

Lining Up the Tools to Break the Islamic State Brand

by [Alberto Fernandez \(/experts/alberto-fernandez\)](/experts/alberto-fernandez)

Feb 2, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/tjmy-aladwat-llqda-ly-allamt-alty-trwj-l-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslamyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/tjmy-aladwat-llqda-ly-allamt-alty-trwj-l-tnzym-aldwlt-alaslamyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alberto Fernandez \(/experts/alberto-fernandez\)](/experts/alberto-fernandez)

Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and a former senior State Department official.



Brief Analysis

Reversing the political, military, and ideological factors that led to the movement's rise will require substantive projects that are as self-sustaining and nimble as IS has proven to be.

The Islamic State brand is an ambitious and seductive vision that has proven to be a tremendous media success. Yet this vision is ultimately tethered to the perception of an actual, functioning utopian state. Military action against IS havens in Syria and Iraq is thus the most effective way to puncture the group's propaganda balloon. Ongoing efforts toward that end are producing some tangible results, but all too slowly. And while technical measures to diminish the volume of IS material available on social media are also important, the brand is now a mature one that is well understood and internalized by proponents and adversaries alike. Washington will therefore need to find more creative ways of getting its own message across, mainly via its partners in the Middle East.

REBRANDING AND WORKING THROUGH PROXIES

On the surface, the recent rebranding of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) into the Global Engagement Center seems to be nothing more than a public relations gambit. Not one of the responsibilities listed in the State Department press release announcing the change was new -- CSCC had worked on all of these tasks as far back as 2011. According to press accounts, however, the new center will no longer be in the direct messaging business. If its budget remains the same -- about \$5.5 million per year -- the move away from direct messaging would free up approximately \$3.5 million for the creation of overseas proxies and indirect messaging platforms.

Earmarking more funds for such efforts is certainly worth trying, assuming the programs in question include solid performance metrics and congressional oversight. Yet the one visible example of a Middle Eastern messaging proxy has not lived up to its promise, at least not yet. Launched to great fanfare in July 2015, the Sawab Center in the

United Arab Emirates is largely funded by Abu Dhabi, with two American foreign service officers detailed to the operation. Its output -- some 2,900 tweets in over six months -- has been a bit underwhelming, resembling a smaller, more timid version of CSCC's digital outreach team. Although it should have greater freedom to do things that overt U.S. government communications avoid, Sawab is missing two things that the IS brand has in abundance: volume and passion. The idea behind Sawab is solid, however, and one hopes that it will mature, and that similar initiatives in the pipeline will evolve into something more substantive and consequential.

Unsure about how to proceed in the propaganda war, the U.S. government wasted much of 2015, as news reports presented an image of confusion and drift compounded by poor management and infighting over the right formula to follow. Apparent micromanaging by the National Security Council, a risk-averse mentality, and obsessive attention to form over substance prevailed. Perhaps something has been learned from this debacle and the center's new, well-regarded leadership will be empowered to do the necessary work. The government seems to be making the beginnings of slow progress, but it is too early to tell.

INCREASING VOLUME AND FINDING VOICES

Some of last year's efforts to facilitate information on IS defectors and recanters could prove very valuable and should be supported and expanded. As IS fighters return to their home countries, governments should find creative ways to incentivize counterradicalization media outreach as much as integration and law enforcement. In Washington, the disconnect at the top levels of government does not detract from the dogged work being done in this field by dedicated civil servants, foreign service officers, and authorities detailed from other agencies.

Given the importance of Iraq and especially Syria to how the IS discourse is sold to Western and non-Western audiences distant from the front, there is real value in empowering Sunni Muslim voices in those war-torn countries who can speak directly to wavering individuals outside the Middle East. In essence, their message would be, "I am one of those Muslims whom IS claims to be defending, and the image that the group is presenting to you of our reality is a false one." The power of such personal testimony is clear in the videos propagated by IS itself -- so many of the individuals who appear in these messages speak clearly and directly, stating all sorts of awful things with uncovered faces and tremendous conviction. Last month, the *Telegraph* described how London police have used videos of Syrian mothers speaking in Arabic to reach out to the British population. This is a worthy experiment -- the question is whether it can be deepened and individualized to replicate the one-to-one radicalization process that is so often a key factor in influencing new recruits. It should be.

As detailed by recent PBS *NewsHour* coverage, the U.S. government and others are also funding some interesting work in the peer-to-peer interactive realm on social media, often through universities. These efforts seek to begin redressing the imbalance between the time that IS and Washington respectively invest in recruitment. Only time will tell whether such small projects will be able to contest the individual approach pioneered by IS and its volunteer recruiters, but it is a worthwhile investment to make.

IDEOLOGY MATTERS TOO

The U.S. government should also find room for a well-funded regional media effort promoting tolerant, liberal Arab Muslim values in contrast to the vision of Salafi jihadism. This is a longer-term project that has value in promoting the pluralism and open discourse that are anathema to movements like IS and al-Qaeda. Some pioneering efforts to do this have arisen in the private sector (e.g., [Fikra Forum \(http://fikraforum.org\)](http://fikraforum.org)). And clearly there are enough eloquent individuals in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and even the Gulf states who hold tolerant worldviews but are rarely empowered by Washington or anyone else -- certainly not on a consistent basis, and not remotely like the support lavished on a range of non-IS Salafi media.

Again, this is not something the U.S. government can do directly, but it can certainly prioritize the promotion of such

efforts among its regional partners. President Obama has spoken several times about the importance of defeating the Islamic State's ideology, but he has done so without explaining what that ideology is or how to counter it. Indeed, shifting to indirect initiatives underscores the deficit in the government's direct counterterrorism communications efforts. All too often, its default approach has been to work with friendly governments or contract the task to companies or organizations inside the Beltway. To be sure, the Moroccan, Jordanian, and Emirati governments are making some very worthwhile efforts in this area, and there is nothing wrong with that. More is needed, however.

Washington should also look to expand the scope of nongovernmental messaging platforms and organizations in the Middle East, with the goal of building sustainable messaging efforts against Salafi jihadists. Last month, for example, an IS "Wilayah Nineveh" video launched as part of a coordinated campaign on North Africa spent almost as much time attacking Sufi Muslims and liberals as it did criticizing political authorities. The Salafi "sea" from which IS rises should not be ignored -- encouraging regional partners to push back against the political and societal discourse that sets the stage for violence is good policy.

Finally, it must be remembered that the Islamic State is only one part of a larger ideological trend that is inimical to U.S. values and foreign policy interests. The petri dish where it and al-Qaeda evolved was not created overnight, and the political, military, and ideological factors that led to their rise will not be easily reversed. Salafi jihadism needs to be fought on every front, and there seems to be a slow coalescing of critical mass against it; for example, witness the Marrakesh Declaration that emerged from a recent conference on "Religious Minorities in Muslim Lands," jointly convened by the Moroccan government and the UAE-based "Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies." Yet the jury is still out on whether these efforts are too cosmetic, superficial, or esoteric. The challenge is to translate understanding and alarm into substantive policies and projects that are as self-sustaining and nimble as IS has proven to be.

Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and former State Department coordinator of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)