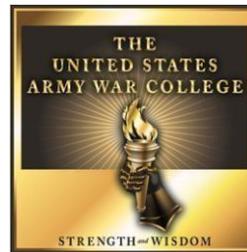


Understanding Syria Through the Islamic State's Eyes: Implications for America

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Understanding Syria Through the Islamic State's Eyes: Implications for America

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Abstract

This strategy research project examines the relationship between the rhetoric of the Islamic State and their actions on the ground. This research effort aims to examine how the Islamic State's framing of its own role in the struggle for Syria explains the group's actions, provides insights on what to expect in the future, and analyzes areas of strategic vulnerability. The paper focuses on provincial Twitter posts from January 2016, drawing out the following key themes of the Islamic State's narrative: battling God's enemies, military strength, piety, and the caliphate as a prosperous place. Finally, the paper discusses implications for U.S. policy: Namely, that the United States urgently needs a robust information campaign, that it must address the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict that will impact regional dynamics for decades, and that any strategy must be informed by the deeply religious appeal and claims of the Islamic State.

Understanding Syria Through the Islamic State's Eyes: Implications for America

It is in psychological terms, though, that IS [the Islamic State] has truly transformed the state of play... So far, most of our attempts to meaningfully mitigate IS's ability to globally engage have been left floundering.

—Charlie Winter¹

In 2014 President Obama referred to the Islamic State as a “JV Team.”² The terror group would go on to take over large portions of Iraq and Syria, establish networks throughout the Middle East, and conduct attacks in a dozen countries. President Obama's comment signaled the administrations misreading of the Islamic State, and the profound gap in understanding of what the Islamic State represents and how they think persists. Despite 19 months of airstrikes against the Islamic State, their ability to threaten the United States and its allies has only grown, as evidenced by the Paris, San Bernardino, and Brussels attacks. The U.S. approach has been informed more by its own political culture than by a deep understanding of the Islamic State. The White House remains committed to avoiding another Middle East ground war, while U.S. media has focused on the Islamic State's brutality and the refugee crisis.³ Understanding how the Islamic State “thinks” should be of increasing importance to U.S. decision-makers, as efforts to confront this rising, global menace continue to fall short.

The Islamic State is unique as a terror-organization. It has State-like characteristics and behavior, but lacks aspirations to join the community of nations. As a self-proclaimed caliphate with control over significant territory, the Islamic State makes policy decisions regarding internal governance as well as calculations related to its foreign affairs. Understanding how the Islamic State *thinks* about its conflict within Syria

could help explain how it makes decisions, ultimately informing U.S. policymakers on how to better mitigate the threat of the Islamic State.

Deciphering how the Islamic State “thinks,” however, is problematic. While the Islamic State has produced substantial information about their radical ideology for a global audience, drawing out how the Islamic State communicates with its constituency in Syria is more opaque, particularly for Western audiences due to language and cultural barriers.

There are several research projects that sought to understand and explain the Islamic State’s thinking, such as Graeme Wood’s analysis of the Islamic State’s theology through interviews with scholars and adherents.⁴ Two Strategy Research Projects from the U.S. Army War College also addressed Islamic state thinking. In their respective versions, both Edward Sullivan and David Kobs focused on the Islamic State’s religious ideology and its appeal to Sunni populations.⁵ Sullivan analyzed the Islamic State’s English magazine *Dabiq* to explain the Islamic State narrative. Charlie Winter’s work at Quilliam Foundation, a London-based center for countering violent extremism, focused on social-media and employed a similar approach to the method used in this Strategy Research Project.⁶ Winter utilized discourse analysis to categorize key themes of the Islamic State’s social media outreach. However, his study, and others like it, have stopped short of connecting discourse analysis to the concept of conflict framing, where the content is understood not simply in terms of appeal or importance, but is also used to define reality and the organization’s place in that supposed reality.

One of the methods that sociologists and political scientists have employed for drawing out the higher order thinking of individuals and organizations is an analysis of

their rhetoric, sometimes referred to as “discourse analysis.”⁷ Discourse analysis is a descriptive method of analyzing words and the content of various forms of speech in order to discover a broader, conceptual framework that is not otherwise apparent.⁸ The discourse of the Islamic State over Twitter illuminates a framework that is built more around the ideas of military strength, civil order, and championing the Sunni cause than that of brutality or fear, which Western audiences typically refer to as the Islamic State’s meta-narrative.

Twitter, a communications platform that allows individuals and organizations to post short, 140-character messages to their “followers,” has enabled the Islamic State to reach a global audience. Message content is immediately available worldwide, searchable within Twitter, and easily forwarded through “retweets.” Since the Islamic State does not stage formal press conferences, nontraditional forms of communication are even more important. It is telling that after the March 2016 Brussels attack, the Islamic State’s first claims of responsibility came through Twitter.

This paper analyzes how the Islamic State views itself in the broader struggle for Syria through its Twitter content, exploring the relationship between how the Islamic State “frames” its struggle and what it does militarily on the ground. Conflict framing can help explain, and to a lesser extent help forecast, organizational behavior. However, it is not a simple, nor an exhaustive, theory for predicting behavior. Rather, conflict framing is a useful method for understanding an organization’s decision-making, particularly those whose behaviors are sometimes puzzling to outside observers.

Revealing a Higher Order Framework

Political scientist Alexander Wendt summarized the theoretical background of this analysis when he wrote, “the daily life of international politics is an on-going process

of states taking identities in relation to others, casting them into corresponding counter-identities, and playing out the result...Managing this process is the basic practical problem of foreign policy."⁹ One way to explain how states (in this case, the Islamic State) take an identity in relation to others is through a process called "framing." Consider how the second Bush Administration framed Iraq's defiance of United Nations' weapons inspections as a flagrant violation of international law and an unacceptable threat to the free world, while its Arab neighbors framed Iraq's behavior as unconstructive but not threatening.¹⁰ The Arab nations, in contrast, framed the potential for a U.S. intervention as the greater threat, which would destabilize the region, violate Iraqi sovereignty, and was unjustifiably focused on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) while not addressing Israel's WMD.¹¹ This example demonstrates how frames are used to interpret reality and promote or justify a group's position and actions.¹² The example also indicates the variety of factors that influence a party's frame toward a conflict.

In the case of U.S. invasion of Iraq, societal factors played a significant role. For the United States, the traumatic experience on September 11, 2001 left Americans feeling vulnerable to terrorist attacks and sympathetic to an intervention in Iraq provided it prevented future attacks.¹³ From the perspective of Iraq's Arab neighbors, a societal factor was identification with Iraqi suffering due to ten years of sanctions, which reportedly led to the death of over 500,000 Iraqi children, children not unlike their own.¹⁴ Other factors that influenced framing had a deeper cultural legacy, such as the Arab experience with colonization and the perception of injustice toward the Arab-Israeli

struggle, both of which fostered suspicion of great power interference and made the protection of Iraq's sovereignty of paramount importance.

Frames not only reveal how a group interprets reality, but they also assert the dominance of that interpretation in order to influence how others respond to the same events. At the sub-state level, consider the violence in Baltimore in April of 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray, the 25 year-old African-American man whose injuries at the hands of police later proved fatal.¹⁵ Some community leaders framed the violent protests as a response to structural racism and the vulnerability of the poor in Baltimore, while city officials and law enforcement advocates framed the response as "criminal acts doing damage" to the community.¹⁶ Framing helps to explain how two groups can experience the same circumstances but interpret and respond to those circumstances in contradictory ways, appearing irrational to one another.¹⁷

Framing is most familiar at the individual level. Consider a family basketball game involving children and teenagers, in which the players mentally frame the contest in different terms. For the adults, the contest is framed as an event to promote fun, learning, and fairness between children of varying ages and abilities. As a result, the adults allow the younger children to foul, travel, and double dribble. Those allowances, in turn, incense the older children, who frame the game as an all-out contest for victory. The adults' frame is informed by their own development, their preference for fairness between their children, and their desire for all to get better at the game. Conversely, the older children want to demonstrate their skills, which includes taking advantage of the other players' relative weaknesses. The differences in the way the game is framed

impacts adult and child behavior and can quickly lead to family conflict, perhaps ending the game prematurely.

Unfortunately, the players in the Syrian conflict cannot so easily walk away, and the stakes are extremely high. A failure to understand the opponents' frame, whether expressed verbally or not, can exacerbate conflict dynamics. In the Syrian conflict, the United States' limited understanding of the Islamic State's frame has weakened the effectiveness of its counter-messaging efforts.

Analysis

In order to bring the Islamic State's conflict frame into clearer view, this analysis examined and categorized the Islamic States' Twitter messages according to idea content. The data comprised of 134 Twitter posts from January 1-31, which included 99 posts with links to longer pictorial reports, 22 with embedded photos, and 13 with links to video reports (Figure 1).

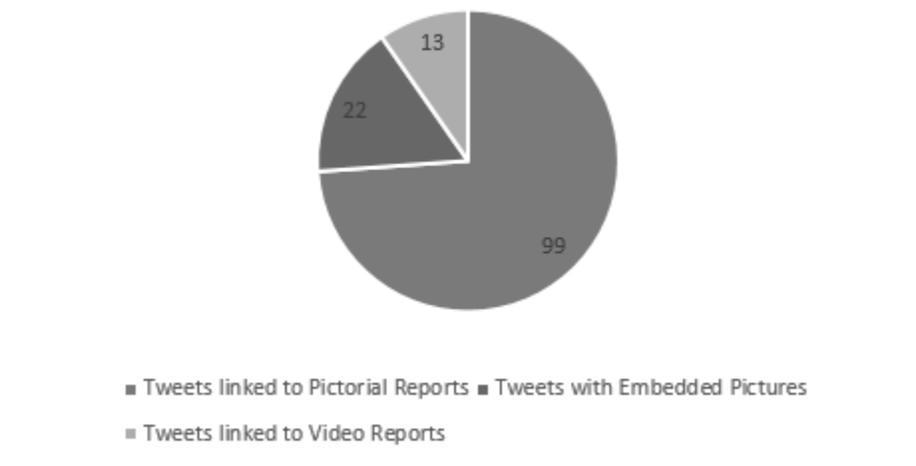


Figure 1: Media Content Type

The Twitter posts were categorized according to 28 primary themes, based on the content (depicted in Table 1). As much as possible, the research categorized the

language content of each Tweet into one primary theme. However, 14 Tweets were cataloged into more than one primary theme, based on the varied nature of the content. Two distinct categorization schemes, developed by recognized researchers in discourse analysis, were merged into a single table for this research project.¹⁸ The vertical columns on Table 1 categorized ideas according to world view, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs. The horizontal columns utilized a linguistic typology to classify whether ideas were being “asserted” or used in a “committive” manner.¹⁹ Assertive ideas were those that “asserted” a particular truth about a state of affairs. Commitment ideas were those that held other people to their commitments, which become others’ rights to a promised state of affairs.²⁰ Taken together, these categories helped identify focal points of the Islamic State’s messaging, revealing a broad conflict frame. Whether the Islamic State is sincerely committed to the focal points of its messaging, or simply communicating something that is self-serving, the importance of what it tells us remains. While admittedly requiring some subjective judgment, the research relied on repeated words and ideas propagated in the Twitter posts to determine which category was most represented by each post’s content. As an example, on January 13, 2016, a user Tweeted a link to a pictorial report at Figure 2.

The verbiage conveys an identity that is juxtaposed the Shia power-base, both the regime and its allies. “Party of Satan” is a play on words that refers to Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy in Syria, which literally means “Party of God” in Arabic. The text asserts the worldview that the Islamic State is fighting the enemies of the Sunni faith, and the Tweet is therefore categorized in the “assertive” and “worldview” columns in Table 1.



Figure 2: Translation "Pounding Nusayri and Hizb Al Shaytan (Party of Satan) Bunkers in the Ad Dawwah Region with a 122 mm Cannon." Bottom right: Wilayah Homs Media Office Logo.²¹

Since all of the Twitter posts included in the analysis were purportedly produced by the Islamic States' provincial media network inside of Syria, the research focused on media directed at the Arabic-speaking populations in and around Syria. One of the challenges for verifying the claims made in the Islamic State's Twitter posts is that Syria is a non-permissive environment for journalists and outside news organizations, which have come to rely largely on individual reporting through social media.²² As a result, this study tracked events on the ground using the open data-driven media platform <http://syria.liveuamap.com/>, which relies on field reports from open sources as a method to corroborate or contradict the Islamic State's Twitter posts.

Four focal points emerge from the analysis. They represent four corners of the Islamic State's conflict frame for its war in Syria:

- Strength of the military campaigns (victory, targeting, advanced weapons built in the caliphate, spoils gained, mutilated opponents)
- Battle against God's enemies (Nusayris [a derogatory term for the regime], apostate Kurds, Awakening [Sunni] apostates; sentries on the frontier)
- Piety in the actions of the people of the caliphate (mercy, justice, prayer, distribution of literature, educating youth, dying for God)
- A prosperous place (pictures of nature, orderly streets, filled markets)

Table 1: Discourse Analysis

	WORLD VIEW (entwined with conceptions of identity, invokes emotions)	# of occurrences	PRINCIPLED BELIEFS (used to distinguish just from unjust/right and wrong)	# of occurrences	CASUAL BELIEFS (consensus of cause-effect relations; recognized authority)	# of occurrences
Assertive	Victorious combined arms maneuver against "Nusayris" (derogatory term for Alawite), "Apostate" Sunnis and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (ie. depicting ISIL fighters firing various weapons, including tanks, mortars, and machine guns) ^{23*} ; dead Nusayris or awakening apostates following battles ²⁴ ; pounding Nusayri and the "party of Satan" (Hezbollah) with artillery ²⁵ ; video of commando units and dead "Nusayri" soldiers ²⁶ ; attacking Awakening and Nusra fighters, dead Nusra fighter and prisoners taken ²⁷	20	Mercy: (ie. distributing alms to in Al Qaryatayn sector, depicting ISIL operatives keeping a log of alms recipients and distributing plastic bags of foodstuffs ⁴⁰)	2	Ongoing military operations: Pictures of ongoing battles around the area of Ayn Isa ⁴⁹ ; successful targeting of Nusayri positions with rockets, ⁵⁰ targeting with artillery ⁵¹ ; against the unseen PKK ⁵² ; clashes with Nusayri Army ⁵³ ; sophisticated operations north of Kuwayris airport against Nusayri ⁵⁴ ; Nusayri security and militia men captured, their planes "do nothing for them" ⁵⁵ ; crusader plane does nothing to help the awakening apostates ⁵⁶ ; engaging Nusayri positions and Russian aircraft ⁵⁷)	20
	Targeting "Nusayri" Army gatherings with <i>locally-made</i> rockets in the village of Najjarah ²⁸ ; targeting the PKK with locally-made rockets ²⁹	10	Reconciliation between two spouses, pictorial report ⁴¹	1	Video of military training, "Allah extend the caliphate until it rules the eastern and western parts of the world" ⁴²	2
	Peaceful scenery: (ie. Gardens of Ashadadah ³⁰)	9	Suicide Attacks (ie Successful truck attack on regime forces ⁴³) video of three suicide attacks against regime elements ⁴⁴ ; against awakening apostates in the North ⁴⁵	9	Video on production and use of a superior sniper rifle against regime and Nusra members ⁵⁸ ; pictorial report on an air defense company ⁵⁹	2
	Aftermath of attacks by the Alawite regime ³¹ ; by Russian airstrikes ³²	2	Details (graphic pictures) of killed "awakening" fighters, ⁴⁶ Nusayri "agents" of the regime, ⁴⁷ and alleged spies ⁴⁸	6	Preparing food for the men on the front lines ⁶⁰ ; distribution of news and prayer times to the front lines ⁶¹	3
	Spoils that God gave his fighters ³³ ; spoils after retaking Kubri ³⁴ ; after taking 6 Nusayri checkpoints ³⁵ ; from awakening rejectionists ³⁶	8			Ghazal village sweep results in picture of grisly awakening corpse ⁶²	1
	There is no value in this world apart from God ³⁷	1				
	Video of ISIL fighters from N. Africa discussing colonization against Islam; call to unity ³⁸ ; West occupying N. Africa ³⁹	2				

Commitment	Civil order in the caliphate (ie. pictorial report of snow in Al Bab with children playing, men shoveling, peaceful city life; town of Rai ⁶³ , stone-cutting, slaughterhouse ⁶⁴ , shops filled with food and merchandise ⁶⁵ ; inspection and testing of foods ⁶⁶ ; repairing power lines in Ash_Shadadah ⁶⁷ ; Raqqa electric service offices and men at work to repair crusader or Russian aircraft damage ⁶⁸ ; distributing newspaper An Nab'a ⁶⁹ ; male and female children schools with math and reading, the "cubs and flowers of the caliphate" ⁷⁰)	17	Public execution for crimes (i.e. execution of man for apostasy ⁷⁹ ; stoning a man for adultery, ⁸⁰ execution of a man for murder ⁸¹)	3	Call to Jihad videos: Former Saudi singer calls others to Jihad ⁸⁴ ; A historical overview and call for North Africans to join Jihad ⁸⁵	4
	Defensive (ie. sentries guard against the awakening apostates ⁷¹ ; against the regime ⁷² ; guarding the frontiers ⁷³ ; victorious repelling of an apostate awakening attack ⁷⁴ ; repelling helicopter attack ⁷⁵)	5	Video report citing the Koran and depicting North African fighters criticizing their apostate governments, their affiliation with Jews and crusaders; the sword is the only way ⁸²	1	Religious Piety (ie Activities of Al Hisbah [ISIL religious compliance police] in the cities of Ar Raqqa ⁸⁶ and Tabaqah ⁸⁷ ; distribution of Da'wa literature ⁸⁸ ; Friday worship and shopping ⁸⁹ ; distribution of religious literature to fighters ⁹⁰ ; community watching a program on Islam and science ⁹¹ ; testing Imams after a Sharia course ⁹² ; those who die live in God's presence ⁹³)	15
	Pictorial report of young suicide driver ⁷⁶ ; father hugs son before teenage son climbs into a vehicle-borne explosive device, followed by explosion in distance ⁷⁷	3	Pictorial report: Police were established for the protection of the people and their property (picture of police listening to citizens ⁸³)	1	Memorialized fighter who died storming a Nusayri gathering ⁹⁴	1
	Religious workshop for the "cubs of the Caliphate," with boys armed and dressed in camouflage ⁷⁸	1			Preparing and departing for a battle against "atheists" ⁹⁵	1
					Pictorial report on caring for the family needs of the martyrs ⁹⁶	1

Explanation of Terms and an Important Note:

World view: "Entwined with peoples conceptions of their identities, evoking deep emotions and loyalties."⁹⁷

Principled beliefs: Specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust.

Casual beliefs: Derived from the shared consensus of recognized authorities, govern conceptualization of cause-effect relations.⁹⁸

*Due to the nature of the content, the Twitter accounts that posted the content were removed from Twitter, and the links are no longer valid. For a screenshot of any or all of the 134 Tweets, please contact the author.

Discussion

The Islamic State Tweeted “assertive” language nearly twice as often as it Tweeted in “commitment” content (98 verses 53 occurrences). As supported by constructivist political theory and historical precedent, the Islamic State used words and images to reinforce the focal points of its conflict frame.⁹⁹ The Islamic State projected its version of reality through its Twitter content, which suggests that particular themes are especially important to the organization and shape its view of reality.

While 134 Tweets over one month is a relatively small sample when considering the prolific nature of social media, it is a useful dataset that can serve as a test case for a more expansive dataset in future research. The small dataset forms a robust foundation for this analysis for a variety of reasons: It provides a snapshot in time of the Islamic State’s Twitter activity from within Syria; it contains an appropriate number of Tweets compared with a July 2015 study; and it suggests findings that are consistent with four different studies on the Islamic State’s use of social media over the past twelve months.¹⁰⁰

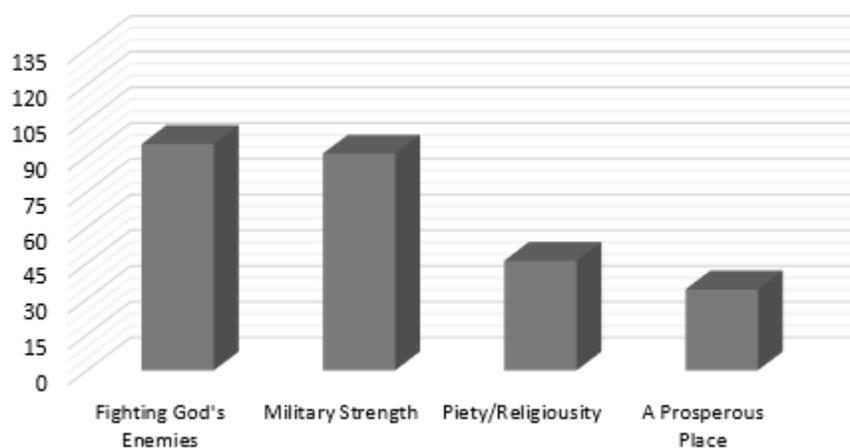


Figure 3: Occurrences of Each Theme Across 134 Twitter Posts

Military Strength

One of the most significant focal points of the assertive language was the Islamic State's military strength, represented in 91 of the 134 tweets. Among these Twitter posts were reports of victorious battles against regime and Kurdish forces, with pictures of uniformed Islamic State forces firing tanks, heavy artillery, rockets, and machine guns. They also featured grisly pictures of dead enemies, a video of a newly developed sniper rifle and tails of its success in action against the regime, and pictures of spoils taken in battle.

Events on the ground during the period of analysis demonstrate that the Islamic State's narrative of victory and strength did not reflect reality. The month of January was marked by Islamic State losses, counter-attacks, and modest expansion within Syria, but the Islamic State still lost more territory than it gained. For example, on January 13, 2016, regime and Syrian rebel forces made significant territorial gains against the Islamic State in northern Syria, where the Islamic State lost the towns of Baghidin, Khalfatli, Ayn Al Bayda, Surayb. and A'ran.¹⁰¹ On the same day, the Islamic State posted an account of its "pounding" of regime and Hezbollah positions outside of Palmyra. No external reporting supported the Islamic State's claim. The Islamic State simply ignored battles where they lost significant territory and emphasized other elements of the struggle—featuring a new sniper rifle, the activity of an air defense company, suicide missions, and a 14-minute video about a new military offensive. In other cases, the Islamic State reported the results of actual fighting, but where the Islamic State lost ground, its Twitter posts continued the narrative of strength and did not depict any losses. In the few instances that Twitter posts depicted coalition or regime airstrike activity, the Twitter posts still conveyed a message of strength by

stating that the airstrikes were unable to help Nusayri or Awakening forces (alluding to the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces) on the ground. The theme of the Islamic State's military strength is reinforced by grotesque images of dead enemies, including two sets of spies, a clear message to those that were contemplating defecting.

It comes as no surprise that the Islamic State has an incentive to continue its narrative of victory and strength, but the fact that it lost territory in the month of January and makes no mention of it (and only twice mentions coalition airstrikes despite confirmed damage to infrastructure, equipment, and personnel) all shows the strategic importance of maintaining its strength narrative.¹⁰² It also becomes clear that this type of framing through social media is vulnerable to contradiction and could be weakened with an extensive information campaign, with virtually no additional commitment of combat resources.

Battle against God's Enemies

The theme of the Islamic State's battle against God's enemies was emphasized in 94 out of 134 twitter posts, spread between assertive and commitment ideas. The posts included the extensive use of Koranic verses and the exclusive use of the term "Nusayri" for regime forces, in one case coupling it with the term "crusader." "Nusayri" is a reference to Ibn Nusayr, the man believed to have propagated the Alawite sect in the 9th century, and implies that the sect was founded by man-made ideas and is therefore not Islamic.¹⁰³ Similarly, references to clashes with the Kurdish forces were always preceded by "apostate" or "atheist," as are the depictions of slain Sunni Arabs, who are referred to as "awakening apostates." The "awakening" term was first used for the Sunni Muslims in Anbar that sided with the United States against Al Qaida in Iraq (which later

became the Islamic State) in 2007-2008, ostensibly portraying those Sunnis that fight against the Islamic State as Western agents.¹⁰⁴

The assertion that the Islamic State is fighting against God's enemies gives the group a religious authority and sense of mission with which few governments or rebel factions can compete—especially Arab states that are viewed as serving their own interests rather than the faith of Islam.¹⁰⁵ The rule of Bashar Al Assad's Alawite sect through decades of brutal oppression, in the context of a regional struggle for domination between Shia and Sunni power-centers, created a space for religiously-motivated militancy. While the Islamic State dominates this space, there is competition for the opportunity to represent the aspirations of Sunni militancy, as demonstrated by the strength of Jubhat Al Nusra, Jaish Al Islam, Ahrar Al Sham, and other militant Islamist groups. These groups are fighting not only against the regime, but against secular-leaning rebel forces and against each other for domination.

Many Sunni "fence-sitters" view the fight against the aggressive militancy of Iran and their proxies in the region (and by extension the Syrian regime) as an imperative.¹⁰⁶ When it comes to the question of who will guarantee the best future for the Sunni people of Syria, the Islamic State responds with the insistence that it is God's army, fighting God's enemies. As such, the Islamic State has an inherent appeal as the Sunni force that is pushing back against the enemies of Islam, whether those of the oppressive "Nusayri" government (ie, Bashar Al Asad), the regional Shiite threat (Iran and Hezbollah), or against Kurdish forces that are apostates of the faith. Some Twitter posts featured the Islamic State "sentries" on the borders of the frontier. The language

conveyed the idea that the Islamic State is threatened by “apostates” and must protect the caliphate—and, by extension, the faith of Islam itself.

Piety

Not only did the Islamic State frame its legitimacy with its theme of fighting God’s enemies, but it also demonstrated the group’s piety in 46 of 134 Tweets. The Islamic State presented the ideas of mercy, justice, religious activity, commitment unto death, and even the training of children in a religious workshop (a group that looked strangely like Islamic State Cub Scouts). In counterintuitive way, the three executions it Tweeted portrayed swift justice, a notion that may be appealing to people that have often been victims of rampant corruption. While the Western world focuses on the brutality of the Islamic State, the analysis suggests that the Islamic State spent the first month of 2016 strengthening its core narrative of pious religionists. For Western audiences, the irony seems so stark as to not be believable. However, for an organization that purports to be a religious caliphate, a strict adherence to Islamic religiosity and jurisprudence is crucial. As other research has suggested, the Islamic State has a narrow and selective interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, one that is not representative of the developments in Islamic law over past centuries.¹⁰⁷ However, the religious appeal should not be overlooked since it is a key feature of the Islamic State’s framing of its activities in Syria.

A Prosperous Place

The final corner of the Islamic State’s conflict frame for its war in Syria is that it has created a prosperous place. Thirty-four out of the 134 Twitter posts pictured nature, orderly streets, filled markets, or social services. The ideas of civil order and the beauty of the caliphate together made up 20% of the textual content. While the theme of the

caliphate as a prosperous place is not generally appreciated by Western audiences, it is crucial to an organization that markets itself as the guardian of God's people, the people of the caliphate. Not only does it help the Islamic State attract sympathetic Muslims to its cause, but it also showed that, compared to competing jihadi movements, the Islamic State can deliver a better life to the families of fighters and to those who support the Mujahedeen (doctors, industries, etc). As a Charlie Winter pointed out in his comprehensive work on the Islamic State's messaging, "With its 'caliphate' narrative as a unique selling point, the group is able to decry the intransigence of its jihadist rivals, pick holes in their respective programmes, and claim that Islamic State alone is legitimate in the eyes of God."¹⁰⁸ The success of the Islamic State as a caliphate is a key component of its meta-narrative of restoring the greatness of Islam, whose previous caliphates were dominant world powers between the 8th and 13th centuries.¹⁰⁹

Implications for America's Counter-IS Plan

The most important overarching lesson for U.S. policy-makers is that a serious information campaign is overdue. Hundreds of photos are dispersed in the 134 Twitter posts, in a pictorial form of story-telling. The substantial use of pictures underlines the importance of visually representing the Islamic State's version of reality; the use of video accomplishes the same goal, but with even more sensory appeal. The Combined Joint Task Force Inherent Resolve Tweets its post-strike information, but during the period of time covered in this study, it released relatively few photos and videos, and even fewer in Arabic. There is an opportunity here to better exploit the Islamic State's military defeats (such as the destruction of Islamic State targets), to include reporting on Kurdish and regime victories over the Islamic State in order to *erode the Islamic State narrative of military strength*. Since reliable sources of objective media within Syria are

scarce, engaging in this information war by Tweeting pictures and videos of reality could gain credibility over time.

The Islamic State's one-dimensional representation of military strength must be challenged, and the United States does not need to employ its ground troops to do so. Local forces, coupled with special operations advisors and coalition airstrikes, can still erode the Islamic State's narrative of military strength if managed adroitly. Simply Tweeting pictorial reports and videos in Arabic that highlight Islamic State losses could serve as a powerful information weapon when propagated through hashtags and retweets by Arab news sources. This effort could be overseen by the State Department's new Center for Global Engagement, but better still if they contract experts in social media exploitation to execute the effort.¹¹⁰ The United States should expect the Islamic State to persist in actions and policies that portray an image of military strength, whether that is in the form of offensive operations, competency with advanced weapons, or uniforms and organization, even if it has to fabricate actual military successes—something it has already done. Undermining the Islamic State's military strength narrative would likely hurt its credibility with its local population and simultaneously reduce its appeal to fence-sitters to join the Islamic State, further eroding its momentum.

A revived U.S. information campaign should also exploit fissures in the Islamic State social contract, highlighting reports of disparities in wealth between foreign fighters and locals, the misery of the poor, and heavy-handed Islamic State tactics for taxation and conscription in places like Deir Az Zur.¹¹¹ The approach should build on existing efforts by Syrian activists, include Arabic interviews with returning fighters and

fleeing refugees, and employ metadata software to inform targeted messaging strategies.¹¹²

The U.S. information campaign should depend on transparency, demonstrating that American values are better by consistently reporting the truth, even when that means describing U.S. setbacks. While there is no counter-messaging panacea for reversing Islamic State dominance on Twitter, these efforts would help undermine the Islamic State's domestic and global appeal over time.

However, challenging the Islamic State narrative will not by itself be enough to defeat the Islamic State's ideology, and a more active information campaign carries risks. The United States should expect that when pressured, the Islamic State may shift to a narrative focusing on the fulfillment of prophesied defeats preceding the return of the Mahdi and their final victory, as Graeme Wood warned.¹¹³ While this shift could help the Islamic State survive as an ideology, it would make them a less attractive cause in the eyes of some foreigners, if they understood that they were signing up for premature death—not heaven on earth.

Another risk to undermining the Islamic State's narrative on Twitter is that it could drive the organization to develop new social media encryption technologies or tactics that make it harder for non-followers to access. It could also strengthen certain elements of the Islamic State's core narrative if the United States Tweets footage that the Islamic State is able to successfully exploit (for example, by portraying the Americans as culpable for civilian deaths). These risks do not negate the urgency for a robust information campaign, but they should inform how America carries it out. The

United States must avoid adding to the perception that Sunnis are under attack from all sides.

Expect a More Sectarian Future

The increased sectarian tensions in Syria make political reconciliation extremely difficult. If lessons from Lebanon and Iraq are any indication, creating political terms for multi-sectarian rule is extremely difficult even with a heavy external hand. The United States should assume that the sectarian appeal of the Islamic State will persist, in part because the Islamic State exploited sectarian tensions through its propaganda efforts. The Islamic State will likely continue to base its legitimacy on its appeal to Sunni masses. While the Russians have sided with Assad, the United States is better served by recognizing the underlying appeal to Sunnis. The United States should continue to strengthen alternative forces which have similar appeal to Sunni populations but which are less threatening to U.S. enduring interests.

In strengthening alternative Sunni forces, the United States risks stoking Sunni militancy by encouraging actors who are scarcely different from the Islamic State. The United States has criticized Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia of doing exactly that, fueling Sunni militancy without careful enough consideration of who received their weapons and funding. Without the strong Sunni bias of the aforementioned countries, the United States is in a unique position to see a clearer way forward (though the United States is also probably the easiest to mislead due to the challenges of religious and cultural nuance). Shrewd application of U.S. resources is required to understand the nature of the different groups, their capabilities, and their threat to the United States over the long term. Balancing these groups against one another is one way to mitigate their risk to the United States, but it could also result in an even more chaotic situation,

like the one underway in Libya. Alternatively, the United States could build its own narrative as the strongest ally for the Sunni people of Syria by doubling down on its fight against Assad and the regime through Sunni proxies. However, the United States faces significant skepticism in light of its recent history in Iraq and its thawing relationship with Iran. Pursuing this path would also mean deepening U.S. commitment to an increasingly complex and open-ended regional conflict, which would be costly and difficult to sustain.

While the United States is not in a good position to be the Sunni champion in Syria, it can help ensure that the Sunni population is protected and represented in any future political settlement. The question of who will be the guardian of the Sunni faith remains, as does the likelihood of an increasingly sectarian future for Syria. The United States must recognize the relevancy of this question for the Sunni masses that feel under attack by the Shia (and by growing Kurdish control over Northern Syria) by strengthening alternative Arab Sunni forces and working toward a political settlement with Sunni buy-in over the long term.

It Will be a “Long War” After All

As the United States contemplates policy options to confront the Islamic State, the deeply religious nature of the organization is instructive. There is no solution that will eliminate the threat of radical Islamists wanting to harm the United States and its interests, even if the Islamic State is decisively defeated in Iraq and Syria. Remember that the Islamic State formed out of the ashes of a near-complete defeat of Al Qaida in Iraq by the end of 2010. While core Sunni grievances in Iraq certainly strengthened the position of its remaining leaders, its quick rise back to power demonstrates the strength of its narrative, which is deeply sectarian and religious.

At the core of the Islamic State's conflict frame is an interpretation of the Koran that is militant and expansionist.¹¹⁴ Even if the United States solved the Arab-Israeli conflict on decidedly positive terms for the Palestinians, disposed of every autocratically in favor of a populist choice, and withdrew every American soldier from the Arab lands, there would still be radical Islamists that threatened the United States. There is a deeply religious narrative to Islamic terrorism that will not be satisfied short of total world domination.¹¹⁵ The task of U.S. policy-makers is to minimize that threat as much as possible. The United States must remain clear-headed and discerning in its approach. A political solution in Syria is certainly a necessary part of minimizing that threat, by depriving the Islamic State of its unique position as an alternative government that provides for the rights and protection of the Sunni population in Syria. However, as a political solution is negotiated, other groups that have radical designs against U.S. interests could be strengthened. As various militant groups have flourished in Syria, the United States should expect a strong jihadi undercurrent to persist. Therefore, it must design policy and security arrangements inside of any negotiated settlement and transitional government that are informed by that reality.

More urgently however, since a political settlement is still a long way away, the United States should carefully consider the prominence of religion in the Islamic State's framing of the conflict. This factor should have significant weight in steps to mitigate the threat of the Islamic State to the United States. For example, for all of President Obama's missteps in Syria, the decision to not commit a large ground force has meant that the Islamic State targeted the Nusayris and the Kurds as its principle enemies. If the United States had committed ground forces, it might have played into the religious

narrative of the Islamic State that prophetically believes in a final battle against “Rome” or the West.¹¹⁶ Those who advocate for a large U.S. ground combat role should anticipate how the Islamic State would exploit U.S. intervention in a religious context, attempting to validate their call for the final battle for all Muslims at Dabiq.

The Role of Islamic Authority

The potency of the religious appeal of the Islamic State has been the focus of previous efforts to counter the messaging of the Islamic State, attempting to win over would-be jihadists with the powerful voice of “moderate” or true Islam.¹¹⁷ Even President Obama weighed in on the messaging effort with his controversial statement that “ISIS is not Islamic.”¹¹⁸ While his point that the Islamic State does not represent the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world was accurate, it raised the broader question of who in the Muslim world possesses the power and influence to counter the Islamic State’s messaging in the global media? Do such forces even exist, and presuming that they do, have they been utilized to the maximum extent possible? While there is a natural problem with trying to preach a loud message of moderation, there is more that can be done by religious centers like Al Azhar mosque in Cairo, the Organization of the Islamic Summit, and the various Mufti leaders of large theological traditions. The United States should more vigorously pursue regional cooperation on a social media strategy that undercuts the Islamic State’s claims that they are God’s people, fighting God’s enemies.

In the context of sectarian violence in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, an effort began in Jordan in 2004 called the Amman Message, which created a definition for who is a Muslim and eliminated illegitimate practices of calling other Muslims “takfir” (apostates). It was endorsed in July 2006 by over 500 leading Muslim scholars, and it was an important part of dealing with the religious war in Iraq.¹¹⁹ However, the Amman Message

has not had an active role in addressing the resurgence of sectarianism in Iraq (or in Syria) and the rise of the Islamic State. The United States should explore an Amman Message part II, as a part of its ongoing cooperation with partners in the region.

Conclusion

What does success against the Islamic State look like? Even if the United States was able to deconstruct and completely undermine the Islamic State's themes on Twitter, the Islamic State would likely morph its rhetoric into a narrative of victimhood, emphasizing the glory of suffering and casting defeat as a way to apocalypse. Considering the potency of their religious approach, it is not hard to imagine how this would play out. To be successful against the Islamic State, therefore, the United States need not attack their conflict frame. Rather, the United States can focus its power on exploiting that frame.

The Islamic State's reliance on themes of their own military prowess, their fight against God's enemies, the piety of their actions, and the creation of a prosperous place are all vulnerable to a counter-messaging and exploitation, which could fundamentally alter their regional and domestic appeal. This would weaken their ability to threaten the United States over the long term.

First and foremost, a serious information campaign is overdue. The United States must recognize that it is woefully underperforming in the information realm when it comes to social media, which has helped the Islamic State maintain its allure even in the midst of relative decline in Syria. A robust and nuanced information campaign on social media is urgently needed.

Secondly, the United States must recognize the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian state, the role that it plays in strengthening the appeal of the Islamic State as

the best Sunni Army in Syria, and the prolonged effect that it will have on the struggle for power there. All of the United States' policy decisions must be informed by the need to guarantee the rights and future of the Syrian Sunnis, while anticipating increased threats from the growth of jihadi organizations within Syria.

Finally, coordinating with partners in the region to enhance the influence of Sunni religious authorities is a necessary but insufficient answer to the deep, religious claims of the Islamic State and the enduring threat of Islamic terrorism. The religious appeal of the Islamic State, and groups like them, will enable them to persist despite military and economic setbacks. The best strategy is to minimize that threat by helping to strengthen alternative religious voices from within the region.

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