscent of some twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, the Islamic State was weaponizing information offline just as enthusiastically as it was online. As this case study has demonstrated, media dissemination and censorship were being manipulated in tandem by the group, complemented by a carefully constructed portrayal of caliphate “reality.”

Clearly, the Islamic State's media strategists were aware of the power of information. While they were not in a position to exert the level of control that, say, the Nazis enjoyed in Germany prior to and during World War II, they did strive towards an information monopoly of which Hitler would have been proud. Operating gradually in order to avoid alienating the local population, they developed a sophisticated and resilient media delivery infrastructure in places where it was lacking; produced a constant, multimedia flood of propaganda; disabled channels through which adversaries could communicate with the masses; and concocted their own all-encompassing version of existence. Through the lens of their totalitarian information operations, the Islamic State caliphate was framed as all-powerful: uncontested, inevitable, and unassailable.

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In light of this, there is a distinct possibility that the greatest challenge to emerge from the Islamic State's propaganda operations in recent years may only become apparent in the long term. Without comprehensive survey data from inside the caliphate heartlands of Iraq and Syria, it is not possible to gauge the extent to which the Islamic State was able to permanently alter public opinion in the region on a mass scale. However, we can be confident that the cumulative effect of years of indoctrination operations will not simply evaporate, even if the Islamic State, as an overt organization, eventually disintegrates. Ideas, unlike armies, cannot be beaten with bullets, and there can thus be little doubt that the after-effects of the group's carefully systematized strategic communication endeavors will long outlive its military might.

It therefore serves to think about what could follow the Islamic State's eventual defeat—even if, at the time of writing in Spring 2017, it is still a long way off.<sup>108</sup> Without effective counter-ideological measures, the prospects of an Islamic State resurgence will be extremely high. Even if the organization ceases to control territory, its supporters could go on to act as incubators for the caliphate idea and facilitate its re-emergence as soon as conditions allow. Lest it be forgotten, the group has risen from the ashes of defeat once before.<sup>109</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this study to propose a comprehensive strategy for mitigating this threat, but there are multiple historic and contemporary contexts from which practitioners—both policy makers and warfighters—could learn. Take, for example, Germany, which at the end of World War II was home to millions of Nazi Party members. In an effort to lessen the long-term destabilizing threat they presented in the years that followed the Third Reich's demise, a far-reaching set of denazification

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<sup>108</sup> While the group lost a number of key strongholds as of the time of writing in 2017—including the cities of Mosul and Tal'afar in Iraq—it remained a deeply entrenched force in eastern Syria, one that would not easily be dislodged.

<sup>109</sup> Craig Whiteside, "War, interrupted, part I: The roots of the jihadist resurgence in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, 5 November 2014, accessed 5 June 2017 at <https://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/>.

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policies was implemented by the Allies. For the most part, they were built upon foundations of collective guilt and were thus deeply unpopular with the German people.<sup>110</sup> For that reason among others, many of the most sophisticated initiatives were largely ineffectual. With this in mind, Allied denazification may be more fruitful as an example of what *not* to do, rather than serve as a prototype for what works. However, even if these policies were often counterintuitive, stabilization-focused practitioners should still examine the post-war German context, for it serves as one of just a few examples in history of post-totalitarian mass de-indoctrination.

It would also be prudent to examine successful cases of post-war reconciliation in Africa, particularly those that came in the aftermath of conflicts involving cultic fighting groups and heavily indoctrinated child soldiers. After all, while the Islamic State's salafi-jihadist ideology hardly compares with that of groups like Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, the way that both use pseudo-religious beliefs and millenarian principles to coerce support and maintain adherence is at times strikingly similar.<sup>111</sup>

In any case, moving forward, those engaging in stabilization and deradicalization in post-Islamic State Iraq and Syria will be entering into largely uncharted territory—and, for that reason, it is crucial that they learn as much as possible from history. This is all the more important given that stabilization models developed for the post-Islamic State context will increasingly be required in other scenarios. After all, while the Islamic State may currently be the most notorious, it is not the only transnational salafi-jihadist group to be in control of large territories—far from it. One only needs look to Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, and Syria to find other examples of where comprehensive post-conflict counter-indoctrination strategies could well be required in years to come.

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<sup>110</sup> Brian Puaca, *Learning Democracy: Education Reform in West Germany, 1945-1965*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2009, 34.

<sup>111</sup> Eleanor Beevor, "Coercive radicalization: Charismatic authority and the internal strategies of ISIS and the Lord's Resistance Army," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (2017), 496-521.

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### Discussion Questions

1. Why should we pay attention to this old-fashioned form of indoctrination when the issue of online propaganda and recruitment is in the headlines?
2. How does in-theater indoctrination differ in terms of target audience, reach, and impact compared on online indoctrination? In particular, which audiences does offline strategic communication target?
3. What are other effective methods of in-theater indoctrination and why would groups chose to use them?
4. What is the relationship between in-theater and online indoctrination, and why would armed groups devote resources to one versus the other? How do external terrorism attacks—Propaganda of the Deed—figure in this dynamic?
5. What internal and external skills and circumstances allowed the Islamic State to operate with this degree of latitude? Were those unique to that organization?
6. What outward evidence suggests that this systematic propaganda machine is being used?
7. What are the limitations of studying propaganda by using propaganda? What issues arise from working with the source materials to which we have access?
8. How can a systematic internal propaganda machine be organized?
9. How can a systematic internal propaganda system be disrupted?

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10. How did the Islamic State adapt to disruption and resistance?
11. What are the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the system or underlying premises? What are the limitations of this system, and how can they be exploited?
12. Given the evidence in this case study, how embedded is the Islamic State ideology in the areas where Islamic State occupied? Will their ideas simply wash away, or are there deep seams of indoctrinated underground cadres? Can we know?
13. Has the Islamic State changed the perceptions of more than just “true believers” in its ranks? Does this bode ill for the region and elsewhere? What local, regional, and international implications does this have for the U.S.?
14. Under what circumstances and with what adaptations could this model be replicated by the Islamic State in another area? Are any other Salaafi-jihadist groups using propaganda in a similar manner? (i.e., AQAP, AQIM, Al-Shabab?)
15. At the operational level, what short- and long-term implications does this have for intervention in areas held or once held by the Islamic State?
16. At the strategic and international level, what short- and long-term implications does this have for intervention in areas held or once held by the Islamic State?

