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## **The Caliphate Wants You! Conflating Islam and Islamist Ideology in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda and Western Media Reporting**

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Having declared its caliphate in mid-2014, the militant group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) effectively utilised Islamic terminology, texts and narratives to recruit thousands of Muslims globally to join its ranks in the conquest of territory in Iraq and Syria and to commit acts of terrorism in numerous cities around the world. This chapter will examine ISIS recruitment propaganda based on analyses of its online magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Of particular focus will be the extent to which the militant group draws on the religion of Islam as a recruitment strategy in the service of its Islamist politico-military ideology and objectives. This will be addressed in relation to the scholarly debate over the relationship between Islam and Islamism. The chapter examines the appeal of ISIS among significant, albeit relatively small, numbers of discontent Western Muslims and the extent to which Western media organisations have been complicit in ISIS recruitment through a tendency to conflate Islam and Islamism and frame the group in ways that are consistent with its own propaganda material.

### **Introduction**

Almost a century after the Ottoman caliphate was abolished by the Republic of Turkey, the world witnessed the rise and fall of a new entity claiming the title of caliphate. The Salafi-jihadist group known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) ruled extensive territory across Iraq and Syria from 2014 until the end of 2017. This chapter focuses on the time-period between 2014 and 2017 with some discussion of events prior to the emergence of ISIS and following the collapse of the group's caliphate in 2017 when it lost control of its territory. Although short-lived, ISIS has had a transformative impact on perceptions of Islam in the West and relations between Muslim communities and their host Western states and societies. This chapter focuses on ISIS' strategy of conflating the religion of Islam with its own Islamist political agenda to recruit thousands of discontent and disenfranchised Muslims to not only join its armed forces but also become citizens of its 'state'. It highlights ISIS' religio-political appeal and how the group exploited Western media to amplify its propaganda messages directed at Western audiences. With the collapse of ISIS' caliphate, the group is now almost entirely focused on its propaganda efforts to promote a civilisational clash between Islam and the West by promoting acts of terrorism, against its Muslim and non-Muslim enemies, as an Islamic religious obligation.

Caliphate is derived from the Arabic word *khilafa*, referring to an Islamic state under the leadership of a caliph, and is understood to be an 'Islamic' political system. However, the term *khilafa*/caliphate is not used in the Quran and no details of a political system are provided by the Prophet Muhammad. The word *caliph* is used in the Quran not in reference to a political leader, but to human beings in general as inheritors of the earth entrusted with its wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> The idea of a caliphate as an Islamic political system emerged in the centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632.<sup>2</sup> Other related terms, also central to ISIS propaganda, including *hijra* (migration), *jihad*<sup>3</sup> and *shariah*<sup>4</sup>, are used by the group in ways that appeal to Muslim audiences but are also inconsistent with their original meaning in the Quran and in classical Islamic scholarship.<sup>5</sup> For instance, ISIS' consistent use of the term *shariah* as an Islamic legal code has some consistency with classical Islamic jurisprudence, but is inconsistent with the use of the term in the Quran and the fact that *shariah* was not used by the Prophet Muhammad or his companions in reference to a legal code.<sup>6</sup>

Since the fall of the Ottoman caliphate and especially in the aftermath of Muslim-majority countries acquiring independence from European colonial rule, influential movements developed in Muslim-majority countries championing the establishment of an Islamic state. These movements, which are broadly classified as Islamist, sought a return to the political order of the classical Islamic era (8-13th century) or some modified form of it. The term Islamist is addressed below but in brief it refers to individuals, groups and movements engaged in activities to establish a social or political order based on an interpretation of Islam. For some Western Muslims, ISIS represented a formidable, seemingly religiously-legitimate response to their grievances with Western military interventions in Muslim-majority countries, and also appealed to their sense of powerlessness and marginalisation in their own societies. The group's achievements in battle and propaganda spoke to their longing for a return of Islam's glory days as a dominant military and political power. Massive death tolls and destruction caused by Western military interventions in Muslim-majority countries have created conditions that have produced militant groups such as ISIS and reinforced its recruitment propaganda,<sup>7</sup> while Western media coverage and political discourses that conflate Muslims with terrorism and Islam with politicised violence<sup>8</sup> have contributed to the alienation and radicalisation of some Muslims, who are primary targets of ISIS' recruitment propaganda.

## **The Islamic State**

As with any state or non-state actor, ISIS is by no means an autonomous entity and it did not emerge in a vacuum. The catalysts for the emergence of ISIS include the Saudi Wahhabist ideology and interpretation of Islam, which has spread among Muslim communities globally with varying degrees of acceptance since the latter half of the twentieth century, and the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. In particular, gruesome images of the torture and death of Iraqis and other Middle Eastern peoples has had a radicalising effect on Muslims in Muslim-majority countries and the West.<sup>9</sup>

ISIS' genesis can be traced back to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's formation of Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad) in post-Soviet Afghanistan and his pledge of *bay'ah* (allegiance) to his one-time financier Osama bin Laden in 2004. Al-Zarqawi was subsequently appointed as bin Laden's man in Iraq<sup>10</sup> and the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> In the Middle East proper, after al-Zarqawi's death in 2006, the group continued to evolve under the successive leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi,<sup>12</sup> Abu Ayyub al-Masri,<sup>13</sup> and eventually its current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This occurred against a backdrop of takeovers and alliances that saw the creation of the Mujahideen Shura Council, the Islamic State of Iraq, and the merger with parts of the Syrian al-Nusra Front, which in turn led to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS or IS). The formation of ISIS, in turn, created an irrevocable rift between al-Baghdadi's ISIS and the al-Qaeda leadership. Having similar goals as al-Qaeda – the promotion of a civilisational clash between Islam and the West and establishing a caliphate – the two groups vied for supremacy as the defender of 'Islam' against the 'Crusader enemy' and ultimately competed for the same audience.

By all accounts, ISIS was the more successful of the two through its superior use of communication technology as an intrinsic component of its politico-military campaign. In a 2016 ISIS document entitled *Media Operative, You Are a Jihadi, Too* – a rare articulation of the group's propaganda doctrine – ISIS glorifies 'information warfare' in a manner that is seemingly unparalleled by any other Islamist-jihadist group.<sup>14</sup> The 55-page monograph emphasises the importance of propaganda by framing it as part of 'a battle' as 'more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media'.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, quoting Saudi cleric Hamud bin Uqla al-Shuaybi, the authors explain:

The media offers a fine way to spread news of Muslim victories over the enemy, support the mujahidin [jihad fighters], demonstrate their courage and extoll their virtues. These matters are critical in terms of their potency for sustaining the

mujahidin's steadfast pursuit of victory for the Muslims and defeat for their enemies.<sup>16</sup>

Taking this idea further, the authors suggest the creation and dissemination of ISIS propaganda is tantamount to fighting in the caliphate's army or conducting terrorism in its name:

To every media operative brother in the Islamic State, you should know and be convinced of the following fact, [that] the media is a jihad in the way of Allah [and that] you, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid [jihad fighter] in the way of Allah.<sup>17</sup>

In this manner, the document repeatedly glorifies propaganda activism as an aspirational act, claiming even that 'verbal *jihad*' can sometimes be 'more important than *jihad* of the sword'.<sup>18</sup> Although *Media Operative* is a propaganda document in itself, the great lengths the authors go to in branding ISIS' 'information warfare' as a legitimate and logical part of *jihad* demonstrates the centrality of propaganda operations to the group. Testimonies of ISIS detractors appear to confirm this too as they reveal senior media operatives were treated as 'Emirs' of equal rank to their military counterparts.<sup>19</sup>

However, due to the secrecy in which ISIS shrouds its information and recruitment activities, our understanding of their underpinnings and logistics is limited. Much of what is known in the academic literature is derived from the content of ISIS' propaganda output. While former ISIS recruits testify to having consumed ISIS propaganda prior to enlisting,<sup>20</sup> there is yet to be any empirical study of the efficacy of ISIS propaganda for recruitment. This chapter concentrates on ISIS' English-language publications *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* in order to explain the ways in which the group *attempted* to influence and recruit Western (Anglophone) audiences. The observations presented here do not have to necessarily align with the approaches identified in other forms of ISIS propaganda, including periodicals published in other languages. It has to be emphasised that other types of digital productions by the group have their own specificity and target, and therefore they might have been using different methods of influencing audiences.

## **ISIS recruitment propaganda**

The goal of establishing a caliphate is shared by many Islamist-jihadist groups including al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, as well as those regarded as ostensibly non-violent such as Hizbut Tahrir. However, none has been as successful, in terms of acquiring territory and attracting fighters and citizens, as ISIS. Within a few years of its inception as an offshoot of al-Qaeda, ISIS rapidly expanded, took control of extensive territory in Iraq and Syria and amassed revenue estimated around US\$2 billion.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, through its appeals to such concepts as caliphate (*khilafa*), migration (*hijra*) and armed struggle (*jihad*), which have significance in mainstream Islamic teachings, ISIS was able to attract fighters from all over the world, estimated between 10,000 to as many as 100,000,<sup>22</sup> although most estimates suggest numbers between 30,000 and 40,000. The key to ISIS success in this regard is seemingly its highly effective use of internet-based communications technology and religiously-oriented propaganda in multiple languages, including English. Reflecting the group's multi-national and multi-lingual composition and desire to attract recruits from around the world, ISIS recruitment propaganda employed multiple languages including Arabic, English, French and German. However, as this chapter's focus is on the recruitment of Western English-speaking Muslims, our analysis is confined to the English-language versions of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.

ISIS' flagship publications include the digital magazines *Dabiq*, which ran for 15 issues from 2014 to 2016, and *Rumiyah*, which included 13 issues between 2016 and 2017. While the identities of the people who produced and translated *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are not publicly known, news reports suggest ISIS recruited 'as a headhunting firm would, people with a background in graphic design and production and with media degrees'.<sup>23</sup> Given the high-production quality and language-fluency of the magazines, it is reasonable to assume they were created by professionals who are native or proficient English speakers.

*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* reflect the changing fortunes of ISIS on the ground and its recruitment potential. While the names of both magazines are derived from places mentioned in apocalyptic prophecies, the former refers to the town of Dabiq in Syria and the latter an Arabised reference to Rome and the 'West' more generally. Reflecting ISIS' relative strength between 2014 and 2016, *Dabiq* emphasises the religious legitimacy of the caliphate and a call to Muslims globally to migrate to the territory of the Islamic State. As described in one study, it 'brings together ISIS's military, governance, and religious activities into one united outreach effort...to integrate military and governance actions to support a coherent religious vision'.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, *Rumiyah* was published during ISIS' decline and loss of territory,

including the town of Dabiq, which prompted a shift in content from military recruitment and governance in Iraq and Syria to an emphasis on encouraging supporters to launch attacks on their own homelands.<sup>25</sup> This represented a different type of recruiting exhortation to that considered elsewhere in this volume. In conventional military recruiting, individuals are enticed to serve in established armed forces which are either deployed to a foreign country or based at home for defensive purposes. *Rumiyah* encouraged prospective recruits to take up arms by *themselves*, independently of any existing military, and launch terrorist attacks on their countries of residence.

US intelligence officials have not publicly indicated who controls ISIS' propaganda strategy, although it was presumed to be led by the group's main spokesman in 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani.<sup>26</sup> One analyst counted a network of as many as 48 official media offices – including affiliates in Yemen, Libya, and West Africa – and nine additional, centrally administered outlets that coordinated with one and another and seemingly never went off message.<sup>27</sup>

Central to ISIS' recruitment strategy is to establish its legitimacy *vis-a-vis* Islam. In particular, *Dabiq* emphasised the religious obligation of Muslims to migrate (*hijrah*) to the Islamic state as well as *jihad* to establish the caliphate and implement *shariah* law:

The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims. O Muslims everywhere, whoever is capable of performing hijrah [migration] to the Islamic State, then let him do so, because hijrah [migration] to the land of Islam is obligatory.<sup>28</sup>

ISIS also used the threat of eternal damnation to motivate Muslims to join the Islamic state, as expressed in the following:

Finally, if you cannot do any of the above [migration, public or private pledge of allegiance] for reasons extremely beyond your control, inshā'allah [God-willing] your intention and belief that the Islamic State is the Khilāfah [Caliphate] for all Muslims will be sufficient to save you from the warning mentioned in the hadith [narration], "Whoever dies without having bound himself by a bay'ah [allegiance], dies a death of jāhiliyyah [ignorance] [Sahīh Muslim]."<sup>29</sup>

A key strategy of ISIS recruiters is to convince its target audience to prioritise support for the caliphate over other commitments and obligations, in particular education:

. . . every Muslim professional who delayed his jihād [armed struggle] in the past under the pretense of studying Sharī'ah [Islamic law], medicine, or engineering, etc., claiming he would contribute to Islam later with his expertise, should now make his number one priority to repent and answer the call to hijrah [migration], especially after the establishment of the Khilāfah [Caliphate]....As for the Muslim students who use this same pretence now to continue abandoning the obligation of the era, then they should know that their hijrah from dārul-kufr [non-Muslim territory] to dārul-Islām [Muslim territory] and jihād [armed struggle] are more obligatory and urgent than spending an unknown number of years studying while exposed to doubts and desires that will destroy their religion and thus end for themselves any possible future of jihād [armed struggle].<sup>30</sup>

However, under circumstances where travel to the Islamic state was not possible, ISIS shifted the obligation to committing acts of terrorism in one's homeland, as exemplified in the quote below concerning an attack in Sydney in 2014:

This month, an attack was carried out in Sydney by Man Haron Monis, a Muslim who resolved to join the mujāhidīn [jihad fighters] of the Islamic State in their war against the crusader coalition . . . It didn't take much; he got hold of a gun and stormed a café taking every-one inside hostage. Yet in doing so, he prompted mass panic, brought terror to the entire nation, and triggered an evacuation of parts of Sydney's central business district. The blessings in his efforts were apparent from the very outset.<sup>31</sup>

As a recent study of Muslim Australians convicted of terrorism offences highlighted, so-called 'Islamic' beliefs and obligations propagated by ISIS were found by the courts to be key motivations for the attacks offenders were planning. Most of the more recently convicted offenders had been prevented from traveling to the Islamic state and subsequently directed their 'jihad' against fellow citizens.<sup>32</sup> Over time, attacks in one's homeland against Western citizens became more pronounced in ISIS' propaganda appeals to its audiences:



If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict [Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful].<sup>33</sup>

This shift in focus from joining the Islamic State to committing acts of terrorism at home becomes more apparent in issues of *Rumiyah*, while the theme of using the religion of ‘Islam’ to justify bloodshed remained consistent:

Islam is the religion of sound principals providing the perfect foundations upon which the solid structures of justice and glory are built. One of these great principals is that all people must be fought until they accept Islam or come under a shari’ [Islamic legal] covenant. This principle establishes the prohibition of shedding Muslim and covenant-bound kafir [unbeliever] blood as well as the permissibility of shedding the blood of all other kuffar [disbelief].<sup>34</sup>

Another key aspect of the effectiveness of ISIS recruitment propaganda concerns how it positions its audiences in relation to those it defines as outsiders. One study, for instance, explains that ‘*Dabiq* appeals to its audiences by strategically designing in-group identity, Other, solution and crisis constructs which it leverages via value-, crisis- and dichotomy-reinforcing narratives’.<sup>35</sup> In so doing ISIS is able to ‘shape its readership’s perceptions, polarise their support and drive their radicalization’.<sup>36</sup> The main divisions that ISIS seeks to exploit are between the Islamic State and the West, as well as so-called ‘true’ Sunni Muslims (ISIS supporters) and all other Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>37</sup> *Rumiyah* articulates these divisions in terms of a ‘battle’ of creed between the two camps of ‘believers’ and ‘unbelievers’, and emphasises that ‘any slogan raised for any battle between us [‘believers’] and them [‘unbelievers’], other than the slogan of religion, is an utter lie and deception’.<sup>38</sup> Muslims who do not subscribe to ISIS’ ‘religion’ are subsequently excluded from the camp of ‘believers’ and attacks are called upon them:

Those Muslims residing in the West, in particular, have an opportunity to terrorize the Crusaders themselves as well as the imams of *kufir* [disbelief] allied to the Crusaders.

These *murtadd* [apostate] imams have fabricated a false religion of apostasy from elements of democracy, nationalism, liberalism, pacifism, and pluralism, doing so in servitude of their Crusader masters.<sup>39</sup>

Central to ISIS' recruitment strategy is its effective use of Islamist narratives and appropriation of Islamic concepts to appeal to discontent and disenfranchised Muslims. As explained by one study:

The various master narratives employed by ISIS are powerful tools in the recruitment process because they give its propaganda a degree of legitimacy reinforced by the historical experiences of Islam. ISIS uses these narratives to exacerbate historical and political grievances and to harness feelings of personal victimisation and discrimination experienced by Western Muslims (long considered to be key components in the radicalisation process). Feelings of victimisation and isolation within these countries can create a foundation for the rejection of Western values and instigate what they perceive to be a return to an Islamic identity. By evoking the higher authority of Islam over modern state-imposed versions of legality and ethics, ISIS is able to appeal to otherwise vulnerable Muslims living in Western countries.<sup>40</sup>

Mahood and Rane identify three master narratives – crusader, *jahiliyyah* [ignorance], and hypocrites – as central to ISIS propaganda intended to reinforce the group's 'Islamic' self-presentation.<sup>41</sup> The crusader narrative was found to be the most extensively used by ISIS, framed in relation to a view of the West as harbouring a deep-rooted hatred of Islam and perpetuating an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. The *jahiliyyah* and hypocrites narratives are respectively used to delegitimise Western societies vis-a-vis Islam and to legitimise the targeting of non-Muslims and Muslims who oppose ISIS. We suggest that all three narratives are intended to encourage ISIS supporters to disassociate themselves from societies, communities, neighbours, family and friends who do not conform to its ideology in order to reduce the potential for outsiders to counter the group's propaganda. This doctrine of in-group loyalty and out-group disavowal, central to Wahabbism and Salafism<sup>42</sup>, has been identified as a key factor among Muslims convicted of terrorism offences.<sup>43</sup> A major part of the appeal and potency of Islamist narratives is that they seem to be derived from and have legitimacy within Islam.

## Islam and Islamism

Islam and Islamism are not the same thing. The former is a faith, while the latter is an ideology that borrows from the religion of Islam for its legitimacy:

. . . there is a distinction between the faith of Islam and the religionized politics of Islamism, which employs religious symbols for political ends. Many will deny this distinction, including most prominent Islamists themselves. There is no doubt that many Islamists hold the sincere conviction that their Islamism is the true Islam. In fact, however, Islamism emanates from a political interpretation of Islam: it is based not on the religious faith of Islam but on an ideological use of religion within the political realm.<sup>44</sup>

Mozaffari contends that ‘Islamism is more than merely a ‘religion’ in the narrow sense of theological belief, private prayer and ritual worship, but also serves as a total way of life with guidance for political, economic and social behaviour’.<sup>45</sup> Islamism selectively uses the teachings of Islam to form the sets of ideas that comprise the ideology, which it reproduces as legitimate religious obligations.<sup>46</sup> *Islamists* are identified in relation to their pursuit of an Islam-based political agenda. As defined by one leading scholar of political Islam: ‘Islamists are Muslims who are committed to political action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda’, while the content of that agenda and its pursuit is *Islamism*.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, others define Islamists as ‘Muslims with Islam-based political agendas . . . who reject the separation of religious authority from the power of the state . . . and seek to establish some version of an Islamic political and legal structure’.<sup>48</sup> This definition, however, does not account for the evolution of those considered pro-democracy political Islamists, such as Tunisia’s En-Nahda Party and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, that advocate political secularism.<sup>49</sup>

Although we use the term *Islamist* in order to be consistent with the academic literature, not all Islamists are violent, in fact most advocate non-violent means, including democratic elections, to achieve their vision of an Islam-based political agenda.<sup>50</sup> However, research on the prevalence of Islamism among Western Muslim youth gives some reason for concern. Goli and Rezaei, for instance, found that half of the young Danish Muslims included in their study adhere to some form of Islamism, including those that they categorised as fundamentalists (27 per cent), radical Islamists (18 per cent), and militants (6 per cent).<sup>51</sup>

Radical Islamists who advocate the use of violence to achieve national or transnational political goals are often referred to as Islamist jihadists or simply jihadists.<sup>52</sup> Rabasa et al. point out that ‘radical Islamism has been an enduring problem for many nations, but it became a prominent international priority only after the 9/11 attacks’.<sup>53</sup>

Like its forerunner, al-Qaeda, ISIS represents a distinct form of Islamism that incorporates Salafist-jihadism and Saudi Wahabbism as its religious ideology. Salafist-jihadism is essentially a religio-political ideology that seeks to overthrow near enemies (Muslim nation-states) and cause the destruction of far enemies (Western nation-states) – depending on one’s locational perspective – in order to establish a *caliphate* and to implement *shariah* law.<sup>54</sup> While other groups of Salafists do not necessarily advocate violence in pursuit of political goals, and many remain apolitical, Salafi-jihadists consider *jihad* a religious duty. Salafists also apply *takfir* against non-Sunni Muslims, particularly Shiites, and advocate the subjugation and even the enslavement of non-Muslims.<sup>55</sup> Wahhabism is a form of Salafism developed and disseminated by Saudi Arabia based on the teaching of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (d. 1792), a key ally of Ibn Saud, founder of the first Saudi state in 1744. It is characterised by its exclusivism, literalism, ultra-conservatism and intolerance especially in relation to the rights of women, non-Muslims, and non-Sunnis, which is reflected in ISIS’ brand of Islamism as described in one issue of the *Rumiyah* magazine:

An individual cannot be a Muslim without worshipping Allah alone and disbelieving in all others worshiped besides him, as clarified by the hadith of the five pillars... So there is no Islam without worship of Allah (istislam) and there is no Islam without disbelieving in the taghut (salamah). An individual is not saved from the filth and impurity of shirk and its people as long as he does not disbelieve in the tawaghit of his era, their shirk, and those who commit this shirk, [idolatry] such as the apostate partisans of democracy, nationalism, and manmade laws. Included among them are the candidates and voters in the elections and referendums from the so-called ‘Islamic’ parties, as well as those who refer to the courts of manmade laws for judgement under the pretext of maslahah [wellbeing] and necessity. Also included are the soldiers and supporters of taghut such as their military recruits and ‘scholars.’ Also included is the ‘Murtadd Brotherhood’ group and its parties, factions, and sister organizations, which have denied tawhid, the Shari’ah, wala and bara, and jihad, and have resisted adhering to these tenets, mocked them, waged war against them, and

supported the Crusaders and the tawaghit in waging war against them. Rather, it is obligatory on the Muslim to manifest his disbelief in all of these apostates as much as he is able to, with his pen and tongue, and his sword and spear.<sup>56</sup>

While the above-quoted paragraph will seem complex and confusing to non-specialists, most Muslims would understand the message it conveys. What ISIS is doing here is defining Islam in accordance with the ideas and terminology well-established in the Salafi movement and Wahhabism in particular. There is a clear rejection of Western political systems and ideas including democracy and nationalism. This has particular appeal for Muslims who feel modern Muslim and Western nation-states have failed them socially, politically and economically and who feel nostalgia for what they imagine to be a glorious, powerful Islamic polity of the past. This also relates to ISIS' rejection of the borders of the modern Middle Eastern nation-states, which were not determined by the people of the region but established by European colonial powers. By referring to systems of governance and laws outside of the Islamic context with terms such as *taghut* and *shirk*, ISIS is condemning them as oppressive and idolatrous or, in other words, the antithesis of Allah's will and Islam.

The above-quoted paragraph from *Rumiyah* also condemns alternate Islamic approaches to politics and governance, specifically that of the Muslim Brotherhood, which it attacks with a play on words by referring to the group as 'Murtadd' meaning apostate. ISIS also affirms its association with the Salafism and the Wahhabi ideology as the true Islam by invoking such terms as *tawhid* (monotheism), *Shariah* (Islamic law), *wala* and *bara* (loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims), and *jihad* (armed-struggle). The use of these terms in relation to Islamist-jihadism is addressed elsewhere<sup>57</sup> but it is important to note, with the exception of *wala* and *bara* (loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims), their potency comes from their prominence in mainstream Islamic thought. Such a propaganda strategy blurs the line between Islam and ISIS, making it difficult for vulnerable Muslims without sufficient Islamic education to discern between the two. A study based on interviews with twenty foreign fighter recruited by ISIS reported that 'interactions with these individuals were so heavily mediated by religious discourse it seems implausible to suggest that religiosity (i.e., a sincere religious commitment, no matter how ill-informed or unorthodox) is not a primary motivator for their actions. Religion provides the dominant frame these foreign fighters use to interpret almost every aspect of their lives, and this reality should be given due interpretive weight.'<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the above-cited quote from *Rumiyah* also refers to ISIS' enemies as Crusaders in order to evoke historic memory of Western non-Muslim invaders of Muslim lands and, as discussed above, is central to the Islamist-jihadist narrative of Western hatred of Islam. The use of this narrative is also likely to be intended to prevent Western Muslims from forming a Western Muslim identity in which they feel accepted and a sense of belonging in their Western country of birth or residence. As will be discussed below, feelings of marginalisation and alienation among Western Muslims were ripe for exploitation, especially when combined with highly pejorative Western media reporting on Islam and Muslims.

ISIS' hatred for non-Muslims and fellow Muslims, who do not accept its ideology, was manifested in brutal violence and atrocities that meant the actions of the group would be newsworthy, particularly for a Western media that has for decades adopted a formula of covering Islam through a prism of conflict and crises.<sup>59</sup> This, combined with the Western media's limited frame of reference to Islam, audience appetite for sensational reporting, and lack of information about ISIS allowed the agenda to be set in large part by ISIS' own propaganda.

### **Western media reporting**

Bolstering ISIS' politico-military campaign is its insidious ability to become part of Western news cycles and exploit mainstream media to amplify its propaganda. Indeed, while ISIS is effective in transmitting its deeds and messages using its own communication channels, it depends on Western media reporting for amplification and legitimacy. This is consistent with the idea, first articulated by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that terrorists rely on the 'oxygen of publicity' to influence the agendas, attitudes, and perceptions of international audiences.<sup>60</sup>

Tied to this end, Williams suggests ISIS deliberately manipulates Western media by 'tailor[ing] the production and release of its propaganda material to the needs of media outlets'.<sup>61</sup> This view is supported by the observation that ISIS develops high-quality media content in a way that is easily accessible and reproducible by mainstream outlets.<sup>62</sup> As Semati and Szpunar describe, 'the media to which [ISIS] is intricately tied is often accompanied by the adjective "Western" . . . it is "slick", it speaks "our" language' and it shares a similar journalistic style.<sup>63</sup> Williams (2015) also observes that ISIS often releases 'high-impact' images and videos of its brutality after military setbacks or during lulls in international news.<sup>64</sup> She contends the group does this to detract from potentially negative coverage and

to ensure it continues to dominate international agendas.<sup>65</sup> In so doing it can be said that ISIS is using Western media coverage to help build its 'brand'. As a US intelligence official remarked in an interview, "The group is very image-conscious, much like a corporation".<sup>66</sup> He said ISIS' approach to building its brand is so disciplined, 'that it's very much like saying "This is Coca-Cola" or "This is Nike."'"<sup>67</sup>

Systematic studies of ISIS propaganda output suggest the group targets international audiences with the aim of demoralising and intimidating its opponents, as well as agitating and polarising Western societies.<sup>68</sup> Courty et al. organise this propaganda into two main categories: 'formidable foe' and 'clash of civilisations'.<sup>69</sup> The first category of propaganda focuses on the group's brutal exploits and triumphs in order to enhance public perceptions of its strength and success and ultimately legitimise the group's state institutions. The second category advances the notion that the world is engaged in a civilisational war between the two camps ISIS classifies as 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims'. This manipulates audiences' worldview to divide Western societies along religious lines, which has manifested in a rise of anti-Islam sentiments as well as right-wing groups and political parties with an explicit anti-Islam agenda.<sup>70</sup> Combined, the formidable foe and clash of civilisations narratives are designed to convey an image of a Western world intent on destroying Islam, in which true Muslims do not belong, and of ISIS as the saviour of Muslims.

This divisive rhetoric is fundamental for ISIS' attraction of foreign recruits and inspiring 'lone-wolf' attacks around the world. As the group declared in *Dabiq*: 'Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices'<sup>71</sup>. ISIS explained that, as the threat of further terrorist attacks loomed large, Western Muslims would be treated with increased suspicion and distrust, forcing them to: 'either apostatize [convert] . . . or [migrate] to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens'.<sup>72</sup> Courty et al. found in some instances Western media supported this notion of a civilisational clash by repeatedly linking Muslim communities to terrorism, and failing to meaningfully distinguish the Islamic faith from Islamist ideology.<sup>73</sup> For example, *The Daily Mail*'s sensationalist reporting of the 2015 Paris attacks repeatedly conflated Islam and Islamism, and portrayed the wider Muslim community as a potential threat to Western societies.<sup>74</sup> The British tabloid deliberated on the role of 'Islamic' doctrine and its more provocative headlines warned of 'the enemy within', actively stoking anti-Muslim sentiment.<sup>75</sup>

Courty et al. also found that although more responsible media like *The New York Times* and the *Times* were comparatively more discerning and controlled in their reporting of ISIS,

official sources overwhelmingly dominated the way ISIS is represented and understood.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the claims and actions of officials, particularly government leaders and representatives were uncritically accepted and they consequently shaped public dialogue about counter-terrorism choice and policies.<sup>77</sup> This is significant because it means that alarmist, inflammatory, and divisive political rhetoric predominantly went unchecked by the media sources and it, ultimately, supported ISIS' interests through official confirmation of threat and enmity in the name of 'Islam'. By omitting alternative and more reasonable voices, the news media reinforce ISIS' claim of persecution of Muslims, which is so crucial to their ability to prey on disaffected and marginalised Muslims in Western societies.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, sensationalist reporting, which overstated the threat posed by ISIS and glorified its fearsome image, was harnessed by the group as part of its own propaganda strategy. In *Dabiq*, for example, ISIS used the 'words of the enemy' to derive legitimacy for its actions. This regular feature of the online magazine would highlight Western news and political commentary that supported ISIS' propaganda claims of military and tactical prowess. In particular, *Dabiq* would feature stand-alone quotes from Western analysts and politicians which recapitulated ISIS' victories and conquests, and confirmed the threat posed by the group. In its first issue, for instance, *Dabiq* referred to an article written by two American counter-terrorism experts about the state of ISIS in 2014. It featured comments by the authors which described ISIS as a 'de facto state' and 'a real, if nascent and unrecognized, state actor', and compared its 'multi-ethnic army' to 'a foreign legion'.<sup>79</sup> The recognition of ISIS as a legitimate 'state actor' bolstered its claims of maintaining a caliphate as a legitimate 'Islamic' political entity. In summary, the Western media's uncritical acceptance of ISIS as Islamic left non-Muslim audiences with limited capacity to reject the group's claims of legitimately manifesting the teachings of Islam and gave disenfranchised Muslims a long-awaited champion that seemed to seriously challenge Western dominance.

## **Conclusion**

Estimates vary but it is generally agreed that ISIS was far more successful than its predecessors in recruiting Muslims from around the world to join its cause. Much has been written about the group's effective use of communication technology to disseminate its recruitment propaganda. This chapter has highlighted some examples of Islamic terminology, texts and narratives used by ISIS in its flagship publications, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. The main point of this chapter was that the key to ISIS' military recruitment strategy was its ability to



link its militant Islamist goals with the religion of Islam. While this is not a strategy unique to ISIS, setting the group apart was its more effective use of digital media technologies, its willingness to communicate to audiences in their native languages, and the exploitation of Western media. Not only was Western media reporting on the group a regular feature in ISIS' *Dabiq* magazine, referred to as 'In the words of the enemy', the group's notoriety as a formidable foe and the notion of a clash of civilisations were reinforced by Western media reports. This chapter argued that by conflating Islam with ISIS' Islamist propaganda, the Western media contributed to the legitimisation of ISIS propaganda as 'Islamic'.

This chapter discussed some recent scholarship from the field of Islamic Studies which challenges ISIS' use of such concepts as caliphate, *jihad* and *shariah* for its Islamic narrative but we were not able to identify such critical analysis in Western media reporting of ISIS. Rather, ISIS' claims of Islamic legitimacy tended to be uncritically accepted, which contributed to its own propaganda. This reporting was an important aspect of ISIS' recruitment of discontent Western Muslims whose anti-Western sentiments had been driven in part by images of death and destruction in Muslim-majority countries in the aftermath of Western military interventions as well as the religious extremism of Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism more generally. These audiences were predisposed to support entities that Western media reporting and political discourses framed as the enemy, especially a formidable, 'Islamic' one like ISIS. This ultimately served the central goals of ISIS, and others such as al-Qaeda, which were to establish a caliphate as rival political entity to other Western and Muslim systems of governance, disrupt and destroy the peaceful coexistence of Islam in the West, and to convince Muslim and non-Muslims of the inevitability of their mutual enmity.

At the time of writing this chapter, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, announced the death of the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a US-led operation in Syria. While this may represent a blow to the group, this chapter contends that the key to destroying ISIS is to undermine support for its ideology among Muslims around the globe, which was weak to begin with and has eroded over time. This could be most effectively achieved through more critical rejections of ISIS' claims of Islamic legitimacy, including by Western media organisations. Additionally, more critical engagement from Islamic religious authorities with Islamic interpretations and narratives that counter ISIS' use of such concepts as *shariah*, *jihad* and caliphate as well as its framing of Islam's teachings concerning religious pluralism and inter-faith relations is likely to be a decisive factor in diminishing ISIS' recruitment potential.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>4</sup> The term *shariah* literally refers to a path that leads to water but has a meaning in the Quran of a life path towards salvation in this world and the afterlife. In the classical era of Islam’s history (from the eighth to the thirteenth century), *shariah* came to be used as the term for the Islamic law developed by the classical era Islamic jurists and legal scholars.
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