

Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine, quantitatively and qualitatively, one week of official media releases of the Islamic State (IS). Due to the breadth of IS official media releases, this provides a snapshot upon which to better understand the different styles and messaging streams IS releases on a weekly basis. The article shows that IS produces much more material, and on a broader range of topics, than what gets reported in the mainstream media. Execution videos make up just a fraction of the overall output and are dwarfed by the number of IS productions on military affairs, governance, preaching, moral policing, and other themes. The analysis also shows that IS relies very heavily on visual as opposed to text-based propaganda, and that most of its military activities take place in Iraq, not Syria.

Keywords: Jihadism, ISIS, propaganda, ideology, social media, Internet, rebel governance

Introduction

Ever since the Islamic State (IS) took over a third of Iraq and declared a caliphate in the summer of 2014, the world has been fascinated with the IS media operation. Many have looked to the group's propaganda for answers to the question why it has not only gained substantial local support, but also attracted scores of foreign fighters. Yet the literature still lacks an exhaustive study of the full media output of the self-styled state. This is not only due to the language barrier (the vast majority of official media releases are in Arabic), but also to a singular fascination by the media and some researchers with IS' most grotesque acts or messaging targeted toward a Western audience. As a result, the breadth of IS's messaging strategy is insufficiently understood.

This article aims to start filling this lacuna by examining the totality of IS media productions during a sample week; from April 18 to April 24, 2015. Considering IS's full propaganda output – as opposed to a selection of the most spectacular productions – reveals a very different picture from that conveyed in mainstream Western media. We will see that IS attempts to use media as a force multiplier to make it appear it is active in many locations even though the vast majority of its activities are in Iraq and Syria. Even among those two, there is a difference, with far more military operations taking place in Iraq than in Syria. IS's media apparatus is decentralized through its provincial-level media offices, and 88% of its releases are visual. All of IS's media is released in Arabic, and only a small proportion is translated into other languages. In the media releases themselves, IS portrays itself as winners, competent, and pious, while it portrays its enemies as unjust and unbelievers.

Because of the vast and sometimes overwhelming quantity of official IS media products, the scope of this paper is limited to giving a snapshot of IS media production. It would be yeoman's work, if not the subject of a full length book, to comb and analyze IS' full archive. This, no doubt, would be an important task, insofar as understanding the evolution, ebb and flow, and changing dynamics of IS media over a longer period of time. For the sake of brevity, this analysis will only cover one week of official releases. This, of course, is only a small sample, and it might be coloured by the particular events that took place that week. That said, it is still a large sample, and one that can shed light on the breadth in content and number of releases from IS.[1] This,

in turn may help explain why certain individuals at a local and global level have an interest in IS, decide to join it, or on an unofficial level outside the territories of IS, spread its message on social media.

While most of IS's media operation takes place on the Internet, it should be noted that IS also organizes viewing parties of its official content locally in the territories it controls. It also has created so-called *nuqat i'lamyya* (media points) in a number of cities and villages. These consist of a stationary stall, a small shack, or a roving car or winnebago that distributes printed, CDs/DVDs, and/or USB drives of IS official media to locals, with a target audience mainly comprised of children and young teenagers.

Unlike a few years ago, when password-protected forums were the headquarters of media releases and conversation amongst jihadis online, now Twitter has become the central distribution platform. Since the series of video releases of IS murdering American, British, Japanese, and Jordanian journalists, humanitarian workers, and a pilot, Twitter began taking down IS' official media account, but in response al-I'tisam, IS's main distribution unit, went through tens of variations on its name when creating new Twitter handles whenever it would come back online. In response to this and the increasingly quick rate at which Twitter was able to shut down the al-I'tisam account, reminiscent of Twitter's campaign against al-Qaida's East African branch Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin, IS created a new methodology for distribution. In this way, IS devised a "centralized decentralization" plan, creating a number of official dissemination accounts, meaning that if one account was taken down, others will still be operational. These other accounts would then tweet whenever the new account of the one taken down was back online using an alternative handle. This provided an authentication mechanism that has largely worked since late fall 2014. It is also a way for one that follows this activity on a daily basis to assess truly what is a legitimate official dissemination account from one that is a fake, some online grassroots jihadi activist, or a foot soldier that is not connected with IS' official media apparatus.

To collect all of IS' official media releases during one week in April, I followed three of its official media disseminators. They included in order of usage, Ayun al-Ummah (with two accounts, @news_ommah_ and @eyes___IS), Abu Muhammad al-Fatih (with one account @gothoathinnhg), and Abu Mu'awiyah al-Shami (with three accounts, @abo_moawea_H1_d, @abo_moawea_HD, and @abo_moawea_HD19). As a consequence of the constant taking down of IS twitter accounts, none of these accounts are active today. That said, I maintain an archive saved on my laptop of all releases during the one week time period. Additionally, due to the taking down of accounts, it is conceivable that I may have missed a release or two, though I am confident based on my years of experience collecting and verifying that I retrieved the vast majority of official releases.

The article has two parts. The first offers some descriptive statistics about the corpus, while the second looks in depth at the main types of content.

IS Propaganda by the Numbers

Besides the sourcing and release title/description, I coded the releases for eight variables: date, wilayat (province), country, city/village/region, media center, language(s), medium, and types. During the week of April 18-24, 2015, IS put out 123 different media releases. On average, IS posted 18 media releases per day, though the numbers varied from 9 documents on April 20 to 24 documents on April 18 (see Table 1).

Date	Number of Releases
4/18/2015	24
4/19/2015	17
4/20/2015	9
4/21/2015	21
4/22/2015	21
4/23/2015	16
4/24/2015	15
<i>Average</i>	<i>18</i>

Table 1. IS Media Releases by Date

Over this time span, IS media released content from 24 different provinces within its broader self-styled Caliphate system (see Table 2). Overall, at the time of the data collection, IS claimed to have 33 provinces, which include: Iraq (10), Syria (7), Iraq/Syria (2), Yemen (5), Libya (3), Saudi Arabia (2), Algeria (1), Egypt (1), Afghanistan/Pakistan (1), and Nigeria (1). Therefore, within this one week time period, IS distributed content from 73% of the areas it claims to control and/or has a presence. Although the heartland of IS is in Raqqa and Ninawa, Halab (Aleppo) has the most releases, in part because the majority of releases are on military activities (more on this below). And while Ninawa still has active fighting, Raqqa has more or less been secured by IS, with no military battle taking place in that part of its territory. There were also three releases that did not necessarily relate specifically to any particular wilayah, but were more general. One was IS’s monthly calendar, another was a video message released by al-Hayat Media that did not mention the location of filming (even though it was most likely in Raqqa), and, finally, a graphic that suggested a “top-10” list of videos released by IS that individuals should watch.

Wilayah	Number of Releases	Wilayah	Number of Releases
Halab	18	Kirkuk	3
Ninawa	15	Tarabulus	3
al-Barakah	12	Unknown	3
al-Barqah	11	Baghdad	2
al-Anbar	7	al-Furat	2
al-Janub	7	al-Jazirah	2
al-Raqqah	6	al-Khayr	2
Dimashq	6	Gharb Ifriqiyya	2
Salah al-Din	6	Sinai	2
Homs	4	Diyala	1
Dijlah	3	Khurasan	1
Hamah	3	Sana’a	1
		Shimal Baghdad	1

Table 2. IS Media Releases by Wilayah

Although 58% (19 of 33) of IS’s claimed provinces are in Iraq and Syria, there is a disproportionate amount of content coming from those two countries with 81% (or 100 of 123) of the total. This illustrates that although IS wants to present an image that it is active and conducting different types of operations in a wide variety of locations, in fact the vast majority come from the core territories of what used to be part of Iraq and Syria. There is a significant reduction in the number of releases when one gets to the third country on the list, Libya (see Table 3).

Country	Number of Releases
Syria	52
Iraq	48
Libya	14
Unknown	3
Egypt	2
Nigeria	2
Pakistan	1
Yemen	1

Table 3. IS Media Releases by Country

Although one can identify which provinces releases are coming from, not all of them are from IS’s provincial-level media outlets. Within IS’s broader official media apparatus are a number of media wings. They include its original one—al-Furqan Media—as well as the more recently created ones in the past two years: al-I’tisam Media, Ajnad Media, and al-Hayat Media. In addition, there is also IS’s provincial-level media offices for each province as well as its news agency A’maq and its radio station al-Bayan. In the case of this particular week of tracking information, IS’s shari’a committee also released a document. As one can see in Table 4 when adding the layer of media outlets, the distribution changes compared with just the provincial-level tally. In this case, A’maq News Agency, al-Bayan Radio, al-Hayat Media, al-Furqan Media, and the Shari’a Committee represent 22% (or 27 of 123) of the media releases, while the rest of the 78% of official releases come from its provincial-level media operations. This suggests a more decentralized system compared to that of two years ago, when IS was only using al-Furqan Media. It also illustrates the organization’s growth both geographically and in terms of technical capability. This partly explains why IS is so prolific in its content production and dissemination.

Media Outlet	Number of Releases	Media Outlet	Number of Releases
Wikalat A’maq al-Ikhbariyya	15	Wilayat al-Furat	2
Wilayat Halab	15	Wilayat al-Jazira	2
Wilayat al-Baraka	11	Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya	2
Wilayat al-Barqa	10	Wilayat Hamah	2
Idha’ah al-Bayan	8	Wilayat Homs	2
Wilayat Ninawa	8	Wilayat Sinai	2
Wilayat al-Janub	7	al-Furqan Media	1
Wilayat al-Anbar	6	Wilayat al-Khayr	1
Wilayat al-Raqqa	6	Shari’a Committee	1
Wilayat Dijla	3	Wilayat al-Khayr	1
Wilayat Dimashq	3	Wilayat Diyala	1
Wilayat Kirkuk	3	Wilayat Khurasan	1
Wilayat Tarabulus	3	Wilayat Salah al-Din	1
al-Hayat Media	2	Wilayat Sana’a	1
Wilayat Baghdad	2	Wilayt Salah al-Din	1

Table 4. IS Media Releases By Media Outlet

When it comes to data at the regional and city level, there are major gaps in part because 33% (41 of 123) of the releases do not include geographical information at this resolution level. Only 12% (or 6 of 49) of the cities/villages/regions mentioned had more than two releases about them. They included Baiji (6), Benghazi (6), Ninawa, (5), Kobane (4), Darnah (3), and Mosul (3). With major fighting at the Baiji oil refinery between IS and Iraqi Shia militias, as well as at Kobane between IS and the Syrian Kurds, these locations are, not surprisingly, two of the top places mentioned. What’s more, the Libyan cities of Benghazi and Darnah are overrepresented; perhaps because IS only controls a few locations it is more willing to identify where it is operating in Libya to show it has a greater presence, as in the case of Iraq and Syria. The last is Ninawa (with

no particular city or village mentioned) and Mosul, which is the capital of Ninawa province, highlighting IS's Iraqi stronghold.

The reason for the disproportionate Western media coverage of IS magazines such as *Dabiq* is their availability in English. This creates a biased understanding of IS as a phenomenon since *Dabiq* is for a particular audience. Yet, all of IS media content is published in Arabic, while the second largest language used is English at 6.5% (or 8 of 123).

Language	Number of Releases
Arabic	123
English	8
Russian	5
Kurdish	4
French	2
Urdu	1

Table 5. IS Media Release By Language

In addition to having its provincial-level media offices, IS has been able to put out more content by showing picture albums of its activities. It is easier to take a picture and add a graphic from the particular province it was taken in and then posting it online than the production of a video, which is a more difficult and time-consuming process. As a result, 63% (or 77 of 123) of the releases are of these online picture galleries, with a large reduction to video messages that account for 20% of IS releases for the week studied. If one adds the graphic medium, then 88% of IS releases are visual.

Medium	Number of Releases
Picture	77
Video	24
Graphic	6
News Report	6
Radio and PDF	6
Radio	2
Statement	2

Table 6. IS Media Releases by Medium

Last, there were a number of topics portrayed within all of the releases IS distributed the week under examination. A little less than half of them were military operations, projecting the image of an organization not only on the offense, but also attempting to hold its front lines, if not push them forward. In more secure areas, IS has greater freedom to conduct its da'wa campaign of calling people to join its cause, instituting its conservative social agenda through its hisba office, and providing services through its governance apparatus. A fuller discussion on the content of these releases will be addressed in the qualitative section below.

Type	Number of Releases
Military	58
Governance	13
Da'wa	10
Hisba	10
Promotion of the Caliphate	9
Enemy Attack	9
News	7
Martyrdom	4
Execution	1
Denying Enemy Reports	1
Other	1

Table 7. IS Media Releases by Type

In addition to these statistics, we have IS's daily news reports from its al-Bayan Radio Station, which describe all of its military operations for each day. If accurate, during the week that I analyzed this data, IS conducted 258 military operations in 23 of its provinces, highlighting how its media releases don't often match what it is actually undertaking on a day-to-day basis. Unlike the relative evenness in distribution between media releases from Iraq and Syria, in terms of actual military operations, Iraq accounted for 67% (or 173 of 258) of all attacks in the week covered, while IS only carried out 19% (or 48 of 258) of its military operations in Syria. This shows the potential asymmetric nature of IS media operations and how it could attempt to alter the perceptions of what it is doing, since it is clearly fighting far less in Syria than in Iraq.

The Framing of IS's Message

As noted above, there are eleven key types of messages disseminated in the Islamic State's releases from the week I followed. To gain a deeper understanding of IS analytically, the most important among these types are the top six: military, governance, da'wa, hisba, promotion of the caliphate, and enemy attack. IS's news reports, its martyrdom notices, its execution of innocent Ethiopian Christians, its denial of enemy reports, and its top ten video suggestions are all interesting, but less prominent. Therefore, the analysis below will focus on the top six types of messages. As we will see, within these types there are a number of recurrent themes: IS portrays itself as winners, competent, and pious, while it casts its enemies as unjust and unbelievers.

Military

When promoting its military related-activities, IS projects an image of always being on the march. There is always progress, with enemies being killed, defeated, or territory being taken over. This echoes the winning narrative that Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger describe in their recent book *ISIS: The State of Terror*. The language described about its operations is always offensive in nature or using action verbs. IS also uses a variety of terms to discredit and dehumanize its enemies. Lastly, besides its military operations, IS also highlights military training camps as incubators of future soldiers of the so-called Caliphate, which will serve as the building blocks of a new generation of fighters.

As an example of the framing of IS's success on the battlefield, a video released by A'maq on April 18 portrays fighting in Iraq as "continued progress of the Islamic State fighters in parts of the Baiji Oil Refinery." [2] Further, in a picture series on April 20, IS shows its destruction of the Iraqi Army's armor in al-Ramadi. [3] Moreover, when describing a military operation against Kurdish forces, IS is quick to note that it inflicted "direct" casualties on the enemy. [4] At the same time, in a blog post by A'maq, it plays up the losses of its

enemies, showcasing in a video how the so-called “Free Army” (better known as the Free Syrian Army or FSA) lost its only supply line to the Damascus region at the hands of IS, while also losing 40 soldiers.[5] Further, IS highlights its counterintelligence capabilities when it destroyed minesweepers of the Iraqi Army on the al-Hadithah-al-Baghdadi Road.[6]

When discussing its military operations and capabilities, IS is keen to use derogatory language against its enemies, in part to delegitimize them, but also to present IS as the true believers and defenders of Sunni being, rights, and property. It is also a way to signal its supporters that it is defeating its enemies. During the week of releases I followed I was able to identify seven particular derogatory terms: *al-sahawat al-murtaddin* (the apostate awakening), in reference to its Sunni enemies in Iraq and Syria; ‘B.K.K.’ *al-murtaddin* (P.K.K. apostates), Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria; *tanzim al-nusayri* (the Alawite regime), the Assad regime and its supporters; *junud al-taghut* (soldiers of the tyrant), in reference to those fighting under General Khalifa Hiftar in Libya; *jaysh al-safawi* (the Safavid Army), a euphemism for the Iraqi army that is controlled by Iran since the Safavid’s are an old Iranian Shia dynasty; *al-ahzab al-kurdiyya al-ilhadiyya* (the atheistic Kurdish parties), another reference to the PKK as well as the YPJ in Iraq and Syria respectively; and *al-hashd al-rafidi* (the rejectionist committees), a derogatory way of describing Shia and referencing the militias established by Shia Iraqis. Because these fighting forces are outside the pale of Islam and are legitimate targets, it explains IS’s justification for extreme violence. And, as one can see, unless one is truly supportive of IS then one is likely to be subject to its excessive fighting, even other Sunnis.

The final aspect of IS military messaging deals with the future generation and the new forces it is building to continue the fight and follow through on its promise to remain and expand (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*). For example, in a picture series from the city of Hit, Iraq, IS shows off newly minted graduates from its “Two Shaykhs Military Camp”, parading them in a convoy of tens of cars and pickup trucks with dozens of individuals armed with a variety of weapons through the main street.[7] This not only highlights the importance of these new graduates, but also contributes to the militarization of civilian life by lionizing them. Similarly, following the graduation of one of its ‘cub’ units (for children and young teenagers), IS boasts of the new skills these children obtained, such as marching with the black flag and taking ready positions to fire upon the enemy at a roundabout in a town in al-Jazira province.[8] With a different focus, in a video that highlights its al-Kurar Military Camp in Dijla province, IS proudly shows the various training methods for the new recruits to demonstrate its professionalization and the serious nature of such camps. In this case, the different styles include amphibious warfare, close combat fighting, weight lifting, and urban warfare.[9]

Governance and Hisba

The main message that the Islamic State puts forward when discussing its governance and hisba activities is that it is a state of high competence and swift justice, and that life goes on even while the war is continuing. There are a number of ways IS shows this. One example is through its community relations office, where it has what it describes as “hospitality meetings” with different clans, as when it met with the Albu Hasuni and al-Mushahada clans in al-Baraka province during the week under study.[10] This is a way for IS to maintain ties with local brokers and demonstrate that it is taking the interests of different actors into consideration, as well as highlight that these clans have bought into IS’s system. In addition, IS touts its state-building apparatus by doing rehabilitation work on al-Tabqa Public Hospital, opening the Education Center doors to employment, publishing of its custom shari’ah committee-approved calendar for the Islamic month of Rajab in the year 1436 Hijri, and building arches on an external road, among other things.[11]

Besides displaying state-building through public works projects, which have gotten even more sophisticated since I collected this particular week's worth of data, IS also wants to show normalcy within the territory it controls. This is why, on April 21, IS published pictures of agricultural activity continuing in Wilayat Halab in spite of the continued war and the continued business at the *suc* (market) for al-Barouza village. [12] This message was further driven home in a video message called "Services of the Subjects #1," where IS interviewed three residents in Mosul as testimonials. In it, the first man thanked God and the Islamic State for the progress and success in improving the conditions of the municipality, specifically for clearing streets and the generally comfortable living conditions. He tells people to come visit and enjoy the comfortable lifestyle in Mosul. The second man tells people to come and enjoy the stability and security in the Islamic State, while the third man explains how IS cleared large concrete slabs that had been blocking the street since 2003, reiterating the message that everyone is comfortable. [13] This is clearly propaganda, but it is the image IS hopes to portray to its supporters and potential recruits, whether locally or globally.

Last, IS highlights its *hisba* (moral policing) activity to illustrate not only that it is living up to its precepts, but also bringing to justice those who, in its view, violate such precepts. Two major ceremonial and ritualistic activities IS pursues is the burning of cigarettes, marijuana, hookahs, alcohol, and other products deemed immoral. This is of course in addition to the meting out of corporal and capital punishments. [14] Regarding the latter, during the week of media collation, IS implemented the *ta'zir* (corporal) penalty for a man embezzling Zakat funds, the *hadd* (limit/crimes against God) for a thief, *ta'zir* of four people charged with theft, and the stoning of an individual described as a "sodomite". [15] Besides these activities, which occurred during the time of this study, the IS *hisba* team is also usually involved in the destruction of Sufi and Shia shrines, closing shops during times of prayer, and making sure food and medical products being sold in markets are not expired or counterfeit, among other things.

Da'wa

There are a number of critical features of IS's *da'wa* campaign. In particular, as noted above, it has been establishing permanent and/or roving 'media points' in various locations that distribute IS media content that is originally released online; passing out its own custom *da'wa* literature, which is produced by its al-Hammah Office as well as provincial-level statements; erecting billboards throughout cities and villages; and conducting *da'wa* forums, among other things. All of these activities are aimed at calling people to IS's message and interpretation of Islam. It also seeks to educate individuals to return to the "true" Islam, which they either have abandoned or have a mistaken understanding of (from IS's perspective).

For example, on April 18, IS built a new stationary media point that was soon-to-be operational in Homs province. [16] As for its *da'wa* literature, in Halab province IS distributed a number of pamphlets to residents as well as taping them to walls of shops and the outside of a mosque. The titles of this literature include "Loyalty to Islam and Not to the Nation (*al-watan*)", "Remembrance for the End of the Daytime", "The Islamic Gold Dinar or the American Paper Dollar?", "The Pinnacle of Islam", "Important Questions on Methodology (*'aqida*)", "Why Prayer in the Mosque?", and "The Two Bases Upon Jihad." [17] Likewise, in al-Janub province, IS gave individuals a brochure on the duties of the Friday prayer (*jum'a*). [18] Moreover, in al-Barqa province, IS handed out summaries of its military operations for the day in its various provinces across its self-styled state. [19]

Similarly, IS also called attention to three billboards that it had put up around the city of al-Bab in northern Syria. The first propagated one of IS's major slogans: "The Caliphate Upon the Prophetic Methodology (*manhaj*)". The second is a message to "a brother mujahid" on the importance of patience (*sabr*), while the

third one is a series of emphatic statements about the realities on the ground in the Caliphate: “Here is the Abode of Islam. Here is the Land of the Caliphate. Here [the ideas of] *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’* (loyalty to the Muslims and disavowal to the unbelievers) [stand]. Here is the market of Jihad. Here is the winds of paradise. Here is the glory. Here is the dignity.”[20] All of these messages reinforce the ideas IS hopes to ingrain within society and for it to become second nature. Another avenue for putting out its message and ideas is through da’wa meetings. One such event took place on April 20, and was targeted toward children and younger teenagers. Many of these forums have targeted this particular age group because IS understands that they are the basis of the future. In this case, three children made the pitch to other young potential adherents. The first child recites Qur’anic verses and Islamic poetry, verses about serving God and God’s loving nature, and on doing jihad. He also tells the crowd to undertake jihad and sings IS’s *nashid* (religiously-sanctioned *a capella* hymns) about the caliphate remaining (*baqiya*). An even younger child then thanks God for giving him strength and courage and makes many religious references, while the oldest child of three discusses how “we have become and we will stay soldiers” and concludes by talking about the importance of serving God.[21]

Promotion of the Caliphate

When looking at the full official output of IS one could argue that it is all about the promotion of its Caliphate. This is true of course, but I also want to identify particular messages where IS emphasizes the greatness of its overall vision and mission. Increasingly, it has relied on taking pictures of nature within its territorial control to show how idyllic, pristine, and beautiful the Caliphate is, even though the environment within the Islamic State is no different now than when it was either under the control of the Maliki regime in Iraq or under Syrian rebel forces or the Assad regime in Syria. Nevertheless, this kind of message appears to really resonate with supporters. In addition, IS’s messaging has also sought to highlight the significance of its social services, as well as the great life one can live under the Caliphate, especially by foreign fighters. There is also the component of new local pledges of allegiance (*bay’at*) to IS to illustrate that there is a momentum toward supporting it and therefore, why should one wait if one has yet to do so, as was the case of this particular week of analysis, when IS released a new bay’a pledge from Wilayat Sana’a in Yemen.[22]

A perfect example of IS highlighting the beauty of the environment within the Islamic State is its media release on April 18, which includes pictures of the ripples of a river, a dandelion, and a green forest in Wilayat al-Barakah.[23] Three days later, in Wilayat Halab it showed another, smaller stream and a shepherd moving his flock of sheep.[24] Lastly, in the town of al-Hul, IS released a picture of the sunset that is bright orange and red, with rays coming through the pillow-like clouds.[25] In many ways, this is the “Instagramification” of IS media, which appeals to its younger audience in the West who might decide to emigrate (*hijra*) to Iraq or Syria.

Another way IS seeks to promote itself is through two different videos looking at the medical services IS provides within the provinces of Aleppo and Raqqa, both released on April 24. The latter video went viral because the Australian Tareq Kamleh, who went by Abu Yusuf al-Ustrali, spoke in English in the video about the pediatric department. The story was then picked up by virtually every major media outlet in the West. This is an example of the megaphone effect IS hopes to gain through its official media releases, since the mainstream media helps spread its propaganda much more widely than it can do alone.

In the first video, four doctors speak about the necessity of providing healthcare to the poor and heal the sick. They also discuss the reputed progress and growth with its facilities and highlight that one no longer need *wasta* (connections) to get into the hospital, contrasting how IS administers such services compared with the Assad regime.[26] In the second video, IS gets into more detail about the different departments within

the medical facility it operates by speaking with six doctors. For example, it has an administrative health office that is the centerpiece of the entire structure. The hospital also has an injury wing, an x-ray division, a physical therapy center, an acupuncture department, a kidney department, the aforementioned pediatric department, and a medical school. The video even provides metrics such as having 500 patients per week. It also notes that doctors from all over the world are helping, including from Russia, Australia, Tunisia, and Sri Lanka, as well as women doctors working with female patients.[27]

Enemy Attack

Finally, there are two major ways IS portrays attacks from the enemy: first, attacks upon 'ordinary' Muslims; and second, upon infrastructure within the Islamic State. The latter is a way of saying that IS builds, while its enemies destroy. It also conveys the message that the international community is working against it and will never allow Muslims to live in a prosperous society. In this way, IS wants to show that its enemies are always unjust no matter what they do: that the outside world is adamantly against Muslims.

As an example, after a April 21 coalition airstrike (which IS describes as a Safavid-Crusader bombing) in the Aden neighborhood of Mosul, IS released a number of pictures of the destruction of civilian property as well as civilians injured, maimed, bloodied, and sitting in hospital beds being treated or dying.[28] IS released similar pictures in Sirte, Libya on both April 23 and 24 related to the destruction of civilian housing and injured and bloodied people as a result of what IS described as 'indiscriminate' bombing by the 'apostate' Fajr Libya, the main Islamist militia in the Libyan civil war.[29] Moreover, IS reported on a variety of other aerial attacks on infrastructure, including a desalination plant in al-Shadadi, Syria, a mosque in Benghazi, Libya, a hospital in Dayr Hafar, Syria, and a school in Dar al-Fatah, Syria.[30]

Conclusion

The picture drawn here is but a snapshot of IS's official media releases for one week. As close observers of IS propaganda will know, this sample is not fully representative of everything IS releases over longer periods of time, but it is more representative than what gets highlighted in Western media. In any case, this inquiry was intended as an illustration that will hopefully inspire other researchers to take a more holistic look at IS media over time. One could go all the way back to 2003, when it was originally Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, or look back to April 2013 when IS officially announced its presence in Syria. Either way, there are some important conclusions that can be made based on the data collated and analyzed above.

Regarding the quantitative section, although 58% (or 19 of 33) of IS's claimed provinces are in Iraq and Syria, there is a disproportionate amount of content coming from those two countries with 81% in total. The majority (78%) of IS-official releases come from its provincial-level media operations. This highlights a more decentralized nature of its media output compared to its methodology more than two years ago. In terms of medium of release, 88% of IS releases are visual (63% picture, 20% video, and 5% graphic), showing the high proportion of emotive media content. Last, through IS's daily news report with al-Bayan Radio Station, IS conducted 258 military operations in 23 of its wilayat, highlighting how its media releases don't often coincide or match what it is doing militarily on a day-to-day basis. This shows the potential asymmetric nature of IS media operations and how it could attempt to alter the perceptions of what it is doing, since it is clearly fighting far less in Syria than in Iraq, let alone its operations outside its core territory.

As for the qualitative side of analysis, within the six key types of methods of IS official media used, when promoting its military related-activities, IS is always on the march and active. There is always progress and

enemies are killed, defeated, or they are taking over territory. IS also highlights military training camps as incubators of future soldiers of the so-called Caliphate that will continue the dominance and the building blocks of a new generation. On the governance and hisba front IS seeks to show that it is competent, conducts swift justice, has the ability to run and build its state, and that life is going on even while a war is continuing in many parts of its territory. The purpose of IS's da'wa activities and messaging is in the service of calling people to the group's interpretation of Islam. It also seeks to educate individuals to return to their 'true' faith and highlight its spreading of its message. Another important avenue of recruitment and cultivation of sympathy is through its promotion of the caliphate campaign to show the ideal nature and environment one is and/or would be living under, its allegedly functioning service capabilities and great life individuals are living as well as the momentum of support it has with continued pledges of allegiance on both the local and global level. Finally, IS characterizes enemy actions as attacks upon "ordinary" Muslims and upon infrastructure within the Islamic State in order to create a visceral pull and reaction for more support.

From this, hopefully, I have provided a sketch of IS's media mechanics, strategy, and capabilities, as well as the range of themes it projects. It is a sophisticated operation that has many components and pieces that will likely continue to evolve and become more advanced as IS further solidifies its control over territory in Iraq and Syria as well as even possibly Libya or elsewhere. As the Islamic State says for its territorial control, so too one can say for its media operations: it is remaining and expanding every day.

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Notes

- [1] Since drafting this paper in early June 2015, Charlie Winter of Quilliam Foundation has also written a paper on IS media: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>.
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