
How to Keep our Youth away from IS: The Need for Narrative Analysis and Strategy

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pp. 48-52

Recommended Citation

de Graaff, Bob. "How to Keep our Youth away from IS: The Need for Narrative Analysis and Strategy." *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 Suppl. (2015): 48-52.

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How to Keep our Youth away from IS: The Need for Narrative Analysis and Strategy

Abstract

The German war theorist Carl von Clausewitz pointed out that in order to defeat an opponent one had to crush his point of gravitation (*Schwerpunkt*).^[1] In the case of non-state opponents, like the Islamic State, which do occupy territory, but more or less in a nomadic way, moving like a snake among the rocks, it is difficult to target a physical point of gravitation. In fact their *Schwerpunkt* is their ideological narrative, which functions as a redoubtable pull-factor, responsible for attracting throngs of foreign fighters. So far the West has shown a poor record in targeting this narrative. This paper tries to map some of the elements in IS's *Schwerpunkt* that look vulnerable and may be targeted in order to diminish the power of the Islamic State as much as possible without actually fighting the self-proclaimed Caliphate.

^[1] <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/VomKriege1832/TOC.htm>.

Introduction

The German war theorist Carl von Clausewitz pointed out that in order to defeat an opponent one had to crush his point of gravitation (*Schwerpunkt*).¹ In the case of non-state opponents, like the Islamic State, which do occupy territory, but more or less in a nomadic way, moving like a snake among the rocks, it is difficult to target a physical point of gravitation. In fact their *Schwerpunkt* is their ideological narrative, which functions as a redoubtable pull-factor, responsible for attracting throngs of foreign fighters. So far the West has shown a poor record in targeting this narrative. This paper tries to map some of the elements in IS's *Schwerpunkt* that look vulnerable and may be targeted in order to diminish the power of the Islamic State as much as possible without actually fighting the self-proclaimed Caliphate.

First, the difficulties of subduing IS and its lure to Western foreign fighters will be discussed. Then the general tenets of the IS narrative will be pointed out and finally the target points for strategic communications will be presented.

A Tough Opponent

Time and again it happens that terrorist attacks take place in North America or Western Europe or that jihadists escape to travel to Syria or Iraq, forcing intelligence and security authorities to admit that they had the culprits under surveillance, but just not at the moment.² The sheer number of (potential) jihadists and terrorists makes it impossible to keep them under surveillance all the time, unless the country would be turned into a police state. So far military actions against the Islamic State have shown mixed results and while the Caliphate may be rolled back in Syria and Iraq, it is projecting its influence into other areas in North and West Africa and South and Southeast Asia. All it shows is that it is not possible to bomb or arrest an idea from the surface of the earth.

The idea in this case is generally called by the names of Islamism and Wahhabism. The first major proponent of this idea challenging the West with terrorist onslaught was al-Qaeda, headed by Usama bin Laden and after his death in 2011 by his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda was guided by the ideas of the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid al-Qutb (1906-1966). Qutb as so many Islamists wanted to establish the rule of Sharia and to do so the Islamists would have to eliminate the influence of the West in the Muslim world and with it their "apostate" accomplices who rule the countries in the Muslim world. Qutb's ideas were very helpful in creating opposition against the Arab rulers, but less so in establishing a new Caliphate, because the central tenet of his philosophy was that no Muslim could rule over the other. The

¹ <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/VomKriege1832/TOC.htm>.

² Ed Pilkington and Miriam Elder, "FBI Faces Questions over Previous Contact with Boston Bombing Suspect", *The Guardian*, April 21, 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/21/boston-marathon-bombings-fbi-tsarnaev>; Nancy Dillon, "Charlie Hebdo Attack Plotters were Well-Known by French Authorities, Spotted with Al Qaeda Recruiter in 2010," *New York Daily News*, January 13, 2015, available at: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/charlie-hebdo-attackers-spotted-al-qaeda-recruiter-article-1.2076562>.

idea of a Muslim ruler was therefore an oxymoron to him.³ And thus, though Qutb-adept Usama bin Laden championed the idea of establishing a Caliphate, he remained stuck in his own rhetoric. When the choice was between awe-inspiring terrorist attacks and the possibility to have an emirate or caliphate Usama bin Laden chose the former. He first and foremost promoted an idea, al-Qaeda, which could be used as a brandname by organizations in Africa and Asia, as long as they professed some loyalty to the core of al-Qaeda.⁴

One of these affiliates, al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had earned its experience mainly by fighting American troops and Shiites in Iraq, developed into a different direction. One of its early leaders, al-Zarqawi, took a different view on Islamic rule than his mentors. His idea was actually quite the opposite. Wherever two Muslims are united, his teachings go, one will be the emir.⁵ Such an idea suited actual rule much better than the philosophy of Qutb had. Zarqawi's deviation from Qutb's central tenet meant that the movement needed territory to establish its rule. In the more or less civil war that developed after the American liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein, ethnic and religious cleansing went hand-in-glove with the establishment of the beginnings of a new Caliphate. After 2010 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi walked in the footsteps of the deceased al-Zarqawi as leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. He used the civil war in Syria to establish a branch of his organization in the neighboring country. In the summer of 2014 he surprised the world by taking the city of Mosul and proclaiming a Caliphate that had the dimensions of a middle-size country, albeit a state in flux. This Caliphate attracted thousands of foreign fighters, many more than any jihadist conflict before. Soon the Caliphate started receiving pledges of allegiance from other parts of Africa and Asia, where Islamist movements were trying to establish territorial rule.

This being the case it becomes nigh impossible to eradicate the violent Islamist movement physically from the face of the earth. Kinetic and law enforcement measures in and by themselves do not suffice. The only promising weapons seem to be words, as even former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged recently: "You begin to look at this thing not like a war, but more like the Cold War ... you're not going to win this with bullets, you're in a competition of ideas."⁶ However, so far a war of words against al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their like have not shown much success. It is not difficult to find utterances claiming that in so far as there is a public relations campaign going on, the Islamists are winning thanks to a sophisticated media strategy.⁷ This is quite different from the time of the Cold War,

³ De Graaff, Bob, *Op weg naar Armageddon: de evolutie van fanatisme* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2012), 503-515.

⁴ Ibid, 564-565; Scott Stewart, "The Jihadist Trap of Here and Now," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, June 25, 2015, available at: <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/jihadist-trap-here-and-now>.

⁵ Napoleoni, Loretta, *Terreurlegende Al-Zarqawi* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers 2006), 71.

⁶ "Donald Rumsfeld: George W. Bush Was Wrong About Iraq," *Bloomberg Politics*, June 8, 2015, available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-06-08/donald-rumsfeld-george-w-bush-was-wrong-about-iraq>.

⁷ Stern, Jessica and J.M. Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 244, 249; Roach, Alfred S., *Why Is The United States Losing The War Of Words In The Global War On Terror? Identifying Causes Of Failure In U.S. Communication Strategy* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2010); Bill Gertz, "Report: Islamic State Winning Propaganda War Against U.S.," *Free Beacon*, June 24, 2015, available at:

when the West used the superiority of democracy over dictatorship and the preeminence of capitalism over communism to its advantage in its wars of words.

The Lure of Apocalypse

The radicalized narrative⁸ of IS, which mobilizes and energizes support, is centered around several themes, including Muslim victimhood, a sense of belonging to a global Muslim community (*Ummah*), brutal winner's messaging by IS combatants, IS being the final utopia of an unadulterated Islam, to which all humiliated and suffering Muslims should flock to in order to take part in the great Day of Judgment.⁹ Thus IS distinguishes itself from al-Qaeda, being an inviting inclusive society for Sunni Muslims under threat instead of the terrorist vanguard that al-Qaeda was.

One of the elements that makes IS's narrative so potent is this appeal to apocalyptic senses, which urges foreign fighters to come to the Caliphate by proclaiming the message "do not miss the boat." One of the central tenets of apocalyptic narratives is an appeal to feelings of injustice. The apocalyptic story holds the promise that at the end of times the first shall be the last and the last shall be the first. Feelings of discrimination and inferiority abound both in the Islamic world and among Muslims in the West. The idea of getting on top of things in the midst of a world historical process has a strong appeal for those who feel a need for counter-humiliation in which both personal and broader social and political feelings coincide. We know from earlier apocalyptic movements that an apocalyptic glee over the fate of former elites is a highly attractive incentive to join.¹⁰ This notion makes it clear that the condemnation of maybe the most obvious part of IS, i.e. its abhorrent violent acts against its opponents, may not be very helpful in convincing people not to join this movement.

Neither will defeat and drawbacks immediately diminish the attractiveness of the Caliphate as such negative developments can easily be explained as lessons Allah is teaching his true followers to become even more ardent in their religious zeal. In a similar vein, any resistance can be explained as a vindication of IS's own beliefs that the eschatological battle between the true Muslims and the forces of the Muslim Antichrist, Dajjal, are beginning. Thus, as with any other apocalyptic belief, IS's belief system is a form of self-fulfilling paranoia. Another non-starter upon which non-Muslim politicians quite often enter is to state that the Islamic State does not

<http://freebeacon.com/national-security/report-islamic-state-winning-propaganda-war-against-u-s/>; Bibi T. van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative," 1 and 14, *ICCT Research Paper*, March 2015, available at: <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-van-Ginkel-Responding-To-Cyber-Jihad-Towards-An-Effective-Counter-Narrative-March2015.pdf>.

⁸ For the concept of "radicalized narrative" see Cobb, Sara, *Speaking of Violence. The Politics and Poetics of Narrative Dynamics in Conflict Resolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Charlie Winter, "Islamic State Propaganda: Key Elements of the Group's Messaging," *Terrorism Monitor* 12:13 (June 12, 2015), available at:

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44030&cHash=8e2c776b9fa5b40119a8dfc05b5c3ebf#.VZ5-MZPtmko; Alex P. Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the 'Islamic State,'" *ICCT Research Paper*, June 2015, available at: <http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ICCT-Schmid-Challenging-the-Narrative-of-the-Islamic-State-June2015.pdf>.

¹⁰ Cf. De Graaff, *Op weg naar Armageddon*.

represent the real Islam.¹¹ In the Islamic world it is already difficult to decide upon the real doctrine, let alone that non-Muslims claim to be authorities in this respect.

If we want to address especially the audience of those in the West who consider joining we have to come up with other means and ideas. That is where the combined roles of intelligence experts and educators come together. And that is why I think IAFIE is a good platform to discuss such a narrative strategy. The foregoing also demonstrates that it is necessary to first establish the lures of the IS narrative before we can develop an alternative or counter-narrative. In this respect the debate with IS differs from that with the communist empire of evil. Then we were preaching mainly for the converted; this time we will have to address those who need convincing, the ones that may or may not leave for the Caliphate and among whom an alternative or counter-narrative can make a difference.

In a global village that in the end may be no one's world, because no one's values may be accepted as self-evident,¹² such an effort at convincing, such an operation of influencing, may be an exercise that will not only pay off in the war against IS but will also be the stepping stone for future information and influence operations, in which the West has recently had to acknowledge the superiority of both IS and Putin's Russia.

Targeting Points

What are the weak points that could be exploited in the IS narrative? First of all as the near-end-state IS should be more or less perfect from an Islamist point of view. The fact that its area is controlled by "perfect" Muslims who have the blessing of Allah should guarantee almost perfect rule. Anything that can be detracted from this one-hundred percent will create doubts about the truthfulness of IS and its leaders.

IS also makes much of the special place allotted to women in the Caliphate. In its gender orientation it is most obvious that the Caliphate is a paradise for just the elected. Its claim to equality rings false in this respect and certainly women who have lived all their lives in the West will recognize this.

The leadership of the Caliphate opines that it can decide who is a real Muslim and who is a *kafir*. This dividing mechanism between us and them may turn out to be even more divisive than intended. Each decision about identity is open for criticism and doubt. The fact that the Caliphate does not unite Muslims but divides them may make the idea of a salutary state crumble. Divisions within the Caliphate may be the best way to disappoint those who came to live in a world free from the polarizations they were used to between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Another targeting point will be the fact that in a Caliphate ruled by leaders who call themselves Muslims they can no longer maintain that they are merely victims as they

¹¹ Geoff Dyer, "Isis is not about Islam, says Obama," *The Financial Times*, February, 19, 2015, available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d2977822-b85c-11e4-b6a5-00144feab7de.html#axzz3eTU2bBZE>; "Abbott Condemns Overseas Terror Attacks", *Sky News*, June 27, 2015, available at: <http://www.skynews.com.au/news/top-stories/2015/06/27/abbott-condemns-overseas-terror-attacks0.html>.

¹² Kupchan, Charles A., *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012).

liked to do in order to attract people who were willing to defend them. They have become perpetrators themselves. This would, by the way, be another argument for the West to leave the Islamic State as much as possible alone, as any interference could be explained as another form of Islamic victimization.

Hopeful Signs

Fortunately, after the attacks on the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris some Western governments decided to put greater efforts into counter-narratives. In February, the US government decided to coordinate strategic communication and public diplomacy policies in the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications at the State Department, which would expand and get its own intelligence cell. In the same month the Five Eyes intelligence community decided to develop counternarratives in order to refrain youths in the West from becoming foreign fighters. In the same vein the coordinator for counterterrorism of the European Union, Gilles de Kerchove, pleaded for the use of video clips to counter radicalization processes. And just recently the anti-IS coalition launched the counter-propaganda Sawab Centre in Abu Dhabi.

The Role of Disillusioned Foreign Fighters

The best champions for such a counter-narrative will not be the authorities in the West, just as a teacher or a police officer are not the most suitable persons to keep youths from starting to use drugs or commit crime. We know from such examples that a former drug addict or an ex-felon are all the more convincing. Therefore in the war of words against Islamic State the persons most suited to propagate the message are disillusioned jihadists who have returned to their countries of origin in the West. These recanters are proof *par excellence* that the Islamic State is not as ideal as it looked to some at first sight. They are the ones who came to the conclusion that there is still a lot of injustice in the Caliphate or that crucifixions, stoning, beheadings and slavery do not blend in with their wrong-headed ideas of romanticism.¹³ Intelligent programs should be established in which they come to play a role as part of pay-back system that will help them to reintegrate in their societies.

It will be very difficult to sell such a program to the public in Western states like the Netherlands, where the mayor of Rotterdam literally told radicalized youths to “fuck off,” where the prime minister said that he preferred Dutch foreign fighters to be killed in the Middle East rather than see them return, and where a majority of the population would like to see returnees locked up for as long as possible. It is to be hoped that the promise of greater efficacy will in the end convince both the authorities and the public at large that such an approach holds more promises than any other policy to reduce the attractiveness of the Islamic State.

¹³ Elaine Gainley, “Former Guantánamo Detainee Steering Europe’s Youths away from Jihad,” *Miami Herald*, June 7, 2015, available at: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/guantanamo/article23330670.html>.