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Jun 26, 2018 by **Madison Jones McAleese**

Part II: ISIL's Religious Soft Power: Digital Narratives ^[1]

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) publishers don't stop at high-quality magazines and infographics (translated into multiple languages); they leverage multimedia to disseminate their interpretation of theological themes.

The group's videos are laden with references to Allah and verses from the Qur'an, such as: "Oh you who believe, answer the call of Allah and his messenger when he calls you, to what gives you life...what gives you life is jihad."

This verse itself is problematic when reading from a true contextual standpoint. ISIL and other terrorist organizations have taken the word "jihad" to mean holy war, when in reality, it simply refers to "struggle," often an internal spiritual struggle. It does not inherently represent violence.

But in addition to the theological verbiage, the group also uses music in the background to further the religious tone. The music they use are called nasheeds, which are types of hymns which have been used by terrorists for over 40 years.

But what about the delivery of information?

The topic of social media always accompanies discussions of ISIL recruitment. Social media platforms are the prime delivery system for recruitment content where users can share the magazines, videos, press releases, etc., in addition to religious content like lunar prayer calendars and hadiths. When it comes to messaging, ISIL "mastered this lesson and has successfully promoted its caliphate vision to a mass audience—something that al Qaeda always struggled to do," according to Green and Proctor.

A New York Times article written by Rukmini Callimachi (who hosts the podcast "Caliphate") features a 23-year-old woman who was recruited by ISIL. She is an example of the religious aspects of recruitment. Her recruiter instructed her to start focusing on Islamic rituals, and even asked her to download the Islamic Hub app to be sent daily hadiths. The young woman, who was previously a devout Christian, was wrestling with theological ideas when her recruiter told her, "Islam is the correction of Christianity."

They would later send her a Qur'an and study guides, books on Islam, a prayer rug, and head scarves. While it is clear this young woman was a target because of her search for identity, community and a place to fit in, it is impossible to argue against the deep theological roots behind the message.

So where do we go from here? How do we work to restore tolerance for a faith which almost 2 billion people around the world believe in, while fighting extremism and the perversion of the religion's core concepts?

The CSIS report points to the necessity of providing a solid counter-narrative, as opposed to the reactionary work the West has grown accustomed to doing, such as removing Twitter accounts. The report highlights a successful U.S. State Department program in Nigeria which facilitated the creation of a radio program that countered Boko Haram's messaging by providing alternative, local narratives. The State Department has the ability to work in the countering violent extremism field, but it's a question of whether they have enough resources, or are using all the resources available to them. Programs like the radio program in Nigeria work, but what about countering extremism on a more global scale?

This is where the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) might fit in. The center, which was created in 2016, was originally tasked with "coordinating U.S. counterterrorism messaging to foreign audiences." But recently it has struggled to find its footing. Its new focus is now on countering disinformation and seems to have developed a focus away from traditional counterterrorism messaging, with most of its funding allocated to Russian interference rather than ISIL propaganda.

But just because ISIL is losing territory does not mean their work is done. Just because they may have fewer active Twitter accounts does not mean they have stopped infiltrating digital channels. In fact, researcher Ali Fisher believes "the impression of decline in the use of Twitter may also occur because researchers are less successful at locating the content on Twitter than they once were." The fight is far from over, as we can see from the terrorist

attacks in Indonesia. The organization is still incredibly active online. The work of the Global Engagement Center is just as important now as ever before.

We must promote accurate interpretations of the text—and of all religious text for that matter, regardless of religion—and encourage voices who seek to achieve the very thing every major world religion teaches: peace and love.

One interesting point to note is that their work in content production focuses on disseminating “factual content about terrorist organizations into the information space to counter recruitment and radicalization to violence. They also allow us to develop and disseminate messaging on effective themes, such as “exposing ISIL’s financial and governance failures; its violence against women, children and religious minorities; and its ongoing territorial losses,” according to the Global Engagement Center website.

Unfortunately, most of these themes don’t seem to reach the heart of the problem. It is clear to most people that ISIL engages in violence, so spending time sharing messaging around that theme seems imprudent. Instead, perhaps the GEC should focus on highlighting moderate voices who will clarify the true meaning behind the Qur’anic verses and Hadiths that ISIL has so often distorted. Incorporating religion into counter-messaging is necessary. Ignoring the issue will only promote continued Islamophobia around the world.

We must promote accurate interpretations of the text—and of all religious text for that matter, regardless of religion—and encourage voices who seek to achieve the very thing every major world religion teaches: peace and love. It is only then that we might truly see change.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This is Part II of a two-part series on the religious soft power of ISIL. This piece originally appeared in full on the [Pacific Council on International Policy's website](#).
