Redefining ‘Propaganda’: The Media Strategy of the Islamic State

Charlie Winter

To cite this article: Charlie Winter (2020): Redefining ‘Propaganda’: The Media Strategy of the Islamic State, The RUSI Journal, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2020.1734321

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1734321

Published online: 17 Mar 2020.
The Islamic State’s contributions in the field of propaganda are sure to be one of its lasting and most infamous legacies. In the years that followed the declaration of its caliphate in 2014, it produced tens of thousands of unique media products: video clips; feature films; newspapers; photo-stories; radio bulletins; posters; mobile phone apps; and more.1 Each and every one of these mediums was deployed with a view not just to recruit new supporters, but to ‘shape perceptions’, ‘manipulate cognitions’ and ‘direct behaviours’.2

The Islamic State’s deployment of strategic communication – that is, long-term, goal-orientated outreach – was unparalleled in its scope and complexity. An essential pillar of its overarching caliphate project, it was used to augment and amplify its activities on a day-to-day basis. While its approach to propaganda was characterised by nuance, with multiple aims and means, the rest of the world’s take on it was not. Continually, politicians and public commentators saw it merely as a lever with which to attract supporters and exhibit its ‘savagery’.3 Throughout the rise and fall of the Islamic State, the conventional wisdom was that its media operations were a unitary, straightforward form of communication that could easily be countered through a similarly unitary, straightforward response.4

This mainstream understanding was woefully – and, indeed, damagingly – inadequate, because it only accounted for one aspect of the tactical and strategic utility the Islamic State was deriving from its propaganda.

Islamic State propaganda had an array of ends and means. Some materials instructed, while others solicited – and yet more had no obvious, action-oriented function. Taking this into account, this

---

article attempts to nuance the way in which the word 'propaganda' is used in contemporary discourse on war and terrorism. It contends that the term refers to an entire ecosystem of information in which different media activities can be geared towards entirely different tasks.

The discussion – which, due to the limited scope of this article, is only explorative in the present context – is structured as follows. First, there is a brief overview of Jacques Ellul’s theory of propaganda. The second section applies Ellul’s conceptual lens to the Islamic State’s stated doctrine of media jihad. The resultant synthesis is used in the third section to examine a one-week snapshot of official Islamic State output, which was archived by the author in February 2019. The article concludes with a brief advisory note to policymakers and academics working in the area.

**Theory, In Principle**

Ellul’s work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, should be required reading for anyone interested in the use of media for social and political engineering. Despite the fact it was written nearly 60 years ago, it is an invaluable aid for deciphering the strategic and tactical motivations of modern propagandists.

Ellul contends that ‘propaganda’ is not effective if one is attempting to implant new ideas. However, he holds that when it comes to compounding and crystallising already-held beliefs and ultimately turning thoughts into actions, its impact can be immense. To this end, it is most effective when propagandists have ‘encircled’ their target audiences and are telling them things to which they are already predisposed. Once the condition of encirclement has been met, concepts that were once abstract can be normalised so that, eventually, the ‘propagandee’ finds himself or herself ‘becom[ing] another person and obey[ing] impulses foreign to him [or her].’ Crucially, Ellul notes, this behavioural dividend does not materialise if propaganda is only being consumed ‘in sporadic fashion and at random’. To be truly effective, it must be ‘total’, making constant use of as many media channels as possible.

Having established this, Ellul presents a taxonomy of propaganda, in which he disaggregates it into four paired opposites: political/sociological; agitation/integration; vertical/horizontal; and rational/irrational. The first half of the first pair – that is, political propaganda – is most relevant to the discussion at hand. It involves ‘techniques of influence employed by a government, a party, an administration, a pressure group, with a view to changing the behavior of the public’. Its intent can be either strategic or tactical: ‘the former establishes the general line, the array of arguments, the staggering of the campaigns; the latter seeks to obtain immediate results within that framework.’ In other words, tactical, action-based propaganda only ‘works’ if it emerges in the context of ideas already established by strategic, brand-building propaganda.

**Theory, Applied**

It now serves to examine how propaganda functions in the specific context of jihadi insurgency. The work of Carsten Bockstette is highly informative in this regard. Writing in 2008, he argued that jihadi communication revolves around one of three clusters of objectives, which can be both strategic or tactical depending on the form of the propaganda in question: propagation; legitimisation; and intimidation. The first refers to efforts to attract recruits, draw in donors and expand the reach of the ideology. The second refers to efforts to justify violence and situate the actions of the movement within a broader Islamic-historic context. The last refers to efforts to scare and provoke the adversary. It most often manifests in propaganda of the deed and propaganda of the virtual deed.

The Islamic State’s stated strategic doctrine for propaganda corresponds closely to this, and this is illustrated in a propaganda field-guide published by its printing press in 2015. Entitled ‘Media Operative, You Are Also a Mujahid’, it details the value of jihadi media activism, both online and offline. The authors are unambiguous when it comes to the role of jihadi media in propagating ideology and expanding the movement. In the introduction, they state that the first goal of the media operative is to ‘buoy the morale of soldiers, spread news of their victories and good deeds, encourage the people to support them by clarifying their creed, methodology and intentions and bridge the intellectual gap between the mujahidin and ordinary Muslims’. In other words, propaganda – or, to use the pamphlet’s wording, ‘media jihad’ – is ideal for popularising the Islamic State brand. Note, however, that the focus here is on people who are already believers in the movement – those who Ellul would have referred to as active ‘propagandees’.

The authors are equally explicit about the need to defend the Islamic State through legitimisation-focused operations. They write at length about ‘the intellectual invasion’ being conducted by Western nations against Muslims the world over and contend that media operatives are obligated...
to ‘declar[e] the truth’ in the face of their ‘daily lies and professionalized falsification’ by responding aggressively to the ‘frenzied media campaign’ they are waging.\(^{18}\)

The intimidation logic of propaganda is also elaborated in the field-guide. The authors write about how terror-focused communication operations are central to both ‘verbal jihad’ and ‘jihad of the sword’, and they devote an entire chapter to its ability to ‘infuriat[e] the enemy’.\(^{19}\) Because ‘everything that angers the enemies of Allah’ is considered to be a legitimate ‘form of jihad’, they hold that offensive psychological operations should be viewed as a logical extension to, or even substitute of, kinetic campaigns.\(^{20}\)

This tripartite approach to propaganda sits well within Ellul’s framework for political propaganda for three main reasons. First, the authors are clearly aware of the fact that it can be used to achieve multiple ends – tactical and strategic – simultaneously. Second, they continually speak of the need for comprehensive and consistent output flow using as many media forms as possible. And third, they do not seem to be under any illusion that propaganda has a hypodermic syringe-like ability to spread ideology.\(^{21}\)

### Theory, Deployed

This part of the discussion applies the above framework to an exhaustive snapshot of official Islamic State propaganda. It was gathered by the author during the third week of the month of Rajab in the hijri year 1440, which corresponds to 24–30 March in the Gregorian year 2019, from the Islamic State’s official media dissemination channel on Telegram.

In the course of seven days, the Islamic State published a total of 70 media products – 52 operation reports, six radio news bulletins, six written news bulletins, three photograph reports, one video, one standalone news feature and one newspaper. The content was Arabic-language only (though later subject to unofficial translation by supporters) and all focused on the Islamic State’s war effort. This contrasts with similar samples from 2015, in which civilian life was the focus in more than half of the group’s output.\(^{22}\)

Crucially, nearly all these materials – the 52 operation reports, 12 news bulletins, three photograph reports and one news feature – were what Ellul would have classed as strategic propaganda. They made no call to action and sanctioned no particular behaviour (things which are the remit of tactical propaganda). Instead, they reiterated ‘the general line [and] array of arguments’,\(^{23}\) providing prosaic ‘news’ about what was going on in and around the Islamic State. The operation reports, news feature and bulletins were fundamentally informational, not agitative, in nature – they described a series of attacks and made no calls for action, explicit or implicit. The three photograph reports were similarly information-oriented – two commemorated dead fighters and one documented an execution. In this sense, they were more focused on maintaining brand consistency than action instigation. Thus, the Islamic State’s strategic propaganda – these materials and others like them – is geared towards iteratively but indirectly legitimising itself and intimidating its enemies. The former achieves this by showing that it remains an active, potent and aggressive military force in spite of what its enemies are claiming – and, indeed, what reality is showing – and the latter by indicating its purportedly unflinching resolve and continuing military capability.

The only two tactical propaganda products distributed that week were the video and the newspaper. Produced by the Islamic State’s Sinai Province Media Office, the former, which was entitled ‘Covenant and Steadfastness: A Single Body’, was used to issue a series of statements about what supporters should do now that the territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq had been defeated (it was published just one week after the Syrian Democratic Forces had declared victory over the last remaining holdout of its proto-state in Baghuz).\(^{24}\)

As a prototypical example of tactical propaganda, it gave specific instructions to viewers and mandated

---

18. Ibid., pp. 15, 39, 42, 44.
‘immediate’ action, either *hijrah* (‘migration’) to the Sinai Peninsula or *jihad* (in this instance, ‘war’) against the enemy. As for the newspaper, *al-Naba’*, alongside its usual range of essays on theological and doctrinal matters, operational reports and updates, it too provided ‘immediate’ instructions to ailing supporters, calling upon them to remain committed to the cause despite the collapse of the territorial caliphate.\(^{25}\)

While only a brief exploration of a small snapshot of data, this analysis demonstrates that it is not enough to simply think of the Islamic State’s propaganda as a tool for radicalisation and recruitment. Working towards both short- and long-term objectives – primarily, in this case, legitimisation and intimidation – its remit was and remains far more ambitious than simply recruitment. It is worth noting that the absence of materials focused on propagation during the week in question was significant, though unsurprising, because the relative prominence of each strategic communication objective is bound to fluctuate in accordance with situational context. Groups in a period of ascendancy or consolidation necessarily prioritise different things to groups that are in a period of decline.

**Conclusion**

This article has shown that, for the Islamic State, propaganda was never just a way to recruit new supporters. Instead, it was instrumental to the jihad itself, a way to enlarge its movement, defend against adversarial attacks and go on the psychological offensive. This is why it spent so much time and energy on media production, and why all direct attempts to undermine it to date have failed.

Propaganda is not just a unitary form of communication. It is a tool with which to ‘shape perceptions’, ‘manipulate cognitions’ and ‘direct behaviour’.\(^{26}\) It is critical that policymakers, practitioners and civil society activists working to counter it in the context of global terrorism threats take this into account. If they do not, their efforts are bound to fail because they will continue to present ill-fitting tactical solutions to challenges that are, in essence, strategic.

The above discussion is only explorative. Future research would (and will) do well to add to it. It is only through disaggregating the idea of propaganda, and thereby better understanding its many complexities, that our resilience to it as a society can be improved.

Charlie Winter is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague.

This work was supported by a research award from Facebook as part of its ‘Content Policy Research on Social Media Platforms’ research project. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the policies, either expressed or implied, of Facebook.

\(^{25}\) Islamic State, *al-Naba’*, No. 175, Central Media Diwan, 28 March 2019.