

# Guidebook of Research and Practice to Preventing Violent Extremism

THE  
CARTER CENTER





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The Strait of Gibraltar viewed from Tangier, Morocco

#### **About The Carter Center**

The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide. A not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization, the Center has helped to improve life for people in 80 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. Please visit [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org) to learn more about The Carter Center.

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	4	<b>The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda</b> ...	48
<b>Introduction</b> .....	6	The Need for a Gender-Conscious Approach.....	49
Our Approach.....	7	Catalysts for Radicalization and the Process of Recruitment.....	50
Lessons Learned.....	8	Roles of Women in Daesh.....	54
<b>Daesh Meta-Narratives: From the Global Ummah to the Hyperlocal</b> .....	10	Effects of Security Approach on Women and Girls.....	57
Defining the Conflict: Narratives of Division .....	11	Conclusion .....	58
“Rise Up, Brothers, Rise Up!” .....	14	<b>The Evolution of Daesh Recruitment Propaganda in Light of Territorial Loss</b> .....	60
Utopia: Life Under the Shade of the “Caliphate” .....	15	Theological Reinterpretation: Constructing the Sacred Canopy .....	61
Conclusion .....	17	The “Winner’s” Narrative: Strategic Communication in the Online Space.....	62
<b>Religious Appeals in Daesh’s Recruitment Propaganda</b> ..	18	Tactical Changes: Encouraging the Jihad at Home .....	63
Master Narratives and the Role of Religious Appeals.....	18	The Importance of Offline Recruitment Networks.....	64
The Rhetoric of Religious Justification .....	20	Conclusion .....	65
Exploitation of Religious Texts .....	21	<b>Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism: Phase 1 Workshop Outcomes</b> .....	66
Conclusion .....	24	Grass-Roots Action for Sustainable Peace Building.....	66
<b>Overview of Daesh’s Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq</b> .....	26	Country Projects.....	67
The Beginnings of Dabiq .....	26	Participant Engagement and Evolution .....	69
The Evolution of Dabiq.....	27	<b>Appendices</b> .....	70
International Propaganda Benefits .....	31	Appendix A: Master Narratives by Language .....	70
Feeding Into the Daesh Narrative.....	34	Appendix B: Master Narrative Deployment Over Time ..	70
Conclusion .....	36		
<b>The Children in Daesh: “Future Flag Bearers” of the “Caliphate”</b> .....	38		
Rationale for Recruiting Children .....	39		
Methods for Recruitment.....	40		
Role of Children in the “Caliphate”: From Auxiliary Support to Full-Fledged Militancy .....	44		
Legal Ramifications and the Way Forward .....	47		

# Foreword

*By Ambassador (ret.) Mary Ann Peters  
CEO, The Carter Center*

As Daesh continues to pose a threat to global peace, the role of religious and community leaders becomes increasingly vital in developing counternarratives to extremist ideology. The effectiveness of Daesh's recruitment tactics is evident in its success attracting foreign fighters to its ranks—since 2014, more than 30,000 men and women from 100 countries have joined the group in Syria and Iraq. This success calls for a multifaceted response based on a nuanced understanding of Daesh's recruitment strategies and propaganda. The Carter Center strives to help develop such a response through research and community engagement.

The Carter Center's Preventing Violent Extremism Project consists of two interrelated initiatives. The first is understanding Daesh recruitment tactics through extensive research on Daesh's videos, print publications and social media. The second is working with religious and community leaders across ideological and political divides to disseminate this information, build countermessaging capacities, and cultivate active civic engagement.

Daesh's outreach and recruitment strategies are unprecedented. The approaches it employs and the messages it propagates are media savvy, multilayered, and context-pertinent. We have analyzed more than 600 Daesh videos and coded them across more than 30 variables, including language, narrative, gender, and target audience. Additionally, we have published a manual on action-oriented research and practical policy outcomes with articles from leading international experts and scholars. The lack of understanding of Daesh's recruitment strategies at the policy level paves the way for ineffective and even counterproductive solutions, and our research helps fill this critical gap.

Our action-oriented research complements the capacity-building workshops with religious and community leaders. Four workshops have been conducted with religious and local community leaders from Belgium, France, Morocco, and Tunisia to help them close the information gap on Daesh recruitment strategies within their local communities. These workshops aimed to engage religious and community leaders in deconstructing Daesh's propaganda, combating Islamophobia, building intrafaith coalitions, fostering greater inclusion of vulnerable youth, and building the technological capability needed to counter violent extremism. A strong sense of trust and community has developed among our community partners over the course of these workshops. And now our workshop participants are engaged in at least 59 individual and collective projects across

multiple sectors, including online media, religious outreach, youth engagement, and gender programming.

Despite setbacks, Daesh will continue to draw recruits to its ideology, which feeds off a variety of social and political grievances. This important collection brings together the Center's research on a range of topics vital to understanding Daesh's propaganda and its appeal among different groups. Unless root causes of extremism are addressed, a viable, long-term solution is difficult to achieve; an aggressive security approach alone could become part of the problem. It is vitally important to continue engaging religious and community actors and leverage the role that they play in providing counternarratives and social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. We hope that the analysis included here will assist in that effort.

# Introduction

*By Dr. Houda Abadi*

*Associate Director, Conflict Resolution Program, The Carter Center*

Violent extremism fractures communities, fosters divisions, and exacerbates political conflicts. Extremist messages of religious, cultural, and gender intolerance do not know nationality, color, or religion. Nowhere are the deleterious impacts of violent extremism more evident today than in Daesh,<sup>1</sup> which poses one of the greatest global threats to peace. Daesh has capitalized on the political vacuum created by failed states and the failure of governments to address underlying root causes. Discussions about how to deal with Daesh have been simplistic and shortsighted. This narrow understanding contributes to increased aggressive securitization and Islamophobia.

While there is no single profile of individuals traveling to join Daesh, we know that many who left from the West had very little knowledge of Islam, no prior connection to Syria, and were in search of personal meaning. Daesh succeeds by offering marginalized youth an alternative outlet where they can share their grievances, hopes, and dreams. Radicalization of these youth must be understood fully, paying special attention to the rational and emotional appeals used by Daesh for recruitment. Daesh systematically misrepresents religious doctrine and manipulates political grievances to legitimize violence and attract new recruits. In addition to addressing root causes, it is vitally important to engage religious actors from the outset and recognize their role in providing psycho-social support to those vulnerable to recruitment. The role of religious and community leaders cannot be overstated; addressing the problem of violent extremism requires partnership with religious actors who hold positions of authority, credibility, and ties with local communities.

Since 1982, The Carter Center has been a leader in promoting a culture of respect for human rights and building sustainable peace. Over the last few years, we have witnessed the devastating impact foreign fighters' joining Daesh's ranks in Syria and Iraq has had on prospects for peace in those countries. To stop this trend, the Center's Preventing Violent Extremism project aims to oppose Daesh's recruitment strategies by engaging with Muslim community leaders, clerics, chaplains, and scholars. The Center's approach

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<sup>1</sup> The name ISIS has a detailed development. Initially, the title was the "Islamic State" of Iraq, then the "Islamic State" of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or more commonly the "Islamic State" of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today the group refers to itself as the "Islamic State," a "caliphate," based on its expansions to North Africa and Europe. Daesh is the acronym for the group's original name in Arabic, al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham. The term Daesh deprives the organization of the legitimacy to claim an Islamic identity or the status of an established state. For more on the term Daesh, please see: <http://blog.cartercenter.org/2016/08/02/war-of-words-helping-muslim-leaders-fight-terrorist-propaganda/>.



also aims to have an impact on the dangerous tide of Islamophobia emerging in some countries partly because of policies that stigmatize Muslims and narrowly address violent extremism. The rise of Islamophobia and the existence of Daesh are deeply intertwined, as the two phenomena constantly reinforce each other.

## **Our Approach**

The Carter Center's approach proceeds along two interrelated lines: action-oriented research and capacity-building workshops with religious and community leaders.

### **Action-Oriented Research: Online and Offline**

The Center's work with religious and community leaders in preventing violent extremism is informed by action-oriented research into Daesh's online and offline recruitment propaganda. To date, over 600 Daesh recruitment videos have been analyzed using a detailed qualitative and quantitative coding methodology. Our analysis tracks 31 variables, including the use of master narratives, religious texts, language, region, symbols employed, race, geography, and image composition. The Center has collected and coded all issues of Daesh's online English language recruitment magazines, Dabiq and Rumiyah, and has analyzed online social media in both French and Arabic relating to North Africa and Europe. Additionally, more than 50 structured interviews have been conducted with religious and community leaders, ex-foreign fighters, the families of Daesh recruits, journalists, and detainees in North Africa. Based on a deep analysis of Daesh online propaganda and in-depth field interviews, the Center has produced analytical reports, presented here in a comprehensive manual, that inform the Center's capacity-building workshops with religious and community leaders. Topics include the following: 1) Daesh's master narratives, 2) Daesh use of religious appeals, 3) Daesh's gendered recruitment strategies, 4) Daesh recruitment and indoctrination of children, 5) reappropriation of media for propaganda purposes, and 6) Daesh's response to territorial loss. We hope the research we have collected here will be of use to additional religious and community leaders, field practitioners, governments, and policymakers as they work to carry forward the efforts against Daesh recruitment propaganda.

## Capacity-Building Workshops With Religious and Community Leaders

During the period of September 2016 to March 2017, the Center convened four reiterative workshops with religious and community leaders engaged in preventing violent extremism (PVE). The initiative works with religious leaders across ideological and national lines to identify flaws in Daesh's narratives, develop a twin approach to discredit Daesh propaganda and rise of Islamophobia, and build capacity among religious and community leaders. The workshop participants included 23 religious and community leaders from Morocco, Tunisia, France, and Belgium—all countries with vulnerable youth populations and a history of providing large numbers of recruits to Daesh. Workshop participants included both women and men, mainstream and conservative religious leaders, academics, activists, and ex-foreign fighters. Forty percent of workshop participants are women, and all hold significant credibility in their home communities. Workshops are reiterative and research-informed, and they respond in real time to Daesh's evolving recruitment strategies and the rise of Islamophobia. Our participants are on the front lines of efforts to prevent violent extremism in their local communities.

The workshops featured leading experts on political and media communication, digital media production, political transitions and coalition building, civic engagement, women in prevention, and reintegration and rehabilitation. The main themes addressed included these:

- Countering Daesh propaganda, media literacy, and digital production
- Strategies for civic engagement and youth outreach
- Building intra-Muslim cohesion and intercommunity coalitions
- Finding a sustainable, consistent, and strategic response to Islamophobia
- The role of gender in recruitment and prevention
- Rights-based approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration

## Lessons Learned

During the initial phase of the project, several important lessons for PVE practitioners and grass-roots religious and community leaders have emerged. First, there is a need for inclusive and community approaches to preventing violent extremism. Efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism are largely based on an aggressive security approach. The Center's research finds that this approach is counterproductive and places additional pressures on already marginalized and at-risk communities. Second, any effective attempts to prevent violent extremism must address all forms: Extremism knows no nationality, color, or religion. It is essential to engage with communities and institutions across political and religious divides, including conservative communities. The fight against violent extremism is also a fight for human rights and social justice. Intersectional coalitions are key. Extremism thrives on division; peace grows in cooperation.

Trust is the most valuable currency in effective PVE work. At times, the messenger is more important than the message. Government countermessaging programs and religious institutions devoid of credibility have little impact. Countermessaging is an important tool in the fight against violent extremism but is insufficient in and of itself. There is a need to provide alternatives for alienated youth. Without political will to end marginalization, recruitment to violent extremism will continue to flourish. This must include comprehensive and rights-based approaches to the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-foreign fighters. Comprehensive PVE programs that seek to immunize against Daesh recruitment over the long term must also include intra-Muslim dialogue. One of the most rewarding outcomes of our workshops was the development of working coalitions between Muslim religious leaders across political, social, and ideological divides.

One of the failures to the existing PVE programming is the lack of context and the “one-size-fits-all” approach. In recent years, we have seen conflation between Islam and terrorism. Anti-Muslim bigotry has moved into the mainstream, more so than after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Muslims in the United States surged 67 percent during 2015.<sup>2</sup> According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of anti-Muslim hate groups in the United States rose 197 percent from 2015 to 2016.<sup>3</sup> Muslims have been double victims and caught in the middle of these two forms of extremism. This is dangerous, not only because it unfairly singles out Muslims, but also because it emboldens other extremist groups, who now feel validated that their actions and ideologies are not condemned by the government. Therefore, a long-term solution for violent extremism hinges on addressing the correlation between Islamophobia and the rise of groups such as Daesh.

Effective programs must be community-based, community-led, and designed to respond to the strengths and challenges of local contexts. Credible Muslim voices must be strengthened in the media and at the local grass-roots level. Extremists will occupy any space—virtual or physical—left open by actors of good will. Youth, women, and religious leaders play a critical role in this process. As positive agents of change, their meaningful engagement avoids further entrenching of the securitization approach to preventing violent extremism. While women are at least equally active as men in peacekeeping, women continue to be ignored and denied formal places in promoting and mitigating violent extremism. Women not only have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh but, given their social capital and fluency in cultural vocabulary, they are also an important asset in shaping the overall discourse on PVE. The inclusion of women in mainstream society and elimination of all forms of prejudice and injustice are integral to achieving long-term peace and security.

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<sup>2</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015 Hate Crime Statistics: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015>

<sup>3</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

# Daesh Meta-Narratives: From the Global Ummah to the Hyperlocal

Daesh's innovative and tailored use of social media has enabled this terrorist organization to lure and recruit young people on a global scale. They communicate their cyber-propaganda directly to disaffected young men and women. Effective interventions of preventing violent extremism designed to reduce the flow of foreign fighters to Daesh require a nuanced understanding of their recruitment strategies. This includes both the range of Daesh's propaganda mediums (videos, online print materials, offline recruitment networks) and the content of their media output.<sup>4</sup> Such analysis is essential for policymakers and community leaders who are on the front lines of developing effective counternarratives to Daesh's invidious ideology.

The Carter Center identified seven main narratives that Daesh employs in its recruitment propaganda. These narratives are in a variety of languages and are addressed to a range of target audiences. They reinforce each other, collectively working to provide emotional, rational, and behavioral appeals to potential recruits. Effective prevention requires that credible, grass-roots leaders develop counteroffers and practical pathways to engagement that address core socio-political grievances. Left unaddressed, these grievances provide fertile ground for the growth of violent extremism and an opening for Daesh's insidious propaganda.

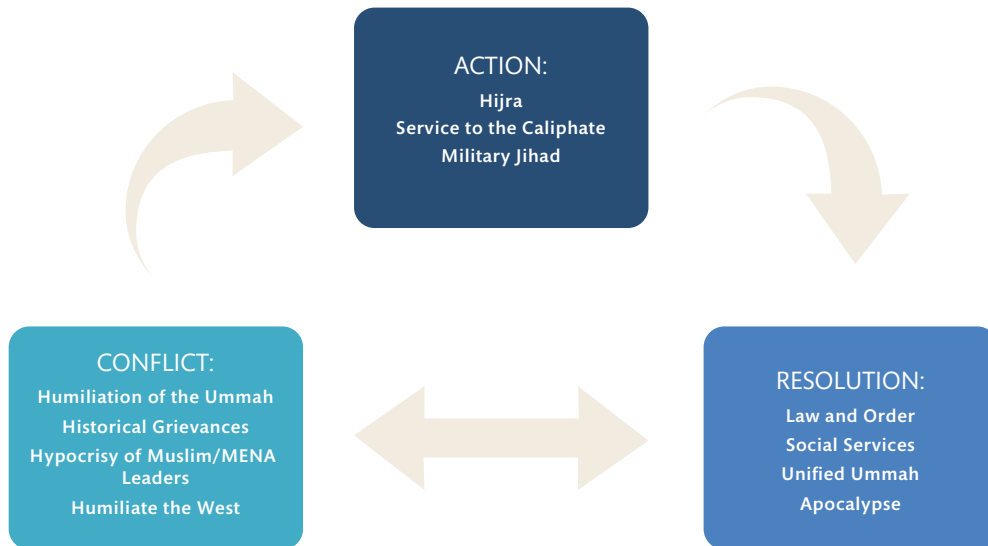
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<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of Daesh online print magazine Dabiq, see the Carter Center's report "An Analysis of Daesh's Online Recruitment Magazine, Dabiq," December 2015. [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf)

## Defining the Conflict: Narratives of Division

Narratives are a powerful rhetorical device and play a strategic role in Daesh's communication strategies. They overlay meaning on a complex set of experiences, helping to organize and make sense of the world. Analyzing the narratives that Daesh employs to garner legitimacy and recruit adherents is essential to understanding its recruitment propaganda and developing effective strategies to delegitimize it.

The Carter Center identified seven main narratives in Daesh recruitment propaganda. These master narratives are dialectical and mutually reinforcing. Each narrative, while distinct, functions by identifying enemies, prescribing actions, or providing a resolution: 1) anger over humiliation of the *ummah*, or historical grievances, 2) desire to humiliate and expose the hypocrisy of the West, 3) glorification of military jihad, 4) provision of social services and benefits to subject populations, 5) disapproval of the hypocrisy of Muslims or Middle East and North Africa (MENA) leaders, 6) prescription of religious/theological doctrine, and 7) ability to administer territory and provide law and order. The interaction of Daesh's narratives in their overall frame can be depicted graphically:



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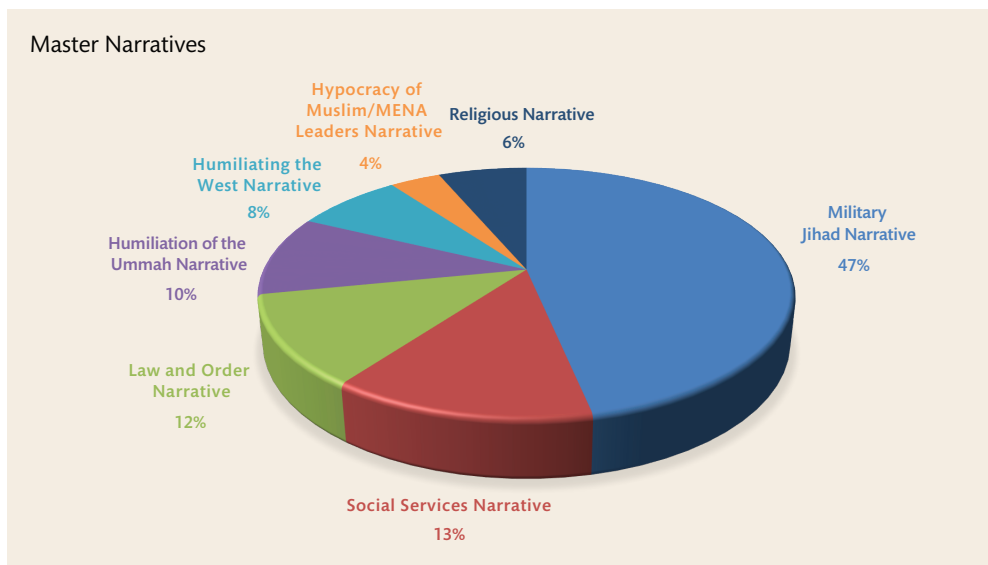
*Daesh propaganda seeks to reinforce a simplistic but emotionally satisfying division of the world into two camps — good and evil. All people are subsumed under this division; no gray zone can remain.*

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Daesh propaganda seeks to reinforce a simplistic but emotionally satisfying division of the world into two camps—the good and the evil. There is no gray zone. The articulations of this division vary—Islam versus the West, good Muslims versus apostate Muslims, believers versus disbelievers—but the central division is always reinforced. Of the 437 videos analyzed for this report, 95 videos, or 22 percent, were directly related to narratives that posit an explicit us-versus-them mentality.

Often, Daesh seeks to provide evidence for this division using decontextualized clips from Western media itself. Of the videos analyzed by The Carter Center, approximately 12 percent reappropriated Western mainstream media clips, with almost half of that media being from the United States. The group uses these Western media clips, including images of political leaders, to illustrate that the West is at war with Islam.

Daesh emphasizes Western transgression in the Muslim world to stress historic grievances and justify attacks as a legitimate response. Videos fueled by this narrative often show in agonizing detail the bodies of children allegedly injured or killed in coalition airstrikes. Narratives like these assert a defensive position and work to establish a hyperintensified moral space for potential recruits. Battle lines are drawn, and action is demanded. Most of these videos are in Arabic, but with subtitles in alternating Western languages (especially French and English). In June 2014, Daesh spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani stated, “The time has come for the *ummah* of Mohammed to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace.” In subsequent videos, Daesh features scenes of destruction from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Another video, released in May 2016 titled “Blood for Blood,” featured children of the caliphate walking through rubble. A *nasheed* (religious hymn) in French is paired with this scene, while English subtitles on the bottom of the screen state: “You grant yourselves the right to massacre us in the name of your so-called precious freedom. Your goods, your lives, none of it is sacred to us. Your blood will flow for your heinous crimes.” Videos like these define a conflict (between Islam and the West or between Islam and hypocrites or apostates), place blame, and evoke moral outrage toward enemies. Such scenes are designed to convince individuals who experienced the conflict firsthand as well as those



who feel horrified at the suffering in Syria and Iraq and perhaps feel alienated in those same Western countries. They demand explicit action on behalf of the audience: Join the fight.

However, propaganda narratives designed to sow division and define sides in a global conflict are not limited to criticizing the West. Indeed, the clear majority of those who suffer at the hands of Daesh are Muslim. Daesh propaganda seeks to delegitimize Muslim and Middle East and North Africa leaders, including Muslim imams. By seeking to discredit Muslim religious leadership, Daesh is seeking to establish its own religious legitimacy and defend against criticisms. In December 2015, Daesh released several videos calling for attacks against Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in response to their recent support and coordination with the coalition. In one video, the King of Saudi Arabia is shown shaking hands with then-U.S. President Barack Obama; the video concludes by encouraging the beheading of both the King and his Shi'ite citizens. Other videos such as "God Will Be Sufficient for You Against Them," released in July 2016, feature footage of Free Syrian Army soldiers being trained by coalition partners. Appearing in Arabic with English subtitles, the video both delegitimizes Syrian opposition forces as "slaves" of their Western masters and ridicules Western planners for being ignorant of Middle Eastern cultural norms. Importantly, of videos analyzed by The Carter Center as illustrating the hypocrisy of Muslim leaders, 93 percent were primarily in Arabic, illustrating that Daesh is strategic in the narratives it deploys to specific target audiences.

Daesh also employs narratives that seek to divide Western societies, pitting Muslims against the societies in which they live, and non-Muslims against their Muslim neighbors. Such arguments often employ histories of racial or ethnic or religious discrimination in the West. For example, multiple videos as well as print articles have highlighted recent incidents of racial or religious tension in the United States. Daesh regularly includes images of multiethnic cadres of *mujahideen* celebrating brotherhood and their arrival to the "caliphate" to promote diversity and acceptance within the caliphate. Interestingly, most videos (65 percent) coded with the "humiliating the West" narrative were released in English, suggesting Daesh targets English-speaking recruits by exposing racism and intolerance in Western society.



Screenshot from a late 2016 video showing then-President Obama as leading a global anti-Islam coalition



Screenshot from the November 2015 video “Let’s Go For Jihad”

## “Rise Up, Brothers, Rise Up!”

Across all 437 videos analyzed for this report, 204 videos, or 47 percent, were focused on graphic images of warfare, the most dominant of the seven narratives in the model. While other narratives describe the caliphate as a utopia, narratives focused on military jihad provide an action plan for potential recruits while also highlighting events or people working to actualize Daesh’s military goals. Daesh ideology redefines the term *jihad* exclusively as outward violence to those unwilling to adopt their strict worldview, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These videos articulate grandeur and heroism in idealized military engagements; combat is glorified to create a warrior culture. In a video released in January 2016, “Kill Them Wherever You Find Them,” Daesh threatens Paris with more Nov. 13-style attacks. In these genres of videos, Daesh regularly portrays fighters between 20 and 30 years of age as shepherds of an impending apocalypse, seeking to both terrorize their enemies and inspire potential recruits worldwide.

Military jihad videos released by Daesh function as advertisements for the adventurous and disaffected. In the video “Let’s Go for Jihad,” Daesh combatants are shown first praying together and studying the Quran and then advancing on opposing forces, riding in tanks and firing rocket-propelled grenades. As the images flow, a haunting *nasheed* builds in tempo and volume, propelling the viewer into battle with the young men on screen. The narrative glorifies military combat but also attempts the argument that study, prayer, and the bonds of brotherhood inevitably lead one to the battlefield. The images reach their pitch along with the *nasheed*, as subtitles flash across the bottom of the screen in English: “Brothers, rise up! Let’s go for jihad!” It is important to note that Daesh videos that emphasize the military jihad narrative are not simply designed to glorify combat. These videos are imbued with a sense of urgency not seen in other genres of video. Their appeals are not simply based on reason or emotion; they offer a behavioral appeal—an opportunity to engage and to find agency.



While the military jihad narrative remains a staple in Daesh propaganda, its prominence and frequency fluctuate depending on several factors, including territory losses and gains or terror attacks abroad. For instance, Daesh increased its use of the military jihad narrative to over 70 percent of its recruitment videos during the spring of 2015 to highlight territorial gains made during that time, including the seizure of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk in Damascus, the city of Ramadi in Iraq, and Sirte, Libya.

## Utopia: Life Under the Shade of the “Caliphate”

In contrast to the uncensored violence of the jihad narrative, utopian videos use positive branding to emphasize the benefits of life under Daesh’s black flag. In total, videos that offer narratives related to this utopian vision comprise 32 percent of videos analyzed by the Center. Daesh taps into socioeconomic grievances of different Muslim communities by offering footage of social services and prosperity paired with audio condemning corrupt governments and sociopolitical structures. These videos aim to personify the idea of “utopia,” such as the innovative Mujatweets series of short (less than one minute) clips of life inside Daesh territory. Released throughout 2015, the Mujatweets series advertises the benefits awaiting potential recruits, and the social justice enacted by Daesh, in succinct and precise terms. Mujatweets, Episode 7, set in Daesh’s Raqqa market, immerses the viewer in images of bins and shelves overflowing with fresh produce, meat, and fruits. While a viewer may be initially unaware of the argument being made, Daesh is implying that it provides plenty for its citizens. In Mujatweets, Episode 2, over 30 individual children run toward a pushcart selling cotton candy and pink ice cream—a paradise for kids—suggestive of Daesh’s family-oriented and stable atmosphere. These episodes almost always use a subjective or first-person camera angle to put the viewer directly into the scene. By immersing the viewer, recruits can imagine themselves in the Islamic State. Such video footage aims to depict everyday life through personal settings, diverse nationalities and ages, and intimate camera technique. By alternating production techniques such as camera distance angles, lighting, and graphics, life under the shade of the “caliphate” becomes more aesthetically appealing.<sup>5</sup>

Narratives that emphasize Daesh’s ability to administer law and order in its territory are designed to garner political and religious legitimacy as a state and as the guardians of Islamic law. Videos coded under the law-and-order narrative were in Arabic in 82 percent of cases, indicating that this narrative is primarily targeted at either internal Iraqi or Syrian audiences or Arabic-speaking audiences suffering under the oppression of dictatorial regimes.<sup>6</sup> A well-known video series, “Commanding the Truth,” provides numerous examples of Daesh imposing their version of Islamic law in Iraq and Syria. In Part 4, a Daesh fighter stands in front of a cigarette merchant’s stall as his men clear out the store’s goods. A crowd gathers as the man gives an impromptu sermon on the physical and societal ills caused by smoking. Jokingly shifting his accent to sound more Iraqi, subtly building identity with the audience through humor, he points out the fruit on sale, “The *shari’a* does not prohibit what is good for you, only what is bad.” Narratives like these attempt to establish Daesh’s piety and religious legitimacy, particularly among

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<sup>5</sup> The term “graphics” here refers to high-definition quality, subtitles, and special effects.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix A offers a graphical representation of Daesh narratives by language.



Screenshot of young man featured in Mujatweets, Episode 6, extolling the virtues of Daesh

conservative Muslims in their territory and beyond.<sup>7</sup> The Carter Center’s analysis shows this narrative increasing from around 9 percent in the latter part of 2014 to almost 20 percent in January 2015 and then shrinking back down to 7 percent in 2016 as anti-Daesh international coalition forces gained ground on multiple fronts.<sup>8</sup>

Religious themes are prominent in only 6.4 percent of the 437 analyzed, but provide a frame for other narrative arguments. Apocalyptic in nature, these videos emphasize the final clash between Muslims and “crusaders” in Dabiq, Syria. A widely viewed example, “Meeting at Dabiq,” shows Arab and non-Arab Muslim fighters raising the black flag over Rome and Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> Daesh cites rewards in the afterlife and often lionizes its deceased fighters. When Daesh declared itself a caliphate in June 2014, it presented itself as the singular political and religious authority over all Muslims. While Daesh’s claim to the caliphate is not novel, its violent misrepresentation of Islam and shocking acts of brutality have sparked international condemnation, particularly within the Muslim community.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Subsequent field work in North Africa confirms that law and order arguments are particularly compelling among conservative Salafi Muslims, who often feel discriminated against in mainstream Muslim states. Salafism is often equated with terrorism, even in Muslim-majority countries. As a result, Salafi communities are easy targets for security services and broadly applied terrorism laws.

<sup>8</sup> Appendix B tracks the development of narratives through time.

<sup>9</sup> Daesh propagandists were forced to revise their apocalyptic narrative when Syrian rebels seized control of the town of Dabiq in late 2016. Anticipating this loss in battles fought both on the ground and through propaganda, Daesh renamed its flagship print publication, changing it from Dabiq to Rumiyyah, Arabic for Rome. Daesh made this change roughly a month before the fall of Dabiq.

<sup>10</sup> For a representative example, see the now-famous “Letter to Baghdadi” signed by over 100 global Muslim leaders. <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>.

## Conclusion

Daesh bases its ideology on a spurious and literalist understanding of Islamic texts to challenge the nation–state. It seeks to advance its agenda through an innovative use of media, releasing video from multiple media outlets across 14 countries. Daesh’s media strategy is not static. Video content evolves, both in terms of the narratives employed and the audiences targeted. Videos in the first four months of 2017 show a heavy focus on military activities in Iraq and Syria and an increasing focus on suicide attacks against military targets, while utopian narratives have played a more limited role. Military interventions will continue to erode Daesh’s organizational capabilities and territorial holding, driving further evolutions in media strategy. However, military intervention alone cannot fracture the range of narratives that Daesh has used to mobilize potential recruits.

The international community must not cede important interpretative ground to Daesh’s ideologues. As important as counternarratives are, it is perhaps more important to present counteroffers to those most at risk to Daesh recruitment. Muslims around the world, especially the youth, recognize suffering and injustice and are eager to exercise their agency in working toward solutions. However, in the context of decade-long wars and oppressive regimes, narratives of positive social change and economic liberation are, unfortunately, in short supply.

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# Religious Appeals in Daesh's Recruitment Propaganda

Daesh employs a complex online media strategy to recruit targeted demographics. Its success has exacerbated conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere and has become a concern for the international community. The Carter Center is working to counter Daesh's recruitment propaganda efforts by undertaking in-depth analysis of its recruitment media, including video, print, and social media. This report examines the use of Quranic verses in 256 of Daesh's propaganda videos.<sup>11</sup> The use of these verses in Daesh propaganda is analyzed by frequency, partial or full *ayahs*,<sup>12</sup> and whether they are *madani* or *makki*.<sup>13</sup> By examining Daesh's manipulation of the Quranic text to claim religious legitimacy, this analysis can serve as a resource for religious and community leaders' understanding of Daesh's recruitment strategies. This is imperative for effective countermessaging and rejecting Daesh's misinterpretation of the Quran to justify political violence.

## Master Narratives and the Role of Religious Appeals

Daesh recruitment propaganda strategies center on the deployment of multiple narratives designed to heighten the sociopolitical grievances of its target audience. Master narratives employed by Daesh include, but are not limited to, the humiliation of the transnational Muslim community (*ummah*), the desire to humiliate the West, reification and celebration of military jihad,<sup>14</sup> providing social services and effectively administering territory, and the hypocrisy of Muslim and Middle Eastern political and religious leaders. Whatever the narrative, Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on the

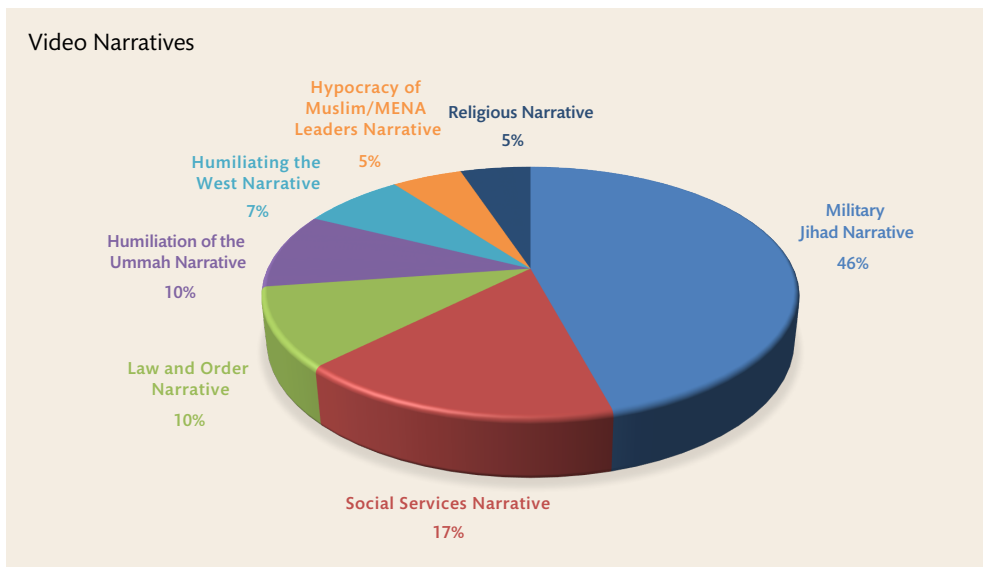
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<sup>11</sup> Daesh videos examined were released between July 2014 and July 2015. This represents only a subset of the total number of videos coded and analyzed.

<sup>12</sup> *Surah* refers to individual chapters of the *Quran*; *ayah* refers to individual verses in a specific *surah*.

<sup>13</sup> *Makki* or *madani* refers to the place and time a particular verse of the Quran was revealed.

<sup>14</sup> The primary meaning of *jihad*, or the "greater jihad," refers to the struggle within oneself for moral and religious perfection. The "lesser" jihad refers to the protection and expansion of Islam through proselytism, defense, or offensive warfare. It is jihad in the secondary, military sense (the lesser jihad) that is fetishized in Daesh's propaganda.



misinterpretation and decontextualization of core Muslim religious texts, including the Quran and *hadith*<sup>15</sup> literature, in an attempt to both (1) claim religious authority for their establishment of a caliphate and (2) morally justify violence and terror in the service of that larger political project. It is important to emphasize that Daesh is primarily a political group serving political aims (including the establishment of a modern state and the elimination of political rivals), even if those aims are framed in terms of religious discourse and theological appeals. This is clearly evidenced by the frequency of different narratives employed by Daesh—narratives predicated primarily on the glory of warfare (military jihad), modern notions of political legitimacy (such as the ability to provide social services or administer territory), or historical and political grievances (Sykes–Picot or Western transgression), which appear much more frequently in their propaganda than purely religious or theological narratives.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Hadith* literature refers to that body of sacred literature in the Islamic tradition that records the sayings and actions of the Prophet, Muhammad ibn Abdallah. The *hadith* comprise a vast body of materials collected within the first several centuries after the Prophet's death.

<sup>16</sup> This is based on the Carter Center's analysis of 285 Daesh recruitment propaganda videos and other online media for narrative strategy. It is important to note that narratives employed by Daesh change over time and are based on multiple factors, including gender, language, events, and intended audience.

## The Rhetoric of Religious Justification

Regardless of the narrative, highly emotive religious justifications for violent action are employed. This approach is particularly effective among foreign recruits who, in addition to holding local political grievances, are shown to lack religious literacy. In the recent past, al-Qaida's own publicly available recruitment manual stresses recruitment outreach to targets with low religious literacy.<sup>17</sup> Daesh recruit intake forms indicate that the vast majority (70 percent) of foreign fighters who arrived in its territory throughout 2014 self-reported their *shari'a*<sup>18</sup> literacy as "basic."<sup>19</sup> In 2015 in the United States, 40 percent of individuals arrested with ties to Daesh were recent converts.<sup>20</sup> Lack of religious knowledge among vulnerable groups provides an opening for Daesh recruitment propaganda. Beyond a lack of religious education, these examples also suggest a clear communication gap between disaffected youth and Muslim religious leaders. While Muslim religious leaders have consistently condemned Daesh's violent ideology,<sup>21</sup> their reliance on traditional forms of communication fails to connect with the demographic groups most susceptible to Daesh's recruitment propaganda.

The rhetoric of religious justification employed by Daesh in their online recruitment propaganda is also multifaceted. Persistent themes of their religious message include a rigid *takfiri* (infidel) ideology, a binary view of the world, and a fetishization of military jihad and martyrdom. The practice of pronouncing another Muslim an infidel (*kafir*) or apostate (*murtadd*) was sidelined very early in the Islamic tradition. Daesh recruitment propaganda employs *takfir* regularly, dividing the world into two opposing camps: the Abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) and the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*). These classifications are legal categories not fully elaborated in the Quran.<sup>22</sup> Muslims who do not accept Daesh's understanding are considered apostates, members of the *Dar al-Harb*, and are used as examples in their propaganda. This includes both Western Muslims (such as U.S. Congressman Keith Ellison and Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf) but even more so, Muslims in the MENA region. For example, Issue 14 of *Dabiq*, released in April 2016, pronounces *takfir* on the Muslim Brotherhood and its current leadership, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; Islamist groups in Tunisia; and an Egyptian police captain killed in a Daesh terrorist action in Giza.<sup>23</sup> Daesh recruitment propaganda also stresses

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Lack of religious knowledge among vulnerable groups provides an opening for Daesh recruitment propaganda.

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17 Abu Amr al-Qa'idi, "A Course in the Art of Recruiting Mujahidin." [https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A\\_Course\\_in\\_the\\_Art\\_of\\_Recruiting\\_-\\_Revised\\_July2010\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A_Course_in_the_Art_of_Recruiting_-_Revised_July2010_djvu.txt); accessed Aug. 23, 2016

18 *Shari'a* has its primary range of meaning in relation to religion and religious law. In Islam, it designates the rules and regulations governing the lives of both individual Muslims and Muslim society, derived, in principle, from the Quran and *hadith*. The word is closely related to *fiqh*, which means "academic discussion of divine law."

19 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," Report from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 2016

20 It is important to note as well that of the entire American-Muslim population, roughly 23 percent are converts. It is thus expected that converts would be overrepresented among Daesh recruits in the U.S. context. See Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," Program on Extremism: The George Washington University, December 2015.

21 See, for example, an open letter from some 100 Muslim religious leaders to Daesh's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>. Last accessed Aug. 23, 2016

22 There is a further legal category, the Abode of Treaty (*Dar a-'Ahd*), expounded in the Muslim legal tradition that comprises most of the world. Daesh, understandably, never employs this category in their propaganda.

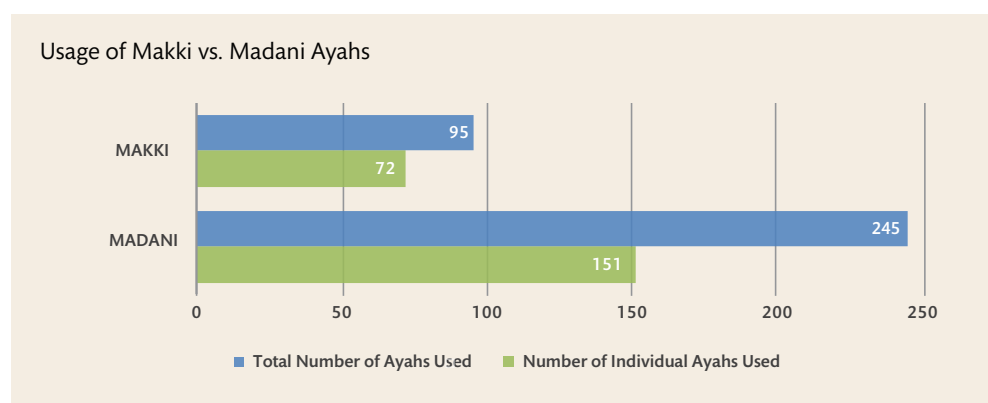
23 *Dabiq*, Issue 14, "The Murtadd Brotherhood." Daesh literature uses the term *murtadd*, or apostate, to refer to its Muslim enemies.

the need for Muslims abroad to emigrate (perform *hijra*<sup>24</sup>) to the Abode of Islam as a moral duty. Building their arguments around Western transgression, humiliation, and corruption of Muslim leaders, Daesh implies that there is no alternative but to emigrate to Daesh territory. In so doing, Daesh symbolically links its narrative to that of the first community of Muslims and the founding of Islam. Daesh purposely misrepresents traditional religious concepts like these, as well as the Islamic concept of jihad, or struggle, to justify its violent political actions and build religious legitimacy both within the group and among potential recruits.

## Exploitation of Religious Texts

The use of various Quranic verses in Daesh’s recruitment propaganda is intended to establish authority and provide religious legitimacy to the self-proclaimed caliphate. To understand the strategy of Quran usage, The Carter Center analyzed 256 videos released by Daesh over a 12-month period from July 2014 to July 2015. Thirty percent (78) were released by transnational media outlets (al-Hayat, al-Furqan, etc.); the remainder (178) by provincial media outlets. The Center coded the videos for verses used and catalogued them according to *makki* and *madani* verses, which indicate both theological content and the time and geographic location the *surah* was revealed.<sup>25</sup> The Center also took note of the repetition of particular *ayahs*—verses favored in Daesh propaganda—and whether an *ayah* was quoted in its entirety or only in part.

Daesh recruitment propaganda relies heavily on *madani surahs*. Generally, *madani surahs*, those revealed later in the Prophet Muhammad’s career and after the community’s emigration to Yathrib, respond to the sociopolitical life of the Muslim community



<sup>24</sup> Facing extreme persecution in their home city of Mecca, Prophet Muhammad and his initial followers received a revelation from God requiring them to emigrate to the neighboring city of Yathrib. Prophet Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community’s emigration (*hijra*) in September of 622 C.E. marks the beginning of the Muslim *hijri* calendar, and forever changed the name of Yathrib to Madinat al-Nabi’, or the city of the Prophet, now simply al-Madina.

<sup>25</sup> The division of the individual *surahs* of the Quran into either *makki* or *madani* is a convention developed by scholars in the classical period to aid in their exegesis (*tafsir*). Interpretation of the Quran is normally predicated on the time and place the verse was revealed or the “occasions of revelation” (*asbab al-nuzul*).

### Ayahs Used With High Frequency in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda

Classification	Surah Title	Surah Number	Ayah Number	Number of Times Repeated
Madani	At-Tawbah	9	14	7
			111	4
	Al-Hajj	22	3	4
	Al-Anfal	8	38	4
			46	4
	An-Nisa	4	75	4
Al Imran	3	102	5	
Makki	Yusuf	12	21	4
			40	3
	al-Araf	7	128	3

including, for example, rules of inheritance and warfare. *Makki surahs* are those revealed during Prophet Muhammad’s residence in Mecca. They are generally shorter and focused on more universal themes: the oneness of God, justice, and the afterlife. *Madani* verses are anthropocentric, while *makki* verses tend to be theocentric. Daesh recruitment propaganda utilizes *madani* verses almost twice as much as *makki* verses: 151 *madani ayahs* were used in the 256 videos examined, versus 78 *makki ayahs*. For comparison, roughly two-thirds of the 114 *surahs* in the Quran are *makki*. There is a clear inconsistency between the text of the Quran and its presentation in Daesh’s online propaganda. This is not surprising, however. The religious rhetoric of Daesh recruitment propaganda aims to link symbolically the group’s self-proclaimed caliphate to the founding of the early Muslim community. Relying on *madani* verses facilitates this linkage and attempts to erase the temporal gap between the past and present in the imaginations of potential recruits.

When looking at both *makki* and *madani ayahs* in terms of verse repetition, only 26 percent of *makki surahs* in our sample were repeated, compared to 57 percent of *madani surahs*. In terms of frequency across our sample of 256 videos, Daesh propaganda repeats *madani* verses with more than double the frequency of *makki* verses.

Just as *madani ayahs* as a whole are used and repeated with more frequency, a small selection of verses is repeated with very high levels of frequency in Daesh recruitment propaganda, defined as three or more uses in the sample. Here too, *madani ayahs* dominate.

Of the most frequently cited 10 *ayahs* listed above, three are *makki* and seven *madani*. Four (4:75; 8:38; 9:14; 9:111) explicitly reference fighting in the way of God in the context of the early Muslim community’s series of battles against the Meccans. The



evident rhetorical use of these verses is to symbolically link Daesh's violent political project with the ultimately successful struggle of the Prophet Muhammad's early community. Five of the above verses (8:46; 3:102; 12:21; 12:40; 7:128) encourage trust in or fidelity to God, either explicitly or with reference to pre-Islamic prophets. In so doing, Daesh seeks to sanctify its actions, using the Quran to give moral sanction to Daesh's grotesque violence. The final verse (22:3) provides a warning against disbelief.

Daesh rhetorically employs the Quranic text to adopt the mantle of prophethood, speaking through the text in the persona of Muslim prophets. In the December 2015 video "No Respite," a Daesh fighter recites a selection of *Surat Yunus* (10:71) adopting the persona of Noah, co-opting and speaking through the text to challenge those who mock and disbelieve. By recontextualizing Quranic historical references, Daesh embodies a prophetic persona and collapses any distinction between its political project and the historical past. Daesh propaganda also primes the audience prior to the invocation of a Quranic verse. A Daesh representative will often offer an interpretation of a verse, intending to justify or provide religious sanction to an act prior to recitation. For example, *madani* verse *al-Tawbah* (9:67), revealed nine years after the Prophet's emigration to *al-Madina* and under the threat of a Byzantine invasion, condemns the hypocrisy of those who professed to have joined the community but instead abandoned it at a critical time. Daesh released a video in February 2015 titled "We Will Conquer Rome," advertising the execution of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians. In the video, an armed fighter quotes *al-Tawbah* (9:67) to condone the executions. Prior to reciting the *ayah*, the fighter interprets the verse, explaining this execution as the price of hypocrisy. Daesh ignores the historical context of the verse, misusing the text to religiously sanctify murder. Daesh's perversion of the text ignores orthodox understanding of the verse, twisting the Quran and Islamic history to its own political narrative.

The use of the Quranic text by Daesh for the purposes of propaganda is intended to establish its religious authority and lend religious legitimacy to its political project—the re-establishment of a modern caliphate. Daesh's religious narrative is centered on a core of concepts—*hijra*, *takfir*, the division of the world into opposing camps, and *jihad*—that are taken out of context, rendered as simple and unambiguous, and supported by sporadic reference to partial Quranic verses. The use of the Quran is designed solely to support a narrative to Daesh's target demographic. With strategically placed images and *ayahs*, Daesh likens the unity of the brotherhood (*ikhwan*) and community (*ummah*) in its territory to the early Muslim community in Medina. Daesh manipulates the meaning of *hijra* and *jihad* in an attempt to link their caliphate with the founding of Islam. Daesh says to these youth: "The first Muslims were persecuted and humiliated, like you. They were forced to emigrate, like you. They had to fight to defend Islam, like we do. They built an ideal society, just like we are doing. Come join us." These Quranic verses become part of the video's overall narrative. Daesh asks of its target audience to relive the times of persecution and, just like Noah, to remain steadfast. The past becomes part of the present and future, creating a constant state of war.

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*Daesh's religious narrative is centered on a core of concepts—hijra, takfir, the division of the world into opposing camps, and jihad—that are taken out of context, rendered as simple and unambiguous, and supported by sporadic reference to partial Quranic verses.*

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## Conclusion

By manipulating texts for purposes of polarization and recruitment, Daesh seeks to manifest its vision of a global partition of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb. It purports to describe this division as already existing, but its rhetoric and violence actively seek to create it. Measures designed to counter Daesh's narrative must then begin with a rejection of this divisive "us versus them" mentality. When this language is used by Western figures, it further marginalizes Muslim communities and feeds directly into Daesh's recruitment narratives. Understanding Daesh's strategy in deploying religious texts will assist religious leaders in identifying counternarratives and offering an alternative paradigm.

The implementation of preventative community-based policies will equip trusted Islamic scholars and religious leaders with the necessary analysis and digital tools. This training should be offered to local leaders, equipping them with the tools necessary to highlight Daesh's fraudulent religious narratives and establish a communication bridge with disaffected youth. In addition, community and religious scholars should seek to work within their communities to increase religious literacy, particularly among youth. Daesh capitalizes on this illiteracy in its propaganda. Muslim leaders should engage in a *jihad* (struggle) of ideas and meaning with Daesh and refuse to cede interpretative ground on the Quran and Islamic history. Islamic history and Quranic texts should be used to undercut Daesh's religious narratives. In fact, Surah al-Baqarah (2:256) states that there is no compulsion in religion, and Surah al-Ma'idah (5:32) states that to kill one innocent is like killing all of mankind. Religious and community leaders have a crucial role to play in providing moral authority and support to their communities. A complete and nuanced understanding of both the Quran and the diversity of the Muslim *ummah* is the best way to immunize against Daesh's insidious propaganda.



# Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq

The successful recruitment strategies of Daesh have become a serious challenge for the international community. Daesh employs a multifaceted online media strategy to recruit targeted demographics. The Carter Center is working to counter Daesh's recruitment propaganda efforts by undertaking in-depth analysis of this group's print and social media publications. The Center has developed a detailed coding methodology allowing for structured study of each individual issue of Daesh's online magazine, Dabiq. All 15 issues of Dabiq have been examined, categorizing 31 separate variables broken down by text, context, imagery, and magazine evolution. This qualitative and quantitative methodological analysis enables the study of shifting themes, trends, and recruitment strategies. This report will discuss the significance of Dabiq as a complement to Daesh's social media campaign, Daesh's successful reappropriation of international media, and its clever repurposing of this material to enhance its own recruitment strategies.

## **The Beginnings of Dabiq**

Since the establishment of the "*khilafah*" (caliphate) on June 29, 2014, Daesh's al-Hayat Media Center has published an online magazine, titled Dabiq. Producing an online magazine is not a novel approach to recruitment; al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) revolutionized English-language messaging with its print media source, Inspire. Daesh has learned from the media strategies of its predecessors and expanded upon them, more effectively using online social media—the retweets and postings of its supporters—to spread its message.

Religious apocalyptic symbolism plays a prominent role in Daesh recruitment. Dabiq is the name of a village located in northwest Syria, an intentional reference to Islamic religious symbolism. According to a *hadith*,<sup>26</sup> an apocalyptic battle will take place in Dabiq between Muslims and their enemies before the ultimate defeat of the Romans at Constantinople.<sup>27</sup> As an important geographical site for Daesh, we can assume the group is goading the international coalition toward this location for an apocalyptic battle.<sup>28</sup> Each issue of Dabiq begins with a quote from the group's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq." This statement aims to tie together Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Sunni insurgency movement against the United States in Iraq with the anticipated expansion of the "blessed jihad" from Iraq into Sham (Levant).

## The Evolution of Dabiq

Dabiq has revolutionized recruitment tactics of foreign fighters through its use of crisp imagery, its thematic design, and innovative use of languages. Although Dabiq resembles AQAP's magazine, Daesh has mastered the tactic of reappropriating international media to benefit its recruitment narratives and propaganda. In its first issue, approximately 7 percent of its images were repurposed from previously published media. By its 10th issue, nearly 45 percent of its images were being reappropriated from major Western media sources such as The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.<sup>29</sup> The sensational violent imagery has shifted to depicting more balanced everyday life in the caliphate. Dabiq initially ran around 30 to 45 pages. As the group's notoriety increased

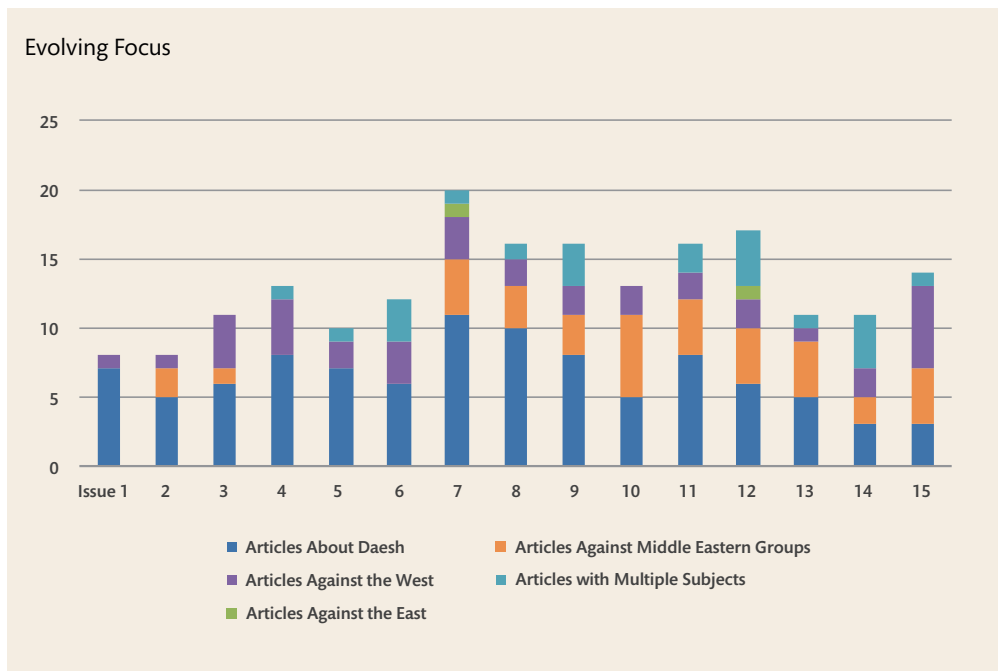
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<sup>26</sup> *Hadith* refers to the collection of spoken reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Each spoken report can be verified by the chain of narrators that goes back to a direct companion of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>27</sup> For further information on Dabiq, Syria prophecies, see "Why Islamic State Chose Town of Dabiq for Propaganda," BBC Middle East News, Nov. 17, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303>.

<sup>28</sup> The International Coalition to Fight Daesh was originally formed in September 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Completed imagery analysis by the Carter Center's Preventing Violent Extremism initiative on Issues 1–10 of Dabiq



and international media sources started to feature Daesh propaganda, Dabiq’s content increased to 83 pages by Issue 15, released in August 2016. Dabiq is published according to the lunar calendar and contains close to twice the number of articles as the first issue. The regularly appearing columns and the recently added sections provide insight into Daesh’s shifting recruitment tactics: “In the Words of the Enemy” and John Cantlie<sup>30</sup> target Western youth; “From Our Sisters/To Our Sisters” is written for the female reader; and “Islamic State Reports” recently featured a push for health care and infrastructure development to target Muslim specialists such as doctors and engineers.

The topical trends of Dabiq have shifted over time. In its first five issues, Dabiq mostly focused inward with articles about Daesh (33), and most of its attacks focused on the West (12). Only three articles in these first issues attacked groups in the Middle East. In Issues 6–12, although Dabiq still included pointed attacks on the West (covering executions, foreign attacks, and appropriating Western figureheads and media sources legitimizing Daesh), over time the issues turned their attention more toward delegitimizing other groups in the Middle East, focusing especially on the Jawlani front (Jabhat al Nusra) and the Sahwah coalition (Sunnis that fight against Daesh). Issues 13–15 continue this trend of delegitimization, laying out a justification for waging all-out war on Shias, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Christians, respectively. In Issues 5–13, while articles about Daesh were still featured heavily (54), there were more than twice as many articles attacking Middle Eastern groups (31) as articles attacking the West (14). This

<sup>30</sup> Cantlie was taken captive in November 2012 in Syria, and when Great Britain refused to negotiate with Daesh, Daesh began featuring Cantlie in the video series “Lend Me Your Ears.”

is reflected in the “In the Words of Our Enemy” section, which appropriates Western media sources and politicians in the first nine issues. In Issue 10, however, both Middle Eastern media sources (the Syria Observatory for Human Rights and Al-Jazeera) and Western media sources are reappropriated to delegitimize al-Qaida. The final two issues of Dabiq, however, reverse this trend, featuring six articles against the West as opposed to only one attacking groups in the Middle East. This is because Daesh uses its last two issues to capitalize on the carnage and shock of terrorist attacks in Europe, South Asia, North Africa, and other locations that Daesh did not necessarily directly oversee.

From its initial release, Dabiq has emphasized *hijrah* (migration), *jihad* (to strive and to struggle—more specifically to “fight,” according to Daesh), and the importance of the *ummah* (community) to attract disenfranchised Muslim youth. According to Islamic tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers faced extreme persecution in Mecca, God commanded them in a revelation to perform *hijrah* to ensure the preservation of the faith. Daesh capitalizes on the symbolic importance of migration that was integral to the founding of Islam and co-opts this concept in recruitment materials by drawing a parallel with its own caliphate project. Using emotional appeals, Daesh likens the brotherhood and unity of the *ummah* in its territory to that of Medina in the sixth century. Daesh manipulates the meaning of *jihad* to justify its violent actions and build legitimacy within its cohort. Dabiq’s overarching narrative attempts to link Daesh’s

Issue 15

# CONTENTS

The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq.  
Abu Musab az-Zarqawi ؓ

**Feature**

46 Break the Cross

**Articles**

- 04 Foreword
- 08 Contemplate the Creation
- 14 From the Pages of History
- 20 The Fitrah of Mankind
- 26 Words of Sincere Advice
- 30 Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You
- 34 Wisdom
- 36 How I Came to Islam
- 40 Operations
- 64 Interview
- 70 Among the Believers Are Men
- 74 In the Words of the Enemy
- 78 By the Sword



64



46



14



74



78

ISIS Propaganda

Table of Contents for Issue 15 of Dabiq

caliphate with the founding of Islam and the progression of the early Islamic community as if they are suffering the same hardships, must migrate, and must fight to defend themselves to create a just society based on *shari'a*.

Early Dabiq titles reflect these religious themes. “The Return of Khilafah,” “The Flood,” and “A Call to Hijrah” (Issues 1, 2, and 4) are prime examples. In “The Return of Khilafah,” Daesh proclaims “Glad Tidings for the Muslim *Ummah*,” claiming the Khilafah is “a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers” (Issue 1). Daesh uses the sacred *umma* as a recruitment tactic, promising true fellowship and justice to men and women of all races and nationalities who migrate to join Daesh. Daesh views the world from a bipolar lens: “Muslims” and “nonbelievers,” feeding into the us-versus-them narrative.

Later titles have evolved to focus on Daesh’s goal to legitimize and justify its draconian interpretation of the law. This includes articles such as “Shari’a Alone Will Rule Africa” and “From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions” (Issues 7 and 11).<sup>31</sup> In “The Burning of the Murtadd Apostate Pilot,” Daesh justifies the cruel execution of Mu’adh al-Kasasibah with *hadith*: “Allah’s Messenger said whoever harms an ally of Mine, then I have declared war against him” [*Hadith Sahih al-Bukhari*] (Issue 7). Daesh takes this *hadith* out of context and misrepresents it as an Islamic legal justification to the execution of the Jordanian pilot, framing it as retribution for his participation in airstrikes on their territories. Over 100 leading Muslim scholars signed an online letter in protest to Daesh’s misrepresentation of *shari’a* (Islamic law) and stated that “the greater jihad” is not the eradication of infidels but seeking spiritual purity by controlling base human instincts of greed, lust, and cruelty.<sup>32</sup>

Jordanian cleric Abu ash-Shalabi criticized al-Kasasibah’s cruel execution: “The manner in which he was executed and the subsequent production of a video displaying his execution are matters that oppose the teachings of jihad, which made people enter the religion, not to run them away or distort its image.” Daesh responded to this criticism directly in Issue 6, calling ash-Shalabi a masquerading supporter of *mujahideen* who continues to live under authority of *murtadd* puppets and who has no intention of making *hijrah* to the lands of Allah. Issue 14 continues this by condemning the Muslim Brotherhood organization, denouncing it as a group of apostates. Daesh also denounces the Muslim Brotherhood for participating in the political democratic process.

Daesh openly outlines its recruitment and expansion strategy. A “roadmap” in Issue 1 details this progression. Daesh states: “These phases consist of immigrating to a land with a weak central authority to use as a base where a *jama’ah* (group) can form, recruit members, and train them.” Dabiq’s role in depicting a more just framework of citizenship, social service, and community offered by the “caliphate” is meant to create a heightened

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31 The gray zone is commonly defined as an area of uncertainty. According to the United States Army, a “gray zone approach” is an ability to adequately navigate conflicts falling outside the traditional peace-or-war construct. See House Armed Services Subcommittee Report, (March 2015). <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20150318/103157/HMTG-114-AS26-Wstate-VotelUSAJ-20150318.pdf>; Dabiq uses the term “gray zone” as both the title of Issue 7 as well as the theme of the issue itself, which discusses Daesh’s continued efforts to force Western coalitions toward conflict.

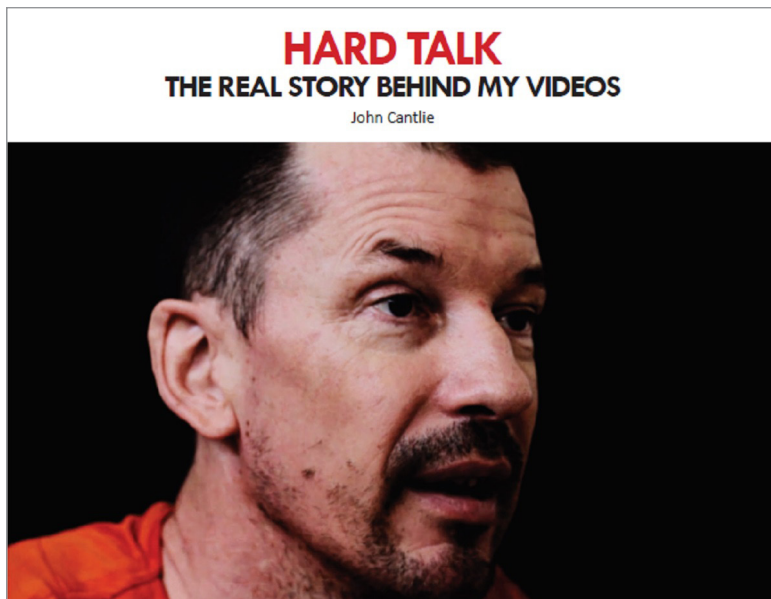
32 To view the full letter to al-Baghdadi, see “You Have Misinterpreted Islam,” <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>



sense of belonging to all Muslims, provoking emotional appeals. In “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” Daesh states: “The Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices. They either apostatize and adopt the *kafir* [unbelievers] religion prorated by Bush, Obama, Blair, Cameron, and Hollande in the name of Islam... or they perform *hijrah* [migration] to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens.” (Issue 7).

## International Propaganda Benefits

At the 69th session of the U.N. General Assembly, Sept. 24, 2014, United States President Obama declared Daesh a “terrorist organization.” Since this declaration, individual countries and key international actors have been divided on how to contain and defeat Daesh. In nearly every issue of Dabiq, both John Cantlie and the column “From Our Enemies” celebrate this international confusion and lack of a unified strategy. In Issue 8, the following quote from former U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is reappropriated to Daesh’s ends: “We’ve never seen an organization like ISIL that is so well-organized, so well-trained, so well-funded, so strategic, so brutal, so completely ruthless. You blend all that together. That is an incredibly powerful new threat.” (Issue 8). John Cantlie adds, “For the former defense secretary to be using such relatively complimentary language when discussing an adversary is a clear sign that Washington isn’t so sure they’re up against a mere ‘organization’ at all.”




John Cantlie, featured in Issue 4 of Dabiq

**IN THE WORDS OF  
THE ENEMY**

Over the last month, a number of crusaders voiced their concerns over the power and drive of the Islamic State, its revival of Islam and the caliphate, and its eventual expansion into Europe and the rest of the world.

The Catholic crusader and American politician Rick Santorum had the following to say:

“This is a caliphate that has been established and that means they are calling people from all over the world to come and fight this battle. As long as they hold ground and continue to expand that ground, more and more will come. The fact that we are delaying means that the Caliphate continues to exist. They are not losing ground. They are not being discredited in the eyes of the Muslim world. They will get stronger. ... This is really important to understand. The reason the West had a thousand year war with Islam is that Islam was ever expanding. When Islam began to contract, it collapsed, and the caliphate was eliminated. Now they have established a caliphate. They are dead serious about expanding it. Unless we begin to take back that ground and make this caliphate just irrelevant in the eyes of the radical Muslim world, we are going to have a bigger and bigger problem.”



The Catholic Crusader  
**RICK SANTORUM**

ISIS Propaganda

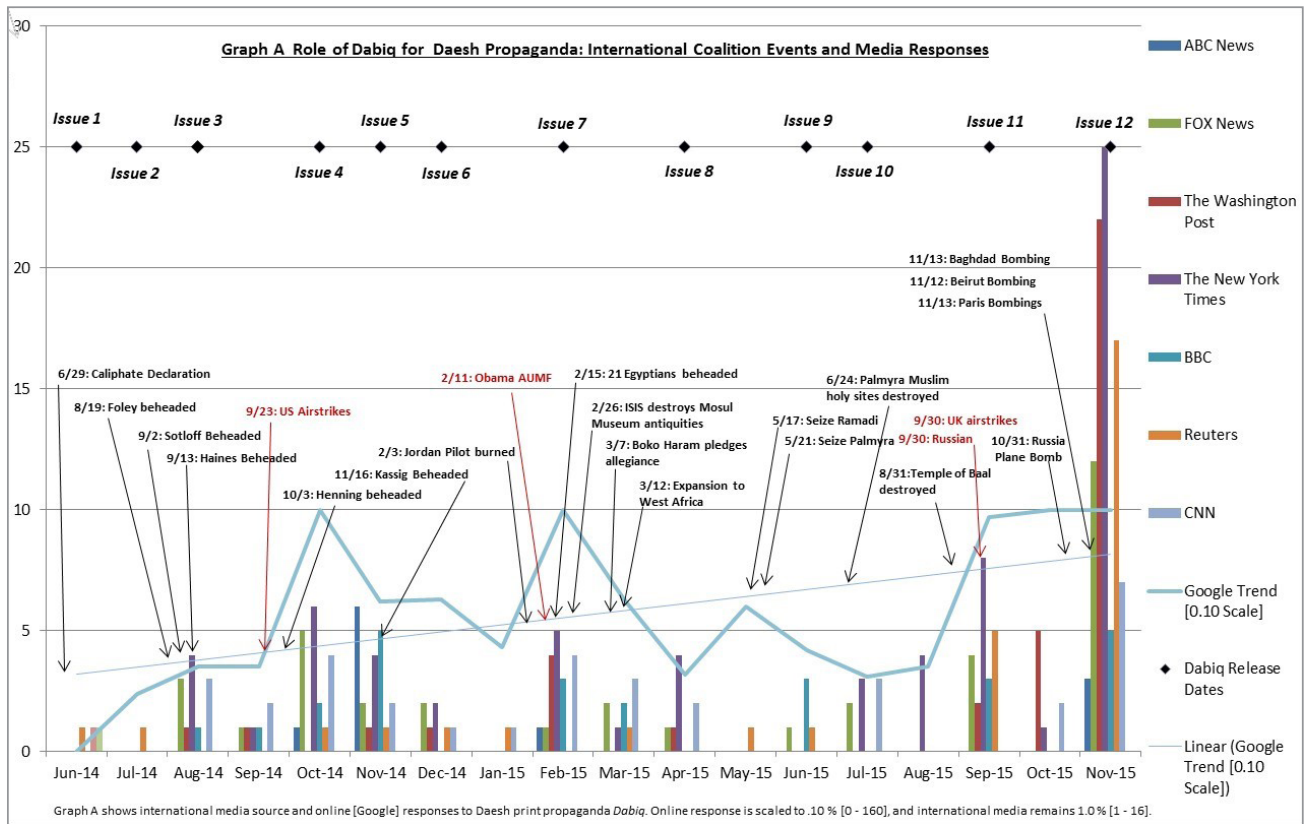
In the Words of the Enemy, Dabiq, Issue 8

Great Britain, John Cantlie’s country of origin, has been an active member of the international military coalition against Daesh. This country’s counterterrorism strategy, specifically the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, features policies such as temporary exclusion and post-obligations for returnees that unintentionally benefit Daesh recruitment. British Prime Minister David Cameron published an update to the strategy in October 2015 that includes an examination of the *shari’a* law in Britain, the promotion of British values, and a community engagement forum. Daesh uses these laws to their advantage, recognizing the alienating effects these laws have on Muslims and then capitalizing on these feelings of anger and disenfranchisement for recruitment purposes and as a driver for radicalization. In “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” Cantlie addresses Cameron and his notion of British values, stating: “Politicians claim how Islam is great, [and] how they really like Muslims—but only Muslims who conform to the United Kingdom’s definition of what a Muslim should be, who fits neatly into the definition of a working democracy. Whoever does not conform to this new definition of Muslim will be persecuted.” (Issue 8). The need to obey and conform to a British version of Islam has created “the anger factor,” emotions that Daesh strategically exploits to recruit Muslims to Syria and Iraq.

John Cantlie's role in Daesh propaganda deserves a close investigation. He is seen in both online propaganda videos and is first featured in *Dabiq*, Issue 4, as the author of a print column originally titled "Hard Talk." Over the course of his captivity, Cantlie's appearance and demeanor have changed: In early videos, he appears in an orange jumpsuit, alluding to Guantanamo, handcuffed to a desk. However, in later videos, he is in citizen clothes walking the streets of Daesh-controlled cities, discussing everyday life. A recent column, "Paradigm Shift II," focuses on the progression of Daesh from an organization to a functioning state, praising the territory's vibrant economy, establishment of law and order, and provision of social services (Issue 12). The remainder of his column reappropriates international media for purposes of "state legitimization," quoting Brigadier General Ronald Magnum from the Georgia Caucasus Strategic Studies Institute [on May 29, 2015] saying, "The Islamic State meets all requirements to be recognized as a state. It has a governing structure, controls territory, and provides governmental services such as health care to its population." (Issue 12). Noteworthy, John Cantlie's name is the only author name *Dabiq* includes on its content page; all other authors have bylines only. Daesh understands the value of a British spokesman, denouncing his democratic government while lauding the brotherhood and services Daesh provides for those living in its territory.

Another example of Daesh utilizing propaganda and social media to its benefit is found in the multipage in-depth interview with Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh in "Al-Qaidah of Waziristan," (Issue 6) published after his capture by Daesh forces on Dec. 24, 2014. Preceding al-Kasasbeh's death, two hashtags on Twitter (#SuggestAWayToKillTheJordanianPilotPig and #WeAllWantToSlaughterMoaz) were retweeted a combined 16,000 times. Individual users, media outlets, and even Queen Rania and Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah II of Jordan sought a way to show support for al-Kasasbeh by countering the tweets of Daesh supporters with opposing hashtags (#JordanianPilot and #WeAreAllMoaz). This opposing Twitter campaign saw over 200,000 tweets prior to the execution of al-Kasasbeh. It is not clear if Daesh leadership initiated the Twitter campaign or if the group ultimately chose an execution style based on follower suggestions. What is clear in the direct exchange of the rival social media campaigns is that a Middle Eastern prince responded to a terrorist organization, indirectly giving it legitimacy.

Perhaps the most significant feature of *Dabiq* is the section "In the Words of the Enemy." Since its first issue, this crowded column has served as home to words from presidents, prime ministers, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, and directors of the CIA, among many other leaders. World leaders, the international media, and think tanks provide Daesh with ample material to reappropriate for its cause. In "The Return of Khilafah," Daesh quotes Douglas Ollivant and Brian Fishman's work, "The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," to demonstrate its legitimacy as a state. "The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is no longer a state in name only. It is a physical, if extra-legal, reality on the ground. Unacknowledged by the world community, ISIS has carved a de facto state in the borderlands. ISIS has created a multiethnic army, provides limited services, and flies its own flag." (Issue 1).



Looking at *Dabiq*'s evolution through quantitative analysis, Graph A provides a clear association between Daesh-created media events, international coalition efforts, media coverage, and the titles of the *Dabiq* magazine. Daesh effectively creates geographically varying events to provoke international condemnations as well as gain exposure and then reappropriates this coverage in its magazine as proof of its political and military ascension. Following each *Dabiq* release, major international media coverage increases between one and eight full-page articles per source. In addition, individual Google online searches increase between one and 160 times per day. This requires the use of a percentage scale, to show the depth of both media and citizen attention.

An applicable example is 1) American Journalist James Foley Beheaded; 2) U.S. Airstrikes in Raqqa, Syria; and 3) Daesh release of "The Failed Crusade." [Issue 4]. Another association is 1) Jordanian Pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh Burned, 2) U.S. Authorization of Military Force (AUMF), and 3) Daesh release of "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Gray Zone." [Issue 7]. A final association is 1) 21 Christian Egyptians Beheaded, 2) Boko Haram's Pledge of Allegiance to ISIS, and 3) Daesh release of "Shari'a Alone Will Rule Africa." [Issue 8]. This chain of events has become a cyclical trend, confirming Daesh's rapid media response capabilities and providing insight to Daesh leadership about how to pique or elicit Western interests.

## Feeding Into the Daesh Narrative

The unequal coverage of Muslim deaths in the international media plays directly into Daesh's online recruitment strategies. In retaliation for the Nov. 13 Paris attacks claimed

by Daesh, French President Francois Holland approved airstrikes on the city of Raqqa, de facto capital of Daesh. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported these airstrikes hit the National Hospital and al-Nour mosque and resulted in civilian casualties. While the commencement of the French offensive was given ample air time, the deaths of Syrians as a result of these airstrikes were underreported. With the exception of Newsweek in the United States, few major international media outlets reported on the immense fires in a refugee camp located near Calais. The fire left over 300 homeless and resulted in 100 deaths. In the days following, French police fired tear gas at and arrested refugees who were demanding justice. This lack of news coverage or concern for the lives of Muslims and refugees feeds into the Daesh narrative that sets believers against infidels or Muslims against crusaders. Soon after, 11 U.S. governors and all Republican U.S. presidential candidates made public statements refusing to accept Syrian refugees. Some changed their statements to allow only Christian refugees. Reactionary violence and fear-mongering statements provide fuel to Daesh and its us-versus-them narrative.<sup>33</sup>

Following the Nov. 13 Paris attacks, news headlines read as follows: Italian Libero's "Bastardi Islamici" (Islamic Bastards), CNN's "The Paris Attacks: Understanding Islam," and FOX News' "We're Not Islamophobic, Mr. Obama, We Just Don't Want to Get Blown Up." In efforts to contain violent anti-Muslim reactions, Muslim imams, scholars, and citizens swiftly responded, stating the Paris attacks were an affront on Islam. The Irish Council of Imams publicly affirmed, "Murder is strictly forbidden in Islam. The murder of one is as evil as killing all people."<sup>34</sup> Dr. Shuja Shafi, secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, stated, "There is nothing Islamic about such people, and their actions are evil and outside the boundaries set by our faith."<sup>35</sup> According to the Center for American-Islamic Relations, after Nov. 13, 27 reported incidents (violent attacks, threats, and assaults) against Muslims occurred in the United States in a period of just 10 days. Of those 27 incidents, 10 armed attacks occurred at local mosques, four assaults were on students on university property, and five assaults or violent threats were made toward women and children.<sup>36</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center reports an increase in the number of hate groups in the United States for the second year in a row: The most dramatic growth was in anti-Muslim hate groups, which grew from just 35 in 2015 to 101 in 2016.<sup>37</sup> This anti-Muslim fervor, like military and policy responses, has fed directly into Daesh propaganda. In the words of Abul-Harith Ath-Thaghri, "After living under the persecution of the crusaders, one could live an Islamic life with safety and security [in Daesh territory]." (Issue 12).

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*Lack of international news coverage and concern for the lives of Muslims and refugees feeds into Daesh's us-versus-them narratives.*

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33 Upon election, U.S. President Donald Trump immediately followed through on his promises to try to enact a "Muslim ban" via an executive order prohibiting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. While courts struck down the order, Trump has stated he will issue a new order to the same effect. "Trump Is Set to Introduce a New 'Muslim Ban.' This One Is Nonsense Too." Washington Post, Feb. 21, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/02/21/trump-is-set-to-introduce-a-new-muslim-ban-this-one-is-nonsense-too/?utm\\_term=.a30e2e3f090c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/02/21/trump-is-set-to-introduce-a-new-muslim-ban-this-one-is-nonsense-too/?utm_term=.a30e2e3f090c)

34 "Killers Do Not Represent Islam, Irish Muslim Leaders Stress" by Joe Humphreys, The Irish Times, Nov. 14, 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/killers-do-not-represent-islam-irish-muslim-leaders-stress-1.2430626>

35 For full statement by Dr. Shuja Shafi, see "Horrible Attacks in Paris: Muslim Council of Britain Responds," The Muslim Council of Britain, Nov. 13, 2015. <http://www.mcb.org.uk/horrific-attacks-in-paris-muslim-council-of-britain-responds/>

36 For full detailed list of incidents, see "Twenty-seven Examples of The 'Unprecedented' Spike In Islamophobic Incidents in the U.S." by Jack Jenkins, ThinkProgress, Dec. 1, 2015. <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/12/01/3726648/islamophobia-since-paris/>

37 Southern Poverty Law Center, Annual Census of Hate Groups, 2016. <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>

## Conclusion

The most effective approach to address the Daesh threat cannot be limited to the military front alone. It must address root causes and confront, head on, Daesh's ideology and media strategies. Daesh's media strategy and recruitment continue to spread in conjunction with the rise of Islamophobia. By understanding Dabiq's role and Daesh's strategic use of local and Western media to its advantage, getting a step ahead of this violent organization becomes possible. In September 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama acknowledged Daesh was successfully attracting recruits not just from MENA states but worldwide through online, social, and print media. At the time, Obama stated that Daesh's ideology must be defeated and that this must be done by ideas, not guns, and by presenting a more attractive vision. This recognition was a step forward. However, the Trump administration has taken a hard turn from this approach, attempting to bar travel from certain Muslim-majority countries and vowing to eradicate "radical Islamic terrorism."<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, this plays directly into the hands of Daesh, perpetuating the narrative of Islam versus the West and legitimizing Daesh by calling it "Islamic." Attempts to weaken Daesh by military might alone will not stop new iterations of extremism unless the war of words, rhetoric, and ideology are seriously confronted as well.

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38 "New Trump Deportation Rules Allow Far More Expulsions." Washington Post, Feb. 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/us/politics/dhs-immigration-trump.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>



# The Children in Daesh: “Future Flag Bearers” of the “Caliphate”

The outreach and recruitment strategies of Daesh have been unprecedented. The approaches it employs and the messages it propagates are nuanced, multilayered, and context-pertinent. One such recruitment methodology entails targeted mobilization, indoctrination, and training of children as young as 8 years old. These child soldiers, proudly branded as the “cubs of the caliphate,”<sup>39</sup> are exploited to advance the organization’s various sociopolitical objectives. Despite children’s consequential role in Daesh’s ideological and military agenda, policy discussions on the importance of children in Daesh appear to be limited. This dissonance between intricate ground realities and limited understanding of Daesh’s recruitment strategies at the policy level paves the way for ineffective and even counterproductive solutions.

To fill this vacuum, this policy report undertakes an in-depth analysis of Daesh’s complex tactics for recruiting children and the plurality of roles played by these children in its mission. The report concludes with an overview of the legal ramifications associated with children’s involvement in armed conflicts and recommendations on how a practical approach to reintegrating returning children could be conceived. The conclusions presented here are based on a thorough investigation of Dabiq, Daesh’s primary print magazine for non-Arabic speakers; over 90 videos analyzed by The Carter Center that depict children as central elements in the propaganda narratives; and additional secondary references.

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<sup>39</sup> Dabiq, Issue 8, “Shari’a Alone Will Rule Africa,” p. 20



## Rationale for Recruiting Children

Daesh's elaborate infrastructure for systematic and institutionalized recruitment of children suggests that it sees immense tactical value in investing resources for the preparation of its younger generation. Based on the depiction of children in its propaganda videos and literature, this seems to be the case for a variety of reasons.

Children are a vital propaganda tool in Daesh's recruitment phenomenon. They have been used as supporting objects to substantiate a whole range of its narratives. For instance, visuals of children suffering as a result of Western aggression are overwhelmingly shown to evoke feelings of anger and disgust. This, in turn, increases the emotional appeal of one of Daesh's predominant narratives, that is, the humiliation and disgrace inflicted upon the Muslim *ummah* (community) by the "tyrant" West. Similarly, to advance its narrative of a utopian "Islamic state" that offers the only path to righteousness, Daesh portrays children as the more fortunate beneficiaries of those blessings, because, unlike adults, they have not been severely contaminated by the vices of the West. In fact, of the videos analyzed for this report, almost 80 percent used children as key props to further such recruitment narratives.

Admittedly, however, Daesh's employment of children goes far beyond simply using them as propaganda instruments. They are, in fact, regarded as an important asset for the growth and longevity of the "caliphate." This is because recruiting and training of children in large numbers allows Daesh not only to build its physical strength but also to create strong safeguards against a potential leadership deficit. Moreover, with an unparalleled rate of child enrollment, the organization's ultimate purpose is to engender, validate, and solidify an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism.<sup>40</sup> This is fundamental to Daesh's long-term pragmatism, as it aims to prepare ideology-blinded acolytes who could outlive its political-territorial loss. Hence, what better targets than children whose suggestibility renders them vulnerable to ideological conditioning? Having less concrete ideological and moral foundations, children are seen as subjects that can easily be manipulated into accepting violent messages without dispute. Such glimpses of children internalizing Daesh's doctrinal positions are frequently seen in its propaganda videos. Children, in these videos, are asked to recite selective verses from the Quran that emphasize the notion of military jihad.<sup>41</sup> They can be witnessed pledging

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*What better targets than children, whose suggestibility renders them vulnerable to ideological conditioning?*

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40 The Guardian, "Raising Tomorrow's Mujahideen: The Horrific World of ISIS Child Soldiers," March 10, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/horror-of-isis-child-soldiers-state-of-terror>

41 Al Raqqah Media Center, "Die in Your Rage," May 27, 2016

“to hear and obey” the authority of the imam with “selflessness” and an unquestioning attitude.<sup>42</sup> Relatedly, children are encouraged to speak against and send warnings to the *kuffar* (infidels): “I will be the one who slaughters you, O *Kuffar*. I will be a *mujahid*, *insh’Allah*,” proclaimed Abdullah, aged 12, in an interview video.<sup>43</sup> This illustrates how Daesh methodically exploits the innocence and malleability of young children to shape them in its mold and, in turn, lay the foundation for its long-term survival.

Lastly, the visual symbolism of having an organized army of young soldiers serves as a crucial element in Daesh’s psychological warfare. The organization’s frequent references to its young combatants as “the cubs of the caliphate,” “tomorrow’s *mujahedeen*,” “the next generation,” and “the future flag bearers” are meant to send a strong message to its adversaries that it is well-equipped and has an unmatched capacity. This is manifestly clear in a recent propaganda video that shows young soldiers vehemently training as the following words are being sung in French in the background: “Beware, we have what we need to defend ourselves: Well-armed soldiers are ready to kill you.”<sup>44</sup> This trend of dedicating entire propaganda videos to emphasize Daesh’s resolute preparedness seems to have noticeably, although unsurprisingly, escalated in the wake of its recent territory losses. Of the 25 children-centered videos in the Carter Center’s database collected in early 2017, 62 percent have preparedness, both ideological and military, as a predominant theme.

## Methods for Recruitment

Daesh’s methodology for recruitment is far from being a uniform and one-dimensional process of outreach and indoctrination. Employing a hyperlocal approach, it fashions messages that speak directly to the pressing concerns of its target audience and offer empowering alternatives. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of Daesh’s recruitment strategies necessitates deconstructing its varying messages with respect to the nature and contextual specifics of potential recruits.

With regard to local recruitment, the process starts at a very young age when children attend Daesh-administered schools. The new curriculum by Daesh effectively abolished secular syllabi composed of subjects such as “drawing, music, nationalism, history, philosophy, and social studies.”<sup>45</sup> Instead, now in the gender-segregated classrooms, children are required to focus on religious studies, which entails mastering the Arabic language and memorizing the Quran and *hadith*. School education is also used as a tool to expunge any notion of citizenship or nation–state building from the consciousness of these young students. The only form of communal identity they are trained to unquestioningly adopt is one that centers on the concept of a transboundary Muslim *ummah*. Moreover, the curriculum emphasizes the need for physical training, which includes fighting drills and instructions on how to operate weapons. By standardizing school curriculum according to its theological and strategic priorities, Daesh aims to manufacture consent and allegiance

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*A comprehensive analysis of Daesh’s recruitment strategies necessitates deconstructing its varying messages with respect to the nature and contextual specificities of potential recruits.*

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42 Al Hayat Media Center, “Eid Greetings From the Land of the Khilafah,” July 20, 2014

43 Al Hayat Media Center, “Race Toward Good,” Nov. 21, 2014

44 Al Hayat Media Center, “Blood for Blood,” June 4, 2016

45 Quilliam Foundation, “The Children of the Islamic State,” March 2016. <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-children-of-islamic-state.pdf>



Daesh's child militants burning their native passports, protesting notions of citizenship and the nation-state.

to its ideas and practices. Eventually, such indoctrination breeds among children a favorable opinion of the organization and its violent disposition and even generates motivation for voluntary participation.

In addition to schools, Daesh uses various public fora as avenues for mobilization of support. Representatives of the organization frequently go to mosques, town squares, and markets to mingle with children and normalize their presence in the society. Propaganda videos show middle-aged Daesh soldiers overseeing sports activities, distributing food, giving away gifts and toys, and organizing other public events where children are encouraged to recite Quranic verses, sing *nasheeds*, and wave Daesh's flag.<sup>46</sup> Such amicable interaction makes Daesh an attractive entity for children.

Desensitizing children to violence is another one of Daesh's tactics for recruitment. Children as young as 4 and 5 years old are forced to witness public executions and torture.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, they are encouraged to incorporate forms of violence in their everyday play activities, such as beheading stuffed toys or pretending to be militants with toy weapons. Based on the analysis of the data reviewed for this report, 36 percent of the videos had children carrying and flaunting weapons, while 27 percent had children as firsthand witnesses of killings and bloodshed. Having internalized violence as a way of life through such exposure and through the ongoing wars, joining Daesh's ranks as a militant becomes a preference for many children.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Al Khayr Media Center, "Holiday Cheer in the State of Unification," July 23, 2015; Al Fallujah Media Center, "Exhort One Another With the Truth," Feb. 15, 2015; Al Halab Media Center, "Living in the Shade of the Khilafah," Jan. 24, 2015

<sup>47</sup> Al Halab Media Center, "Establishment of the Limit Upon the Corrupt in the Land," Feb. 7, 2015



Young boys cover their ears and are seen visibly shaken and frightened as they are forced to witness a public execution.

Daesh also employs more direct methods of recruitment, such as leveraging family and community ties. To enlist combatants, Daesh offers families monetary benefits, which could be as much as \$100 a month.<sup>48</sup> Alternatively, Daesh uses its influence through preachers and imams to condition parents to voluntarily register their children in Daesh's training camps. While education, indoctrination, and social mobilization are integral to Daesh's strategy for child recruitment and retention, it does not shy away from using coercive measures to expand its army. Explicit coercive actions include abduction and lethal threats to children and their families,<sup>49</sup> whereas implicit coercion manifests itself in the form of societal pressure and fear of being labeled a traitor or an apostate if one refuses to join.

To recruit foreign children, Daesh cannot extract from a similar repository of resources and tactics. It does not have, for example, similar sites of mobilization and indoctrination, such as schools and public avenues, directly available in foreign countries. For this reason, in addition to tapping into its widespread relational networks, Daesh calculatedly uses the internet as its primary site of recruitment. In so doing, it promulgates narratives that capitalize on the grievances of its target audience and, therefore, tend to have strong personal resonance.

In general, a majority of messages directed at foreign audiences aim to highlight the "hypocrisy of the West" and to expose its "ulterior motive" of destroying the Islamic *ummah*. The ultimate purpose is to entrench an us-versus-them divide in the consciousness of the target audience and, in turn, provoke them to migrate to fulfill their moral

48 The Guardian, "Raising Tomorrow's Mujahideen: The Horrific World of ISIS Child Soldiers," March 10, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/horror-of-isis-child-soldiers-state-of-terror>

49 Daily Mail, "500 Children Kidnapped by ISIS Are Being Brainwashed Into Becoming Suicide Bombers or Child Soldiers," June 2, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3107010/500-children-kidnapped-ISIS-brainwashed-suicide-bombers-child-soldiers-iraqi-official-reveals.html>

duty of defending the *ummah*. However, Daesh acknowledges that dependent foreign children cannot be recruited apart from their families. Messages of sociopolitical disillusionment are enveloped with the narrative of collective family participation, which specifies obligations of and roles for each family member. This narrative is then supplemented with testimonies from families who have migrated to Daesh. For instance, in a video titled “Eid Greetings from the Caliphate,” a Finnish Muslim sent the following message to his fellow Muslims: “I am calling on all Muslims living in the West, America, and Europe, and everywhere else to come ... *with your families* [emphasis added] to the land of Khilafah. Alhamdulillah, we live in the shades of this religion.”<sup>50</sup>

Another recruitment narrative asserts that Muslim children growing up in the West are being brainwashed at the hands of the *munafiqin* (hypocrites) who are morally bankrupt. Western secular education, it is argued, teaches Muslim youth “to accept all manner of religious deviance and social perversion.”<sup>51</sup> These statements are juxtaposed with descriptions and images of children in Daesh, who are portrayed in a very positive light as individuals who have been blessed with the right path and are being raised under the “shade of the Quran and *sunnah*.”<sup>52</sup> Recruitment propaganda shows children learning Arabic, undertaking shari’a studies, and participating in numerous social and extracurricular activities. The objective behind such imagery is to convince parents that migrating to the “caliphate” is the only way to shield their children from all immoralities of the “atheist and liberal” West.

Predictably, religious references are actively used for further justification. The historical episode of *hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Medina is frequently invoked,<sup>53</sup> and Muslim families are encouraged to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. References are also made to stories from Islamic tradition that show child participation as the *sunnah* (practice) of the Prophet.<sup>54</sup> Finally, out-of-context Quranic verses and *hadith*, oriented around the subject of jihad and martyrdom, are strategically woven into the narratives to confer upon them religious legitimacy.

For older children, who can be recruited independently of their parents, Daesh offers a path to discover personal and social identity. Most of these children struggle with reconciling their religious and national identities. This is exacerbated when they lack access to appropriate resources to undertake an informed study of their religion. In such situations, they are easily lured by feelings of pride, dignity, and empowerment evoked by Daesh’s appeals.

Coupled with this sentiment is the invocation of nostalgia for a utopian state for the entire Muslim community, regardless of one’s race, nationality, or socioeconomic status. Daesh is particularly interested in promoting this notion of a transboundary, pan-“Islamic state” in which Muslims with diverse backgrounds live and thrive in harmony. Propaganda videos successfully convey this message by showing clips of “brotherhood” between youths and adults of various nationalities, including, but not limited

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50 Al Hayat Media Center, “Eid Greetings From the Land of the Khilafah,” July 20, 2014

51 Dabiq, Issue 12, “Just Terror,” p. 34

52 Al Hayat Media Center, “Race Toward Good,” Nov. 21, 2014

53 Dabiq, Issue 12, “Just Terror,” pp. 33–35

54 Dabiq, Issue 8, “Shari’a Alone Will Rule Africa,” p. 21

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*This idea of a post-racial, post-citizenship society resonates rather strongly with young individuals who are marginalized and discriminated against in their native countries because of the color of their skin and/or their heritage.*

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to, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Tunisia, Morocco, France, Belgium, and the United States.<sup>55</sup> This idea of a post-racial, post-citizenship society resonates rather strongly with young individuals who are marginalized and discriminated against in their native countries because of the color of their skin and/or their heritage.

Once recruited, children (both local and foreign) are required to go through rigorous ideological and military training. As part of the process, they are enrolled in *shari'a* camps where religious knowledge is imparted. Those who are not well-versed in Arabic are required to master speaking, reading, and writing skills. This exercise is important, as it aims to create a shared singular identity among all its members that revolves around the language of Islam. Additionally, instruction focuses on instilling in children manipulated interpretations of fundamental theological concepts.<sup>56</sup> The next step in the training process entails physical drills at military camps. This includes training by experts in urban warfare, self-defense, and the use of weapons. After basic drilling, the trainees are assigned to special units, allowing them to focus on specific skill sets.<sup>57</sup> Successful completion of these training programs is regarded as a rite of passage for young boys who are seen as having transitioned into manhood. In sum, these camps are used to romanticize the notion of armed jihad, normalize violence and synonymize it with masculinity, and ingrain a sense of loyalty and pride in fighting for the “caliphate.”

## **Role of Children in the “Caliphate”: From Auxiliary Support to Full-Fledged Militancy**

Children are assigned different tasks, ranging from routine support activities to full-fledged participation as front-line combatants, depending on their physical–mental strength and specific individual skills

**Support Functions:** Children work as spies who are instructed to report on anyone whom they suspect of violating the laws of the *khilafah*.<sup>58</sup> Escapee accounts further reveal that Daesh sends children to join “sleeper cells” in government-controlled areas to gather information on the government’s strategies and operations.<sup>59</sup> Other support functions include guarding checkpoints, transferring weapons, and performing various administrative duties in Daesh-controlled hospitals, courts, schools, and other social facilities.

**Spokeschildren:** Several propaganda videos depict children, both girls and boys, participating in public rallies and religious lectures, where they present speeches and songs eulogizing Daesh’s ideas and practices.<sup>60</sup> Capitalizing on the emotional appeal children are able to generate, Daesh uses its most charismatic and well-versed children as

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55 Al Hayat Media Center, “Eid Greetings from the Land of the Khilafah,” July 20, 2014

56 Al Ninawa, “Course Graduation at the Islamic State Training Camp,” Nov. 24, 2014

57 Al Raqqah, “Institute for the Cubs,” Feb. 22, 2015

58 Foreign Affairs, “Cubs of the Caliphate: The Children of ISIS,” July 21, 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-07-21/cubs-caliphate>

59 Human Rights Watch, “Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die: Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria,” June 22, 2014. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>, p. 20–25

60 Al Khayr Media Center, “Holiday Cheer in the State of Unification,” July 23, 2015



ISIS Propaganda

A young girl recites *nasheeds* in praise of Daesh.



ISIS Propaganda

A young boy preaches at a local mosque.

preachers and recruiters.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, these spokeschildren are used as examples to guilt-recruit older men. The idea is to make the point that if young children can so valiantly devote their lives to Allah, what are adults afraid of?

**Participants in Violence:** Conscripting of children by armed groups to use in wars is not a new phenomenon in itself. Conventionally, however, the use of children has been limited to fulfill supplementary war assignments or to fill out the ranks of adult militants.<sup>62</sup> Daesh, on the other hand, regularly deploys children as main actors alongside

61 Al Furat Media Center, "I Am Leaving Upon You a Clear Path," Aug. 13, 2016

62 CNN, "How ISIS Recruits Children, Then Kills Them," Feb. 22, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/19/middleeast/isis-child-soldiers/index.html>

their adult counterparts for intensely violent operations. In its propaganda media, Daesh proudly exhibits its children as shooters, executioners, suicide bombers, and soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>63</sup> Children are also trained as young officers responsible for punishing and torturing the “caliphate’s” prisoners and dissidents.

**Gender-Based Roles:** It is commonly believed that while young boys are trained to engage in military duties, young girls are simply relegated to their homes and are trained to become obedient wives and mothers. This, however, is only partially true. A more nuanced and gender-conscious approach to understanding women and girls in Daesh reveals that their role is more complex than what appears on the surface. For example, just like young boys, girls are brainwashed to carry out suicide attacks. A teacher from one of the Daesh-administered schools confessed that girls as young as 10 are being indoctrinated with violent ideology and trained to carry out explosive attacks.<sup>64</sup> Relatedly, young Western girls who do not migrate to Daesh’s territories are encouraged to carry out solo attacks in their home countries.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, in order to find viable countermeasures, it is important that recruitment of children by Daesh is observed and analyzed through a gender-conscious lens.



Child militants carry out execution of Daesh’s enemies

63 See, for example, Al Raqqah Media Center, “The Crumbling Nations,” Aug. 28, 2016; Al Hayat Media Center, “Blood for Blood,” June 4, 2016; Al Hayat Media Center, “Uncovering an Enemy Within,” Jan. 13, 2015

64 Channel 4 News, “ISIS’ Children: Soldiers Trained to Kill and Die,” Jan. 10, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVxZfP1fC\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVxZfP1fC_I)

65 The New York Times, “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to Shift in ISIS Gender Roles,” Oct. 1, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0)



## Legal Ramifications and the Way Forward

Children who return from armed conflicts confront a multitude of challenges that include being able to obtain justice and reintegrate successfully into the mainstream society. Protracted exposure to brutal aggression and violence has a serious possibility of leaving lasting physical and emotional scars on the victims. Unlike adult ex-fighters who have seen an alternative way of life, child militants have been raised almost purely on the tenets of warfare and have minimal perception of a world devoid of violence. This is especially true in the case of Daesh, whose fundamental strategy is to indoctrinate its younger generation to ensure the organization's ideological survival. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to have carefully planned programs that ensure proper access to justice and sensitive rehabilitation initiatives that respond to specific needs of the victims.

From a legal framework, the use of children under the age of 18 violates the U.N.'s Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts (2000)<sup>66</sup> and the Paris Principles (2007).<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court categorically states that “conscripting or enlisting into the national armed forces or using ... [children] to participate actively in hostilities” amounts to war crime.<sup>68</sup> In light of these international legal standards, governments must provide adequate legal services to returning Daesh child soldiers and their families. It is also the responsibility of the governments to ensure that those who abused, manipulated, and recruited child soldiers are prosecuted and tried in a court of law.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, for child soldiers who are implicated in criminal responsibility, it is vital that thorough investigation be undertaken to determine the circumstances under which the criminal acts were committed. Additionally, for fair proceedings, established international practice, as enumerated in Articles 3.6–3.10 of the Paris Commitments and Principles, must be followed.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to ensuring a successful completion of legal proceedings, efforts should be made on behalf of governments to implement meticulously designed rehabilitation programs that respond to localized needs. These efforts should be based on cross-sectional partnerships across government organizations and support groups, local community and religious leaders, and educational institutions and vocational training centers. Finally, it is critical to acknowledge and address the stigma associated with former members of violent extremist groups, especially children. This is because placing them in hostile environments where they feel alienated and defenseless can substantially increase the risk of terrorist recidivism. Therefore, it is extremely important to devise collaborative policies in perceptive and constructive ways.

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66 Office of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, “Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts,” May 20, 2000. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/mandate/opac/>

67 UNICEF, “The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” February 2007. <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

68 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, July 1, 2002. <http://legal.un.org/icc/index.html>

69 Article 3.5, The Paris Principles. <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

70 Articles 3.6–3.10, The Paris Principles. <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>

# The Women in Daesh:

## Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda

Since its inception, Daesh has been successfully recruiting women across national and ideological lines to assume key positions in advancing the organization's objectives. According to recent estimates, out of 31,000 foreign fighters within Daesh territories, almost one-fifth, roughly 6,200, are women.<sup>71</sup> Yet, to date, research and policy focus on women's involvement in Daesh has been scant.

Several media accounts that have covered female participation tend to be alarmingly reductionist in their description of the roles women play in Daesh.<sup>72</sup> These reports primarily categorize women as either passive victims, "jihadi brides," or subsidiary supporters of male guardians with negligible influence.<sup>73</sup> This approach not only ignores the multiplicity of roles played by women to expand Daesh's ideological and operational agenda but also oversimplifies the motivations behind their decisions to join Daesh. Like their male counterparts, women are complex human beings with conflicting aspirations, ideological leanings, and life struggles that inform the choices they make. Viewing female recruits simply as monolithic entities, defined solely by their association with male relatives, offers

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71 Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women: Exploring Female Roles in Perpetrating and Preventing Violent Extremism," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017. <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/the-sultanate-of-women-exploring-female-roles-in-perpetrating-and-preventing-violent-extremism>

72 See, for example: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/10/london-girls-lost-isis-what-became-jihadi-brides>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-british-brides-kadiza-sultana-girls-women-syria-married-death-killed-aqsa-mahmood-islamic-state-a7187751.html>; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-american-women-of-isis-us\\_571e16abe4b0d912d5ff0f1b](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-american-women-of-isis-us_571e16abe4b0d912d5ff0f1b)

73 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith. "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon." Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015)

little to understand how they are indoctrinated and recruited, the extent to which they are involved in the organization, and what can be done to prevent their radicalization.

This report presents an in-depth analysis of Daesh's complex tactics for recruiting women and the multiple roles played by women in its mission. The report also offers ways to engage female activists and leaders as active partners in defeating Daesh on ideological and practical grounds. Finally, it examines the effects of an aggressive security approach to counterterrorism on women and girls. The findings of this report are based on a thorough investigation of Dabiq and Rumiya, Daesh's primary print magazines for non-Arabic speakers; examination of over 450 videos; and field interviews with families of those who have joined Daesh.

## **The Need for a Gender-Conscious Approach**

Traditionally, terrorism has been considered a male domain.<sup>74</sup> For many, it is difficult to comprehend how a terrorist organization like Daesh, which is fundamentally misogynistic and patriarchal, can appeal to so many women from varied national and cultural backgrounds. The reluctance to view women as independent and voluntary perpetrators of terrorism leads to simplistic explanations based on traditional gender stereotypes. This perception clearly manifests itself in the recurring portrayal of female Daesh members as one or more of the following: a) dormant victims who lack agency and are in desperate need of saving, b) individuals who have lost their inherent femininity by developing

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74 Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, March 19, 2010

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*Viewing female recruits simply as a monolithic entity, defined solely by their association with male relatives, offers little to understand how they are indoctrinated and recruited, the extent to which they are involved in the organization, and what can be done to prevent their radicalization.*

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masculine tendencies for violence and aggression, and c) irrational actors whose motivation to participate is driven by romantic and sexual urges as opposed to political and rational calculations.<sup>75</sup> Such characterizations run the risk of treating women merely as an extension of male members while neglecting their function as full, active participants. Any insightful reflection on the motivations for female participation in violent extremism must first challenge the perceived relationship between women and terrorism.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that men are not the only demographic who engage with the variety of appeals deployed by Daesh. Women are also consumers of such propaganda and react to them in similar ways as men. In addition to the general narratives directed at all audiences, Daesh disseminates gender-focused narratives for both women and men. These narratives are laden with cultural references and religious appeals that enhance their resonance. Women are offered an alternative vision of freedom and empowerment, and a perceived chance to become part of a community where they can practice their faith unapologetically and feel a sense of belonging and sisterhood. In parallel, traditional gender roles are invoked to shame men who do not participate in violence. This strategy of associating manhood with violence plays to male insecurities. A gender-sensitive approach is vital to effectively deconstruct Daesh's gendered recruitment discourse.

Just as it is important to acknowledge women's role as independent perpetrators of terrorism, it is necessary to recognize their pivotal role in creating the foundations for sustainable and inclusive approaches to peace and security. Any meaningful approach to preventing violent extremism must engage women activists and community leaders as front-line decision makers. Given their social capital, fluency in cultural vocabulary, and extensive local knowledge, women are an important asset in shaping the discourse on preventing violent extremism. They have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh.

## **Catalysts for Radicalization and the Process of Recruitment**

Women are not a homogenous group. They must be recognized as complex characters who, like men, are the product of their respective social, cultural, and political environments. The ways women process and respond to recruitment narratives are determined as much by their individual circumstances as by the resonating power of the messages themselves. Women's reasons for participation in Daesh are multidimensional, as is the case with male fighters. Cognizant of this, Daesh expertly customizes its propaganda to offer a political and social vision that directly addresses the pressing needs of its intended audience. While the push-and-pull factors that Daesh utilizes to recruit women are similar to the ones that encourage male participation, Daesh further taps into specific gender-related elements that increase the relevance and appeal of its messages for the female audience. While recruitment generally takes place online through various

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

social media platforms, the Carter Center's field research reveals that offline relational networks are also crucial. In many cases, for instance, women migrating to Daesh are the sisters, daughters, and wives of male fighters.

For local and regional recruitment, Daesh capitalizes on people's already heightened disillusionment with their national governments. Just like men, women living in Middle East and North African countries confront a range of everyday challenges: lack of employment, poor governance, limited access to basic social services, rampant corruption and injustices, and political oppression and insecurity. Such conditions predispose them to Daesh's idealistic representations of a well-equipped state that offers a higher standard of living and promises amenities that are specifically catered to the needs of women. The unofficial manifesto on women, authored and published by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, an all-female police brigade of Daesh, reinforced the organization's special commitment to the concerns of women and children. Alluding to rising poverty and wealth inequality, the manifesto states: "Women felt the effects of poverty more than men. It meant that they were not able to sustain themselves as easily as they should have been able to. This miserable situation [is] obliterated by the Zakat chamber [of Daesh], which [is] installed so women could take their rightful livelihood from it, which God guaranteed her and her children. Hence, all due respect and capability are given back to women and harm does not come to them."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, condemning the corrupt institutions that are prejudiced against women, the manifesto read: "Women [in Daesh] now go to courts and openly talk of their issues. They find that they are listened to and their issues are dealt with, without a need for bargaining or bribery."<sup>77</sup> Daesh shows, through the voices of its female members, that it understands the structural challenges that lead to disproportionate effects of poverty and injustice on women and that it is proactively engaged in instituting relevant programs that defend them from potential harm and loss of dignity.

The Carter Center's field interviews further reveal how Daesh attempts to establish itself as the legitimate champion and protector of women. An example is the story of a mother in Ceuta, Spain (on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar), whose son and daughter were recruited and migrated to Daesh territory in 2014–2015.<sup>78</sup>

The son was first recruited by a group of boys he met in a vocational program. He contacted his family only when he arrived in Turkey on his way to Syria.<sup>79</sup> Effectively disowned by his family, Aisha, his sister, was not allowed to talk about him. But she refused to give up on her brother and would spend late nights in her room, on her phone, plying social media sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram for news of him. Aisha made contact with a boy who knew her brother and was also planning to go to Syria. They struck up a friendship, a love affair, and then a marriage—all online over

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<sup>76</sup> "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," translation and analysis by Charlie Winter of The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015. <http://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/women-of-the-islamic-state-a-manifesto-on-women-by-the-al-khanssaa-brigade-2/>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Carter Center research staff visited North Africa in October and December of 2016 and interviewed 24 women for this study, including mothers and sisters of alleged Daesh recruits.

<sup>79</sup> He made it to Syria and joined Daesh but was killed shortly thereafter.



The Circulation of Zakat in Fallujah province Source: Manifesto on Women

social media. One interviewee reported that the young man sent Aisha a suicide belt as a wedding gift. They only met when Aisha arrived in Syria. She got pregnant and had a son, the first Spanish national to be born in Daesh territory. After her young husband died, she remained in contact with her mother, sending her pictures of the baby. The mother pleaded with Aisha to return to Spain, but she refused, replying instead: “You should make *hijra* here!” Aisha told her mother that she had independence and purpose in her life—Daesh provided her with a house, a stipend, and a way to be involved with the building of something of world–historical importance. Aisha felt empowered by her involvement in Daesh’s so-called caliphate and had taken to advising other female migrants in Syria. Aisha’s mother was heartbroken by the loss and hounded by the Spanish police for information on her daughter and grandson. This tragic story provides insight into how Daesh’s multilayered recruitment propaganda harms the everyday lives of communities.

While security and prosperity are crucial factors in inspiring some women to migrate to Daesh, the opportunity to contribute in a struggle for a higher cause can be appealing to others. Many female recruits, both from Western and Muslim-majority countries, sympathize with and respond to the emotional appeals central to Daesh’s narrative of the humiliation of the global *ummah* (Muslim community). This narrative depicts Muslims as the victims of the West’s ongoing aggression and tyranny and cites historical grievances such as the Israel–Palestine conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, end of the Ottoman rule, and others, to validate these claims. The recruitment literature and videos present disturbing visuals and descriptions of atrocities that evoke feelings of anger, disgust, and vengeance, and further perpetuate the longstanding belief that Western *kuffar* (infidels) are at war against Islam. As one Daesh *mujahidah*, female fighter, reportedly posted on Twitter: “Two camps in the world, either with the camp of *iman* (belief) or camp of *kufur* (disbelief): No in between.”<sup>80</sup> Encountering such imagery invigorates an activist zeal within many women who feel that it is their moral duty to leave for the

80 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith. “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon.” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.

*khilafah* (caliphate) and participate, through any available avenues, in the global resistance against Western imperialism.

Feelings of estrangement and alienation from one's national and cultural heritage are other push factors for many women. This is especially true for young girls growing up in Western countries who may struggle to reconcile their religious and national identities. With the rise of Islamophobia in the West and fear of religiosity in sections of Muslim-majority countries, women and girls are facing increasing discrimination based on the color of their skin or their choice of attire, such as the hijab. This contributes to social isolation and frustration with one's current society, making some individuals more vulnerable to propaganda that describes Daesh as a Muslim community of shared acceptance and "sisterhood." Daesh understands these frustrations and systematically exploits them to increase recruitment. The previously referenced manifesto on women, for example, repeatedly invokes the notion of sisterhood and shared community by claiming "you [Muslim sisters] are of us, and we of you."<sup>81</sup> The idea of a community that shares one's values, respects one's religious choice, and welcomes one regardless of national-cultural background appeals to many women.

In addition, Daesh offers an alternative vision for female liberation and empowerment. Portraying Western feminism as an exclusionary model of emancipation for elite white women at the expense of minority women groups, Daesh promises female agency inspired by "Islamic" ideals. It stresses that the roles of Muslim men and women are "complementary and cooperative rather than competitive."<sup>82</sup> Given their gender-based expertise, women and men are independent agents within their own spheres and are responsible for fulfilling their respective, divinely assigned duties. For instance, women, as wives and mothers, are equal in their status as jihadis, as men who are engaged in front-line militancy: "My Muslim sister, indeed you are a *mujahidah* [a female fighter], and if the weapon of men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of women is good behavior and knowledge."<sup>83</sup> This decorative conception of gender equality seems to strike a chord with many women around the world, who are frustrated and feel marginalized by Western ideals of female empowerment. These ideals are seen as a pretext for expanding Western political and economic hegemony and, in some cases, for actual war on Muslim countries, such as the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, Daesh appeals to women's desires for agency in state-building, adventure, and a sense of community. These narratives pretend to support self-empowerment of Muslim women through education and religious scholarship. Women are told, "Free yourself from ignorance, and learn the matters of your religion" so that you can become a

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81 "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," translation and analysis by Charlie Winter of The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015

82 Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," *Dissent* magazine, Winter 2015. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-women-choose-isis-islamic-militancy>

83 Dabiq Issue 7, "From Hypocrisy to Apostasy," p. 51

84 Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," *Dissent* magazine, Winter 2015

*mujahidah* by entering “fierce battles between truth and falsehood.”<sup>85</sup> Freedom, learning, and fierce battles make a life in Daesh territory sound liberating and exhilarating, and numerous messages are sent that women’s efforts will be supported and their contributions valued. The specific phrases Daesh employs for these propaganda messages, such as “you [women of Daesh] are the hope of the *ummah*” and “the *ummah* will not rise without your help,” celebrate women’s capacities for action, strength, and influence and combine to create sophisticated and complex appeals.<sup>86</sup> Women also may believe they will enjoy greater agency in a Daesh society than their own because their domestic roles will be valued, appreciated, and even celebrated as a critical part of a greater religious state-building project. Women are encouraged to “be brave and be strong” and even to be advisers for the men in their lives. Women in traditional Muslim communities as well as Muslim women who are stigmatized in Western societies do not often hear their input promoted and validated. In contrast, Daesh’s rhetoric suggests a great level of respect for women’s input and involvement, even if it might be primarily from within their own families. While the lived reality of women in Daesh could not be further from these descriptions, the rhetorical prowess of such narratives can be potent, especially for women living in environments that suffer from discrimination, Islamophobia, or substandard social policies.

Finally, these narratives are articulated through a carefully crafted religious language and metaphors. Appeals are made to women’s religious obligation in advancing the divine goal of creating an Islamic caliphate. Daesh makes references to historical female figures in the development of Islam. Women are encouraged to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors and to migrate from *darul kufr* (land of the unbelievers) to “the land where Islam and its people are honored.”<sup>87</sup>

## Roles of Women in Daesh

The women in Daesh perform a multitude of strategically important functions. Although the virtual absence<sup>88</sup> of women’s images and visuals from most Daesh propaganda may lead some to conclude that the women of Daesh are voiceless, the Carter Center’s extensive field research and a detailed review of Daesh’s recruitment literature highlight the significance of women in the organization’s overall agenda. The following is a brief snapshot of the diversity of roles women play in Daesh:

**Guardians of the Khilafah and Its Ideology:** One of Daesh’s major objectives is to create an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism that can survive any potential political/territorial loss. The idea is to instill its virulent ideology in the hearts and minds of its young generation, affectionately known as the “lion cubs of the caliphate,” who are considered to be its future flag bearers. For this to materialize, Daesh has entrusted the responsibility of raising its sons and daughters to the “mothers

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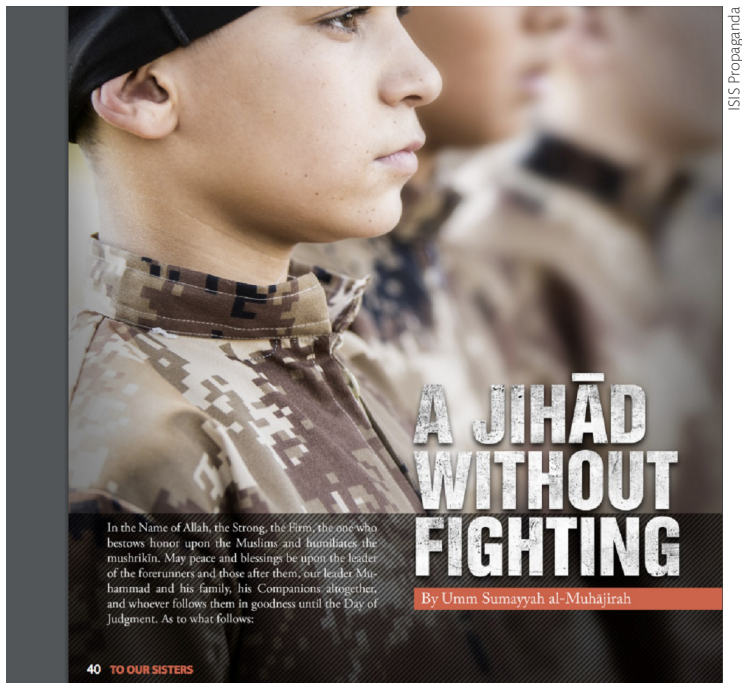
85 Dabiq Issue 7, “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” p. 51

86 “Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade,” translation and analysis by Charlie Winter of the Quilliam Foundation, February 2015

87 Ibid.

88 The Carter Center’s analysis reveals that women, as central characters, feature in less than 1 percent of almost 450 propaganda videos.





Message, To Our Sisters: A Jihad Without Fighting, for the mothers of the cubs of the “caliphate” Source: Dabiq, Issue 11

of the lion cubs,” who are “the guardians of the faith and protectors of the land that will emerge from [them].” As an intermediary between Daesh and its nascent army, women possess substantial, although monitored, influence. The 11th issue of Dabiq conveys the critical importance of motherhood in the following words: “O sister in religion, indeed, I see the *ummah* of ours as a body made of many parts, but the part that works most toward and is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother.”<sup>89</sup> Finally, the presence of women in Daesh’s territory not only provides the opportunity for procreation and sustainability but also projects an image of a well-developed, fully functioning, safe society.

**Operational Responsibilities:** Women contribute additional services as members of female police brigades, fundraisers<sup>90</sup> for the “state,” and active recruiters. The primary example of a female recruiter is Hayat Boumeddiene, the wife of Amedy Coulibaly, a man who carried out a shooting attack on a south Paris supermarket in coordination with the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Boumeddiene arrived in Daesh territory in early 2015 and was interviewed for Issue 7 of Dabiq on the subject of how to be a good Muslim woman and wife, especially for men who are committed to Daesh’s violent ideology. She then began to pen her own columns. She is referred to as Umm Basir al-Muhajirah in the magazine and is one of the only contributors who receives a constant byline identifying her with her articles. This choice to consistently identify her emphasizes both her

89 Dabiq, Issue 11, “From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions,” p. 44

90 Rumiya, Issue 1, “O Women, Give Charity,” p.18

gender and the fact that she is a person who has traveled to Daesh territory from abroad, identities that lend her more credibility to speak to an international audience of women. With columns under the section title of “To Our Sisters,” and in Issues 9 and 10, “From Our Sisters,” she has enhanced Daesh’s image as a place where any woman who believes in the ideology can find community, support, and a voice. Women supporting Daesh continue to have a strong and extensive online presence, and many women specialize in the recruitment, ideologically and logistically, of international women and girls.<sup>91</sup> Women have become a vital part of Daesh’s propaganda machine within and beyond Dabiq and Rumiya. They are positioned to reach, connect with, and powerfully influence an audience of women in ways that men are simply unable to match.

**Participants in Violence:** As Daesh has been losing fighters and territory on a large scale recently and is, therefore, faced with the task of reorganizing its forces, the position of women has shifted to include more critical roles. Two new camps specifically for training women in combat have apparently opened near Raqqa in the past year, and women militants and suicide bombers were reportedly deployed by Daesh in Libya in February 2016.<sup>92</sup> Further, women who do not travel to Daesh territory increasingly are being inspired to carry out terror attacks in their own countries. Multiple women were arrested in France in September 2016 for planning to carry out attacks in support of Daesh, surprising many who still conceptualize the jihadist fighter singularly as a troubled young man.<sup>93</sup> To undermine the success of Daesh as an organization, the recruitment of women must be countered, along with the recruitment of men.



Members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade

91 Frida Ghitis, “In Bitter Irony, Jihadi Women Serve as Useful Propaganda.” *World Politics Review*, Jan. 15, 2015. Linea, Ava. “HAYAT Germany: A Programmatic Approach” in *Countering Daesh Propaganda: Action-Oriented Research for Practical Policy Outcomes* (February 2016), 81–83

Weimann, Gabriel. “The Emerging Role of Social Media in the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters” in “Foreign Fighters Under International Law and Beyond,” edited by Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (2016): 77–96

92 Stoter, Brenda. “As IS Loses Power, Will Group Tap Women Jihadis To Fight?” *AI Monitor*, Nov. 16, 2016

93 Rubin, Alissa J. and Aurelien Breeden. “Women’s Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to a Shift in ISIS Gender Roles.” *The New York Times*. Oct. 1, 2016

## Effects of Security Approach on Women and Girls

The absence of coherent analysis of the motivations and roles of women may lead to counterterrorism efforts based on an aggressive security approach that ends up impacting women and girls in a damaging way. Such an approach may include limiting educational opportunities for young girls or the imposition of social and financial burdens on mothers and wives. This is particularly problematic, as women often act as community gatekeepers and can represent a significant resource in preventing violent extremism.

Often, male fighters leave their wives at home without informing them of their intent to fight in Syria or Iraq. These women are left in a triple bind. The social stigma and political surveillance of the state make participation in social and economic life extremely difficult. If their husband dies abroad, as most do, obtaining a death certificate to allow inheritance and remarriage is almost impossible. If a divorce is sought based on the husband's absence, prevailing legal systems make it difficult for the women to inherit, possibly requiring her to forfeit home and property. Regardless, the property of a foreign fighter is liable to be confiscated by the state. As one interlocutor expressed, the situation becomes untenable for the remaining family. Many end up relying for support on Salafi networks, and participation in such networks may increase social alienation. Faced with ostracism and financial pressures, some feel all but forced to leave for Syria themselves; others try to support themselves and their families through begging or worse. Interviewees indicate that stories like these are widely shared in communities plagued by poor local–state relations, increasing resentment and isolation from state. These circumstances amount to a particular type of gendered violence by the state against women, ultimately increasing the susceptibility of individuals and groups to Daesh recruitment.

Media reports of women migrating to Daesh territory, combined with aggressive security approaches, have led to increased scrutiny of young women. For young women detained on terrorism charges, the consequences are severe and extend well beyond legal repercussions. This is particularly true in Middle East and North Africa, where cultural norms surrounding female modesty are more conservative. Minors who are arrested on charges related to terrorism have had their images or identities shared via the press; they are then stigmatized beyond their affiliation with religious extremism. In cultures where female modesty is prized, such public exposure, even if the charges are dropped, can severely limit marriage prospects and educational opportunities. Countries in North Africa that have seen a high flow of foreign fighters to Syria have also seen police raids on all-female Daesh cells. Many interviewees expressed concerns over these raids and reported concern for the girls' physical safety in prisons with notoriously harsh conditions. One interviewee, a conservative Salafi activist who works with the families of those arrested on terrorism charges, reported that abuse of women in prisons is common.

The consequences for the mothers of children accused of involvement with extremist organizations are different but equally severe. Carter Center staff interviewed Umm Maryam less than a week after her 15-year-old daughter was arrested for allegedly being a member of an all-female Daesh cell planning an imminent attack. Umm Maryam and her family lived in an impoverished neighborhood outside the capital; Umm Maryam, a maid, was the family's only breadwinner. Their home was raided by national police forces, heavily armed and with the media in tow, around 5:30 one morning. Umm Maryam reported that during the raid police circled the neighborhood knocking on

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*Countries in North Africa that have seen a high flow of foreign fighters to Syria have also seen a series of police raids on all-female Daesh cells. Many interviewees expressed concerns over these raids and reported concern for the girls' physical integrity in prisons with notoriously harsh conditions.*

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doors, ensuring the maximum number of witnesses to the raid. Maryam, the daughter, was charged with being a member of the cell; evidence collected at the scene included her cellphone, a few common religious texts, and common household chemicals that were alleged to be used in bomb-making. In the case of Umm Maryam, she not only lost her job after the arrest but also expressed worry about her family's future and that of her daughter: "Would she be able to finish school?" The family was assigned a lawyer and received financial support after being approached by a network of Salafi organizations that work with detainees. No government-sponsored social services, counseling, or legal care was offered. As of the writing of this report, the family's contact with their daughter remains extremely limited, and official charges against the girl have not been filed. Regardless of Maryam's alleged guilt, effectively the family has been destroyed.

## **Conclusion**

Daesh has been innovative in its recruitment of young women into their ranks. Carter Center interviews support the analysis of Daesh propaganda: Women are presented with the possibility of a supposedly righteous life in a Daesh territory or agency and sometimes financial or social benefits not available in their home communities. The aggressive security approach of counterterrorism programs tend to have gendered aspects that place heavy burdens on women and drive them to radicalization. Any approach that ignores either of these factors behind women's participation in terrorist organizations and rejects women's vital role as key partners in preventing violent extremism is inherently superficial and counterproductive.



# The Evolution of Daesh Recruitment Propaganda in Light of Territorial Loss

By the end of 2016, Daesh had lost 43 percent of its total territory, including key cities in Iraq (Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit) and Syria (Kobani, Tal Abyad, and Manbij).<sup>94</sup> Given recent advances by Iraqi security forces, it appears that the final ouster of Daesh forces from Mosul is also inevitable. Such significant territorial losses pose a test of adaptability for Daesh recruitment strategies.

In response to its territorial losses, Daesh has evolved its communication strategies in three important and interrelated ways: theologically, strategically, and tactically. The Carter Center's analysis concludes that Daesh's ideology will likely survive significant territorial loss; military intervention alone is incapable of eradicating violent extremism. Despite setbacks, Daesh will continue to draw recruits to its ideology and incite violence. Unless the root causes of violent extremism, including sociopolitical grievances, poor governance, lack of development, rapid urbanization, increasing competition for limited resources, and longstanding conflicts like that in Syria are adequately addressed, ideologies like Daesh's will continue to metastasize via social media and offline networks. The conclusions presented here are based on a thorough analysis of Daesh's primary sources, including videos, audio speeches, and online magazines *Dabiq*<sup>95</sup> and *Rumiyah*.

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<sup>94</sup> "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond," United States Institute of Peace, December 2016/January 2017

<sup>95</sup> *Dabiq* is both the name of a town in northern Syria where a final apocalyptic battle is prophesized to take place and the name of Daesh's long-running online English-language e-zine.

## Theological Reinterpretation: Constructing the Sacred Canopy

Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on theological claims, including the misinterpretation of core Muslim religious texts, to both construct religious authority and morally justify terrorist violence in the service of a larger political project.<sup>96</sup>

Theological claims buoy Daesh's narrative and reinforce its propaganda. However, theological interpretations of events by Daesh are not static; they evolve to frame the latest developments in ways that reinforce Daesh's political and recruitment goals. In an audio speech released on Nov. 2, 2016, by al-Furqan Media, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, addressed the theological understandings of *fitna* (trial), casting a sacred canopy over battlefield losses: "And if we are afflicted with killing, and our wounds become many, and the storms rage against us, and our adversities become great, then it would also be of no surprise. It is Allah's promise to us. Rather, affliction is an inevitable decree."<sup>97</sup> Extensive theological reframing to explain recent setbacks as a divinely ordained antecedent to ultimate victory is also prevalent in recent articles in Rumiya. Many cite historical anecdotes and Quranic verses that emphasize how initial defeat or unequal force are signs that God will intervene and save His soldiers. The attempt to reinterpret its theological positions indicates the recognition of territorial loss and the evolution of Daesh communication strategy.

This shift is most evident in Daesh's reinterpretation of its core prophecy regarding the apocalyptic battlefield of Dabiq. Daesh recognizes that its military loss in the region of Dabiq, which it celebrates as the site for its guaranteed victory over infidels, could have negative repercussions on its recruitment efforts. Hence, theological reinterpretation of the apocalyptic narrative of Dabiq, coupled with the reimagining of its strategic objectives, is vital for Daesh's expansionist motives.

Reinterpretation and reimagining were achieved by making a shift from the Dabiq magazine to a newer publication—Rumiya. While Daesh did not officially lose the town of Dabiq to Turkish-backed Syrian forces until early October 2016, the discontinuation of the magazine in July, followed by the release of Rumiya in September, shows that the terror group recognized its impending decline and worked accordingly

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*What seemed to be a core strategic and theological aim of Daesh – to hasten the apocalypse in Dabiq – has been redefined in light of territorial losses.*

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<sup>96</sup> It is important to emphasize that Daesh is primarily a political group, even if its aims are framed in terms of religious discourse and theological appeals.

<sup>97</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Al Furqan Media, Nov. 2, 2016

to repurpose its mission. This becomes further apparent in the third issue of Rumiyaḥ, which contains an essay addressing the loss of the town of Dabiq. What seemed to be a core strategic and theological aim of Daesh—to hasten the apocalypse in Dabiq—has been redefined in light of territorial losses. Every issue of the magazine opened with a quote by Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi,<sup>98</sup> pronouncing that the struggle of jihad will continue “until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”<sup>99</sup> Rumiyaḥ, however, draws distinctions between minor battles in Dabiq and the final, apocalyptic battle. The “final hour” in Dabiq is imminent but delayed. Military losses are reinterpreted as mere setbacks on the path to inevitable victory: “This war of attack and withdrawal occurring in Dabiq and its surrounding areas—the minor battle of Dabiq—will inevitably lead to the Major Malhamah of Dabiq, even if a withdrawal were to precede it by Allah’s decree.”<sup>100</sup> Daesh provides theological cover for its losses while warning its enemies and reassuring its supporters.

## The “Winner’s” Narrative: Strategic Communication in the Online Space

Theological innovation has allowed Daesh to provide religious cover for battlefield losses and changing fortunes, but its day-to-day communication strategy has also evolved in an effort to compete on the media battlefield. Daesh understands that it is critical to its recruitment efforts to rationalize and justify its territorial decline for the psychological appeasement of its fighters, followers, and potential recruits.

Historically, Daesh video releases have included significant footage presenting life inside Daesh territory as utopia—children playing, the provision of social services, and the imposition of law and order in areas that have been in a constant state of war for over a decade. Late-2016 video releases, particularly those out of Ninawa province (which includes Mosul), have shifted to an even greater emphasis on the glorification of military jihad, often showing Daesh soldiers on the offensive against Iraqi forces.

For example, a series of two videos produced in the region of Mosul in late October 2016, titled “The Ignition of War,” present the battle for Mosul in glorious terms, framing Daesh fighters as not just brave, but successful. Images show Daesh fighters destroying Abrams tanks and other Iraqi military equipment as well as capturing scores of enemy munitions. Another video from Mosul, released in December 2016 and titled “Tank Hunters,” features the stories and tactics of Daesh fighters in their engagements with armored vehicles. Videos like these are replete with infographics<sup>101</sup> that illustrate the quantity of enemy hardware destroyed.

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98 Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi founded al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 after pledging allegiance to al-Qaida. Zarqawi’s statements are often referenced in Daesh propaganda for rhetorical and strategic purposes.

99 Dabiq, Issues 1–15

100 Rumiyaḥ, Issue 3, p. 26

101 Infographics are visually sophisticated representations of information and data. Daesh relies heavily on infographics as a strategic tool to convey its messages, as they are simple to understand, easily grab an audience’s attention, and have the potential to leave lasting psychological impact.



Daesh's heavy reliance on infographics in its online propaganda serves to frame even territorial losses in Mosul as a strategic success in a war of attrition that Daesh is theologically convinced only it can win. Similar images serve to humiliate and mock its enemies, particularly Western coalition partners. Deployment of warfare narratives in videos emphasize the lack of resources available to Daesh compared to the wealth and power of its enemies, highlighting the masculinity, bravery, and piety of Daesh fighters. While the appeal to armed jihad was quite prevalent in Dabiq magazine, its persistent invocation as a central theme in most articles in Rumiya also indicates an overall intensification of the military narrative. This indicates that strategic communications from Daesh's provincial media centers and online magazines increasingly seek, especially in the aftermath of its recent military failure, to present a "winner's narrative" that both encourages supporters and mocks enemies.

## Tactical Changes: Encouraging the Jihad at Home

Generally, Daesh has been consistent in its online recruitment propaganda that all supporters should perform *hijra* or immigrate to Daesh-controlled territory. Having a territory to which would-be jihadis could immigrate was an integral part of Daesh's appeal. Also, it differentiated Daesh from al-Qaida, which discouraged mass immigration to Afghanistan, closely vetted its recruits, and encouraged attacks at home. Given its loss of territory, Daesh is now increasingly encouraging its followers in both video and print to remain in their home countries and engage in terrorism by any means necessary. This is evident in the rhetorical shift from Dabiq's initial proclamation, "This jihad is not possible until you pack and move to Khilafah,"<sup>102</sup> to Rumiya's, "Mobilize from your dens to alleviate the pain afflicting the hearts of the Muslims by striking the *kuffar* in their homelands," because, "It is only from the *hikmah* of Allah that he has scattered you around the earth and in the various lands of the Crusaders to see which of you are best in deeds."<sup>103</sup> In other words, making *hijra* to the "caliphate" is no longer a necessary precondition to jihad nor is it a theological obligation. Instead, supporters are encouraged to carry out lone-wolf attacks in their native countries.

To facilitate home-based attacks in its name, Daesh has begun providing instructional how-to videos and articles for homegrown terrorists. A new section called "Just Terror Attacks,"<sup>104</sup> introduced in the 12th issue of Dabiq and now regularly appearing in Rumiya, is exclusively dedicated to encouraging lone-wolf attacks. It describes when and how a large-scale attack could be executed and what plausible weapons could be used. Articles such as "The Kafir's Blood is Halal for You, So Shed It"<sup>105</sup> and "Brutality and Severity Toward the Kuffar"<sup>106</sup> attempt to rationalize, normalize, and glorify violence, aiming to eliminate any potential discomfort that may deter Daesh supporters

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*Daesh's heavy reliance on infographics in its online propaganda serves to frame even territorial losses in Mosul as a strategic success in a war of attrition that Daesh is theologically convinced only it can win.*

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102 Dabiq, Issue 3, "A Call to Hijra," p. 31

103 Rumiya, Issue 1, p. 17

104 Dabiq, Issue 12, "Just Terror Attacks"

105 Rumiya, Issue 1, p. 34

106 Rumiya, Issue 2, p. 22

in foreign countries from undertaking lone acts of terror. Similarly, a video released in late November 2016, “Oh You Must Fight Them, Muwahiddun!”, provides a tutorial in French, Arabic, and English on knife attacks and the making of explosives. The viewer is presented with cognitive (narratives of victimhood and persecution), emotional (group solidarity based on religious identity), and behavioral (detailed instruction on method) appeals. This shows how Daesh’s print and visual media are evolving to serve, in part, as its virtual training ground.<sup>107</sup>

## The Importance of Offline Recruitment Networks

Despite the significant shifts in online communication strategies, perhaps the most important result of Daesh’s recent territorial losses will be an increased reliance on offline recruitment networks. Carter Center field research in North Africa indicates that Salafi-*takfiri* recruitment networks that build on geographic ties and social media contacts continue to be active. With the possibility of travel to Daesh territory greatly reduced, local jihadist networks will grow in importance, perhaps even diverting potential foreign fighters to more proximate regions of conflict.<sup>108</sup>

Daesh recruitment strategies in marginalized communities focus on hyperlocal appeals—a history of restiveness and weak local–central relations, lack of upward mobility, weak social services, and a heavy-handed security approach to religiously conservative communities. In an impoverished northern coastal city in Morocco, a lawyer who works on extremism recounted the story of a young man named Cochito, later made famous in a graphic Daesh recruitment video in which Cochito displayed seven severed heads. Before emigrating to Syria to join Daesh, Cochito was the product of a weak and stilted educational system with no prospects for employment, higher education, marriage, or a job. Cochito became even more famous after his death, and the constant circulation of his image in several media platforms only elevated his fame, driving further recruitment from his neighborhood. In cases like this, contacts are maintained after recruitment via Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, facilitating further recruitment from particular neighborhoods. A flawed public education system, lack of youth programs, and limited opportunities create a situation described by one interlocutor as a “pressure cooker.” Even if Daesh disappears from Iraq and Syria, the conditions that inculcate violent extremism across the region are persistent and systemic.

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107 Data on the effectiveness of encouraging “homegrown” or lone-wolf attacks for the period under consideration is not yet available, and the correlation between high-profile attacks in 2016, such as Orlando and Nice, and Daesh propaganda is difficult to measure with certainty. However, data does show that lone-wolf style attacks are more prevalent now than in the past. See the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland’s START program: <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

108 Carter Center staff conducted over 50 structured interviews on Daesh recruitment strategies and takfiri ideology with former foreign fighters, members of insular Salafi communities, and families of alleged Daesh recruits. Initial interviews took place in October 2016 with follow-up interviews in December 2016.

## Conclusion

Daesh's loss of territory is militarily and symbolically important. However, defeat in Dabiq, Mosul, or even in Raqqa, will not signal total defeat for Daesh. The extent of Daesh territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria and their rapid acquisition throughout 2014 will remain part of the mythology of Daesh, a fact that Baghdadi himself has emphasized in recent speeches to his followers. Daesh's core strength has resided in its ability to control narratives (about "us vs. them," war and peace, atrocities, and blame) and to motivate individuals, from Paris to the Philippines, to pledge their lives to the "caliphate." Daesh has pioneered the use of online media and evolved the use of offline recruitment networks in a way no other group has; one does not need a territorial base to Tweet (or Telegram or post on JustPaste.it). Military intervention alone is insufficient to preventing violent extremism. This is not to say that military defeat will not constitute a serious blow to Daesh's claim of having established the prophesized *khilafah*, one that was supposed to be *baqiyah* (here to remain). However, it is unlikely to completely eradicate the organization's rhetorical credibility and recruitment expertise.

# Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism: Phase 1 Workshop Outcomes

The political vacuum created in the wake of the Syrian civil war presented an opportunity for violent extremist groups to flourish, resulting in the creation of Daesh. Daesh's innovative and tailored use of social media has enabled this terrorist organization to lure and recruit young people on a global scale. It communicates its cyber propaganda directly to disaffected young men and women. The Carter Center recognized that any sustainable peace process in Syria at the political level must be complemented by grass-roots efforts to prevent the growth and spread of violent extremism. In 2015, the Center launched a project to counter Daesh recruitment propaganda and Islamophobia through the mobilization of Muslim religious and community leaders across ideological and political divides. The Center's efforts have helped foster a multifaceted approach to building community resilience. From September 2016 through March 2017, the Center convened four reiterative workshops with religious and community leaders from Morocco, Tunisia, France, and Belgium who are on the frontlines of efforts to prevent violent extremism in their local communities. These workshops were informed by the Center's action-oriented research into Daesh's recruitment propaganda. The Center analyzed over 600 Daesh propaganda videos, using a detailed qualitative and quantitative methodology, coded all issues of Daesh's e-magazines Dabiq and Rumiya, and conducted more than 50 structured interviews with families whose children have joined Daesh, ex-foreign fighters, journalists, and members of insular Salafi communities. As a result of our trainings, workshop participants developed and launched over 60 projects across multiple sectors, including media initiatives, religious outreach, youth engagement, and gender programming.

## **Grass-Roots Action for Sustainable Peace Building**

Any approach to preventing violent extremism (PVE) that relies solely on an aggressive security framework has the potential to further marginalize at-risk communities and increase the threat of violent extremism. Effective programs must be community led and designed to respond to the strengths and challenges of local contexts. With this framework in mind, The Carter Center, for its Phase I workshops, engaged with grass-roots religious and community leaders who hold significant social capital. Through a meticulous selection process based on prior research, pre-existing contacts in the four countries, and connections forged during field visits, the Center identified and recruited participants with the following attributes: a) significant credibility among their constituents, b) outreach and power to influence public discourse, and c) insight into the nuances of political and social climate of their countries.

Unlike traditional PVE attempts that have focused only superficially on community engagement, an effort was made to avoid “embassy” imams and institutions that have limited legitimacy in their local communities. Too often, these leaders articulate views that are aligned with official government policies and are disconnected from their communities. Carter Center staff conducted field interviews in the four target countries with prospective participants that yielded further contacts; additional screening interviews to judge commitment and outreach potential were held before participants were invited to join the series of workshops. This selection process yielded 23 participants with extensive outreach potential, including a French imam with two YouTube channels and dozens of videos on religious topics, many with more than 200,000 views; a Moroccan *mourchida* (female imam) who runs a religious school for girls and is connected to over 100 charities and religious organizations throughout northern Morocco; a Tunisian imam with a congregation of over 5,000 who is being relocated to a larger mosque in Tunis to hold all of his followers; and a Belgian imam from Molenbeek affiliated with multiple youth organizations and local religious schools. The Carter Center met extensively with potential participants to answer questions, clarify misunderstandings, and invite critical input. This approach built trust and enabled the Center to convene participants from across ideological divides, many of whom otherwise would not have engaged with each other. Forty percent of the participants were women, all of whom possess ample social capital and who proved to be among the most vocal and constructive participants.

## Country Projects

As a corollary to workshop participation, each participant was asked to plan and implement individual and collective projects designed to prevent violent extremism in local communities.

Tunisian participants have collaborated with various domestic and international civil society organizations, such as ENDA, Ertiqā Association, and Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE) to arrange workshops on the following: 1) Daesh’s recruitment of youth and women, 2) the role of religious discourse in countering Daesh propaganda, 3) women’s role in sustainable peace building, and 4) rehabilitation of individuals already exposed to violent ideology, especially youth and women. One participant, a highly influential Salafi imam with an extensive presence in local media, is building networks to promote sermons across Tunisian mosques that oppose extremist ideology and promote principles-based reading of the Quran. The Tunisian team also has been involved with Rescue Association for Tunisians Abroad, lobbying for the formation of a parliamentary investigation committee into recruitment networks in Tunisia. In the media, the Tunisian participants have live-streamed programs on different media channels, published magazine articles, and issued online sermons that deconstruct and delegitimize Daesh’s propaganda while offering empowering alternatives.

Moroccan participants have formed alliances with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, official religious institutions, domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and various media outlets. One Moroccan imam, who is also the editor-in-chief of an online magazine, released a special issue dedicated solely to opposing violent extremism. Another workshop participant, a well-known youth leader from Morocco,

described a project to provide vulnerable and disaffected youth with training on entrepreneurship, audiovisual expertise, self-marketing, resume building, and thematic summer camps geared toward immunizing youth against extremism. These youth camps were projected to reach approximately 250,000 Moroccan youth across the country in summer 2017. This youth leader also has created guidebooks, conducted training seminars, and launched an antiextremism and youth-empowerment website. Moroccan participants of different political and religious orientations have combined efforts to send a formal proposal to the government, requesting to launch the first community-led reintegration and rehabilitation center in Morocco. Several female religious leaders also have begun giving sermons in Moroccan colloquial rather than classical Arabic, hoping to appeal to a larger cross-section of Moroccan society.

French participants have published high-tech countermessaging videos, released online sermons, and organized e-conferences debunking Daesh's theological positions. One French participant, an influential Salafi imam with a large social media following, launched an online crowdsourcing campaign to raise funds to publish an interfaith booklet on the Islamic teachings on respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. During the fourth Carter Center workshop, this conservative imam live-streamed a Facebook video where he and a mainstream imam from Belgium recited religious hymns; their video garnered over 15,000 views in 15 minutes. One of the biggest challenges faced by French participants is the rising tide of Islamophobia and far-right extremism across Europe. Islamophobia, and ensuing discrimination against Muslims, serves as a recruitment tool for Daesh. The participants realize that any substantive strategy to prevent Daesh recruitment must include efforts to counter all forms of extremism. To this end, one French participant, a very active female community leader, participated for the first time in a televised panel discussion on Islamophobia and its role in reinforcing Daesh propaganda, which garnered thousands of views on YouTube. Additionally, another French imam, a convert to Islam, raised the issue of converts trying to reconcile their identity with a new faith. Driven by the discussions on this subject during the third Carter Center workshop, he launched a mentoring project to provide psychosocial support and care for Muslim converts in collaboration with human rights lawyers, psychologists, and community leaders. In June 2017, he organized an event that brought together 150 converts together to discuss various issues that affect new Muslims, including Daesh and Islamophobia.

Belgian participants have been involved with various domestic and international human rights groups to combat both Daesh and far-right ultranationalist groups. They have partnered with institutions like Amnesty International and the EU Parliament to discuss deep-rooted causes of extremism and ways to overcome them. On a more grass-roots level, Belgian participants are engaging with local imams in community mosques to promote peaceful existence. The Belgian participants also showed concern regarding the increasing impact of Islamophobia and right-wing hatred on the marginalization of already at-risk Muslim communities. Therefore, to promote intersectional solidarity, Belgian participants mobilized the Muslim community in Brussels on the birthday of Prophet Muhammad and distributed to passersby roses and small cards with sayings of the Prophet promoting love, peace, and solidarity. As a direct response to workshop

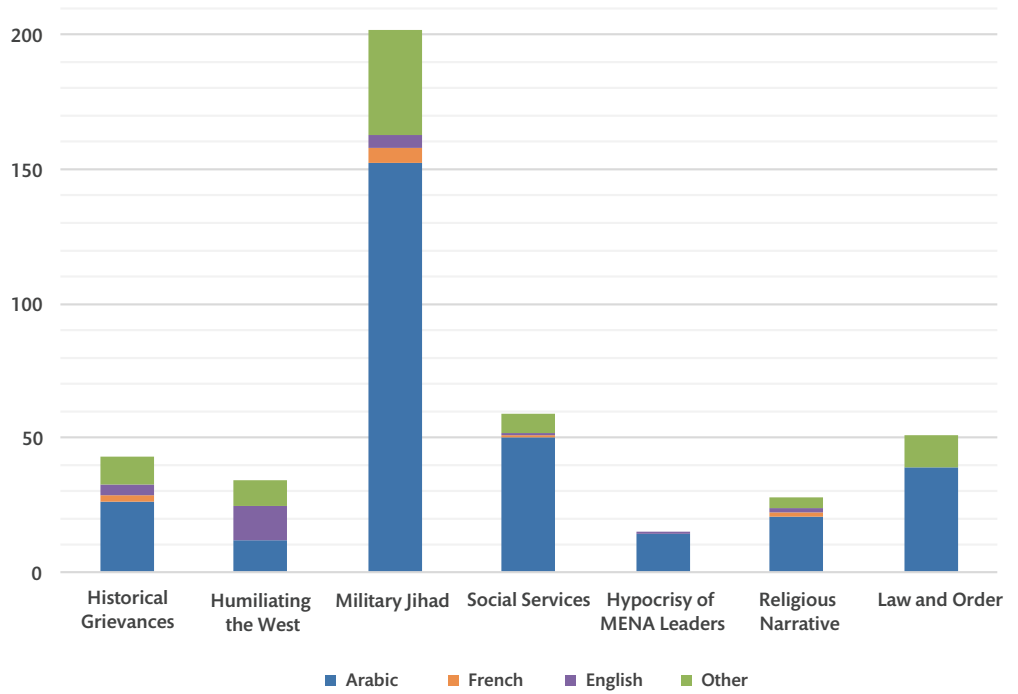
discussions, the Belgian participants also partook in a collective march against hatred and terror on March 22, 2017. Like French, Moroccan, and Tunisian participants, the Belgian participants also have invested resources in projects for youth that include sporting activities, excursions, and religious lessons based on human rights.

## **Participant Engagement and Evolution**

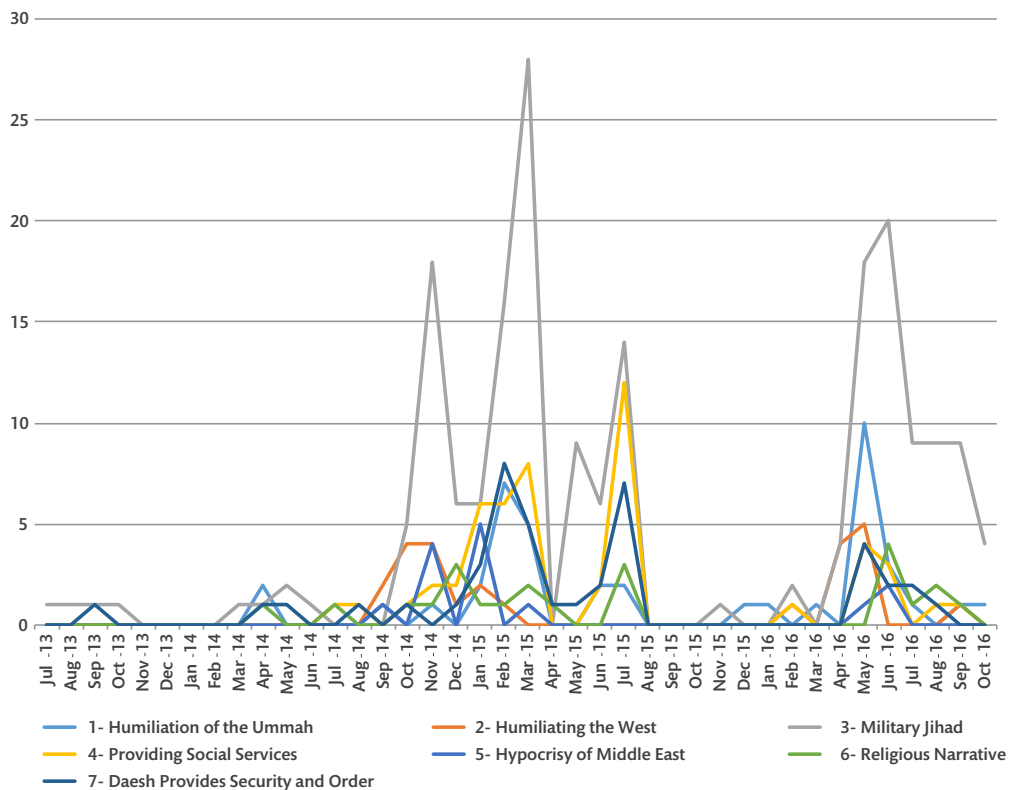
While each participant had his or her own expertise and had previously worked independently, the workshop series motivated participants to collaborate on several in-country as well as international projects. Furthermore, discussions among mainstream and conservative religious leaders paved the way for cooperation and joint initiatives within local communities. For instance, one mainstream Tunisian imam hosted another conservative Salafi imam on his radio show, giving the latter more visibility and a platform to reach a wider audience. Given the longstanding history of uncompromising ideological schism between mainstream and conservative religious leaders in Tunisia, this milestone is the beginning of a constructive dialogue across ideological divides. In terms of transnational initiatives, one of the Moroccan youth leaders invited all workshop colleagues to participate in a fully sponsored summer camp in Morocco to strengthen this newly created network and foster future collaboration. The Carter Center is also devising a secure online space where the participants could continue conversations regarding the opportunities and challenges of their individual projects and learn from each other's experiences.

The Carter Center is committed to continuing its efforts to prevent violent extremism in partnership with local stakeholders and policymakers. The way forward will draw on the analysis represented in the reports presented here, combined with the pragmatic approach to capacity building that has been the hallmark of the Center's Phase 1 workshops. Violent extremism of any type is a fundamental threat to human rights and an accelerator of human suffering. Innovative, grass-roots efforts to prevent violent extremism worldwide are essential to attaining permanent peace.

## Appendix A: Master Narratives by Language



## Appendix B: Master Narrative Deployment Over Time







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