

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

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



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The group produces much more than execution videos, and examining its propaganda on topics such as military affairs, governance, preaching, and moral policing is key to understanding why individuals spread its message or join its ranks.

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 of 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 due not only to the language barrier (the vast majority of official media releases are in Arabic), but also to a singular fascination among the media and some researchers with IS's 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 that the group 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.

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

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