

Filtering the Islamic State's Meta-Narratives: From Global to Local

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Articles & Testimony

The following is an excerpt from Aaron Zelin's contribution to the Carter Center report [Counteracting Daesh Propaganda: Action-Oriented Research for Practical Policy Outcomes](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/counteringdaeshpropaganda-feb2016.pdf) (https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/counteringdaeshpropaganda-feb2016.pdf). To read his full chapter, download the PDF.

The Islamic State provides an unprecedented amount of documentation on its own nature and the messages it hopes will inspire others to join it in IS territory or conduct terrorist attacks in their home country. This paper aims to shed light on the ways in which IS transforms its broader meta-narratives into a local message. It will examine three of the group's metanarratives and provide two case studies on how IS filters these ideas to a local context, in particular looking at Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. This filtering allows IS to shape its message based on local ideas and conditions that will resonate most strongly in a particular location. It also illustrates the elasticity in the group's ideas, giving insights into why it has become so potent at recruiting individuals from all backgrounds, cultures, and regions of the world.

In its messaging, the Islamic State deploys four overarching arguments: (1) the war against Islam, (2) winning [on the battlefield], (3) the caliphate state-building project, and (4) the imminent apocalypse. First, the Islamic State contends that its leaders and members are the only people truly following the original interpretation and practice of Islam from the time of the Muslim prophet Muhammad and the *sahaba* (Muhammad's companions). Therefore, the group is protecting Islam from a series of enemies that are attempting to destroy it. In no particular order, IS claims these groups of entities are un-Islamic and must be fought to preserve Islam: *rawafidh* (a derogatory term for Shi'a); *nusayris* (a derogatory term for Alawites); *taghut* (tyrants), a term to describe Sunni leaders, whom they view as apostates; *munafiqin* (hypocrites), a term to describe Muslims that do not live up to their religion in the eyes of IS; *murtadin* (apostates), those who have left Islam (since IS has a very narrow definition of Islam, this encompasses many ordinary Muslims); and *sahawat* (awakening), a term that originally referred to the tribal awakening in Iraq against the Islamic State's predecessor organization last decade. Further, it has taken on the symbol of any Sunni insurgent faction that goes against IS on the battlefield: *silibiyyin* (crusaders), a reference to Western countries; and

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