

Success Factors of Islamic State Propaganda

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Abstract

The extent of progress achieved by modern terrorist organizations is to a significant degree dependent of their effective information and propaganda strategies. The following paper is an attempt to showcase the propaganda tools and methods used by the Islamic State as an example of a successful campaign supporting the operational activities of a terrorist organization.

A significant number of current analyses dedicated to the propaganda of the Islamic State (IS) and its influence on the “radicalization” of Muslims in Western European countries, including the recruitment of Muslims in Africa and Asia, concentrates on forms of its narration. Those forms include multithread influence through social networks, as well as varied forms: info-graphics, multimedia presentations, high-quality film editing and reproducing forms of popular video games in attack scenes.

Accordingly, proposed forms of counteracting are founded on similar assumptions – cutting off communication channels, closing accounts on social networks (Wolf, 2018), creating programmes (Lacroix, 2018) to prevent “radicalization”, and developing countermeasure programmes for parents to enable the recognition of “radicalization” among the youth. Proposals for IS propaganda prevention measures are usually limited to several simple actions (as, for example, the French plan for radicalization combating), which restrict access to radical messages but do not refer to their content.

In the case of the Islamic State, it is the message content itself that has contributed to its success when competing with other jihad organizations for recruits, financing, and the support on the local and international level. It is the communication content which is unique and which differentiates IS from other radical Muslim groups such as the Afghan Taliban, the Somali Al-Shabab, the Syrian Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and finally, the Al-Kaida. Furthermore, the purpose of IS was, and still is, confronting its views with the views of the above groups and in that way intercepting their followers.

Islamic State's propaganda success stems in fact from its theological and political organizational model, its vision of political, economic and social relations and the adaptation of information channels and forms of transmission to propagate their vision. Moreover, the very notion of IS's "radicalism" or "radicalization" is inherently faulty because it implies that the Islamic State promotes actions substantially more radical than those supported by, for example, Afghan or Pakistani Taliban. In actuality, however, Islamic State has proved on many occasions that its views are much more moderate than the opinions of those groups, e.g. concerning the issue of women's education. For example, in 2015, IS published a series of photos showcasing schools for women and university in Mosul, contrasting with the Taliban, which conducted operations set on destroying schools for women (via twitter account @Daeshness, currently unavailable).

In Aquidah (an Islamic term meaning "creed") explaining the grounds of faith of Islamic State, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, then the leader of IS, stated: „Our belief in faith is the middle path, between Khawarij who are Ghuluw (excessive in the matters of religion) and between Ahlu al-Irjaa who are separate faith from actions" (Sheikh Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, 2015). The ideology of the Islamic State, also in its understanding, does not deviate fundamentally from visions promoted by Salafi Jihadi Movement (Al-Muhājir, 2007, pp. 147–152). That means that it was not "radicalism" which was the essence of the Islamic State's success.

Caliphate

The first unique aspect giving the Islamic State a propaganda advantage over any other jihadist groups is the proclamation of the caliphate. The caliphate was to represent the crowning of the IS' success in territorial expansion, in administration formation, and in the implementation of the basic principles of sharia law. It was the very proclamation of caliphate which enabled the qualitative change, the change with which other jihadist groups were not able to compete. The Islamic State justified its decision in the following manner:

“Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhīd (monotheism), rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the tawāghīt (rulers claiming the rights of Allah) have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The kuffār (infidels) are disgraced. Ahlus- Sunnah (the Sunnis) are masters and are esteemed. The people of bid’ah (heresy) are humiliated. The hudūd (sharia penalties) are implemented – the hudūd of Allah – all of them. The frontlines are defended. Crosses and graves are demolished. Prisoners are released by the edge of the sword. The people in the lands of the State move about for their livelihood and journeys, feeling safe regarding their lives and wealth. Wulāt (plural of wālī or “governors”) and judges have been appointed. Jizyah (a tax imposed on infidels) has been enforced. Fay’ (money that was taken from the infidels without battle) and zakat (obligatory alms) have been collected. Courts have been established to resolve disputes and complaints. Evil has been removed. Lessons and classes have been held in the masājid (mosques) and, by the grace of Allah, the religion has become completely for Allah. There only remained one matter, a wājib kifā’ī (collective obligation) that the ummah sins by abandoning. It is a forgotten obligation. The ummah has not tasted honor since they lost it. It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujāhid muwahhid (monotheist). It is the khilāfah (caliphate). It is the khilāfah – the abandoned obligation of the era” (Al-Muhājir, 2007, pp. 147–152).

Proclaiming the caliphate, the Islamic State did not need to promote it. It took advantage of the success of a longtime promotion action of the caliphate concept among Muslim society all over the world; the promotion activities carried out by Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) organization. The organization was established in 1953 by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani al-Filastyni as a political movement which disavows nationalism, capitalism, and socialism as concepts alien to Islam. Instead, the organization seeks to bring about the return of the Caliphate that ruled Muslims, following the death of the Prophet Muhammad under the four “righteous Caliphs” (Rauert, 2005, p. 28). The organization advocates political change through the destruction of the existing state apparatus and the construction of a new Islamic state.

In the 2000s, the organization became a global scale movement, active and popular also in the West (Jane’s Terrorism, 2009). During the “Big change of the

World towards Khilafah” conference in Jakarta, Indonesia, a crucial time for the establishment of the Islamic State, the organization gathered over 130 thousand followers (Around 130,000 Muslims, 2013).

In this way, by proclaiming caliphate, the Islamic State responded to the demand of hundreds of thousands of Muslims around the world who were already convinced by HT to the concept of the restoration of the caliphate and the abolition of current state structures, the caliphate is very well defined in research materials and publications by Hizb ut-Tahrir. Moreover, a subversion of existing state structures as non-Islamic, including monarchy (The Ruling System, 2002), strengthened the revolutionary effect of Salafi’s postulate of spiritual renewal and the purification of Islam from compromise inflections (Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 209).

For the Islamic State, it was enough to prove that the caliphate was proclaimed properly and possesses all attributes described in HT materials and that it corresponds to characteristics known from historical records of the governance of first rightful caliphs. In its core programme document constituting the caliphate ISIS proves that its establishment is “Allah’s promise”:

“Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them and that He will surely establish for them [therein] their religion which He has preferred for them and that He will surely substitute for them, after their fear, security, [for] they worship Me, not associating anything with Me. However, whoever disbelieves after that – then those are defiantly disobedient” (Quran, An-Nur (The light), [24:55]).

However, according to the authors of the declaration, the authority alone is not sufficient for claiming the rights to be the actual caliph legitimized by the Quran. The caliph needs to have “the ability of creation, reforming, removing oppression, the dissemination of justice, bringing peace and calmness. Only by meeting these conditions, the succession which Allah has mentioned to the angels can take place. Without it, the authority would be nothing more than monarchy, domination, and control, supported by destruction, corruption, oppression, submission, fear, and decadence of human being and its reduction to the level of animals. This is the reality of succession, which has been created for us by Allah. It is not simple monarchy, submission, domination, and control” (This is the promise, 2014, p. 1).

Moreover, the inevitability of caliphate, i.e. the fact that caliphate is not an option for the Muslim community but an obligation, arises from the most popular among the creators of ISIS interpretation of the Quran authored by Al-Qurtubi:

“This ayat (verse) is sound evidence for having a leader and a khalif who is obeyed so that he will be a focus for the cohesion of society, and the rulings of the khalifate will be carried out. None of the Imams of the Community disagree about the obligatory nature of having such a leader, except for what is related from al-Aamm (lit. the Deaf), who lived up to the meaning of his name and was indeed deaf to the Shari’a, and those who take his position who say that the khalifate is permitted rather than mandatory if the Community undertakes all their obligations on their own without the need for a ruler to enforce them” (Belwey, Tafsir, 2003, p. 203).

What follows is that caliphate is an obligatory and inevitable phase of the political action of the Muslim community. It is a historical necessity, even if any other form of governance can fulfill all assumptions of Sharia law. Moreover, caliphate can only be legitimized as sacrum if it realizes specific aims and achieves them by the implementation of strictly defined measures. Any departure from these conditions excludes further Quranic legitimacy of governance and automatically demands its rejection and eradication.

A separate aspect and at the same time the weakest factor in the propaganda use of the proclamation of the caliphate was the caliph himself, until recently a leader of a small organization, neither having a substantial degree of war charisma nor ideological recognition in the Jihadist world. The argumentation for appointing Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi as the caliph was deduced indirectly. Firstly, Abu Mohammed Adnani, the spokesman for ISIS, stated in an audio-recorded declaration widely spread through the Internet, that neither does he know the biography of the caliph nor the criteria according to which he was selected for this position, also adding that “he meets all criteria demanded by scholars” and, what is more, named him “a man of jihad, sheikh, scholar, worker, believer, imam, eminent reformer, descendant of the prophet’s home-dwellers” (Walid, 2014). The original Arabic sources while discussing the qualifications of a candidate fit to be a caliph enumerate the following: generosity, righteousness, courage, and excellent knowledge of religion and the world. The first historical caliph Abu Bakr, as well as his three successors, fulfilled these characteristics and consequently deserved the name of “Rightly-Guided Caliphs” (ar. *Al-Khulafa-ur-Rashidun*) (Afsarrudin, 2014).

Thus, the first constitutive element is the possession of characteristics or virtues which should necessarily be proved for legitimization. The second constituent element is a consultation mechanism: shura. Shura means mutual consultations and is defined as “the collective effort for seeking objective truth” (Hasan, 1984, p. 21). We find in the Quran not just an authorization but an obligation for its use in the decision process of selecting a caliph:

“So by mercy from Allah, [O Muhammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matter. And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who rely [upon Him]” (Quran, Al-Imran, (The family of Imran) [3:159]).

The Prophet himself has also used shura consultation mechanism. Abu Huraira indicates: „I have never seen a person who would consult his companions more often than the emissary of Allah does.” Historically, shura has been used to some extent even for the selection of the “Rightly-Guided Caliphs.” Abu Bakr, delegating caliphate to Omar, used election shura. He has not issued any written statement on the delegation of the caliphate to Omar, but consulted this with his trusted advisors who backed his choice unanimously (Suood, 2001, p. 133). That means that the use of shura for the legitimization of a caliph’s rule has religious character arising from the canon of faith, from its explanations (hadiths) as well as being a historical tradition (usus) in elections of consecutive caliphs.

The constitutive declaration for the Islamic State’s caliphate states:

“The Islamic State represented by its authorities, consisting of its leaders and board members (shura), decided to establish Islamic Caliphate (Khilafah) as a place of meeting for governor (Khalifa) for Muslims and vowed their loyalty to a sheikh, fighter, scholar, who practises what preaches to a faithful, leader, fighter, reinstated, descendant of Prophet’s family, slave of Allah, Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Awwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī, according to his family name, as-Sāmurrā’ī, according to his birthplace and al-Baghdādī from place of preach and living. He accepted the vow of submission (ba’yah). Therefore he is imam and caliph for all Muslims” (This is the Promise, 2014).

The above document indicates the consultations of shura and scholars as well as pointing out all attributes that were to characterize the “Rightly-Guided Caliphs.” As a result, it was implied that the selection of Al Baghdadi as a rightful caliph had a strong legal and theological basis.

From those kinds of sources IS derives a thesis that imamah (leadership) is equally religious and political. IS claims that in contemporary times secularism separated religion from state and sharia from law system, considering the Quran a book of prayers (hymns) and declamation rather than the text of governance, law, and its implementation. Those Muslims, recognized by ISIS as apostates,

attempted to satisfy the governing tyrants (The concept, 2014). Moreover, people of today do not understand that imamah in its religious aspect cannot be adequately constituted before “people of truth” form a proper political imamah over the earth and people.

If a person of such ummah (community) tries to accept “a limited freedom in the profession of faith under the rule of infidel tyrants (ar. tawaghit), or seeks for protection against them in regard to the will of fulfillment of religious needs, he acts as if jumping from frying pan into fire. This leads to the integration of both aspects of authority – political and religious when we try to define the imamah passed on to Ibrahim, mentioned in verse (2:124) and there is no doubt that sharia includes both meanings” (The concept, 2014).

Finally, Adani – the undisputable author of the declaration “Here is the promise of Allah” and likely the author of the idea of the proclamation of the caliphate – is calling all Muslims to join the caliphate. According to the quoted interpretations, it is for them a religious obligation from the moment of the proclamation of caliphate:

“Come forth, O Muslims, to the land of the Caliphate. For you to be a shepherd over a flock of sheep in the land of Islam is better for you than to be an obeyed leader in the land of disbelief. Here, tawhīd (monotheism) is actualized. Here, walā’ and barā’ are embodied. Here, there is jihād for the cause of Allah. There is no paganism here nor any idols, no ethnic partisanship nor nationalism, no pagan democracy nor infidel secularism. There is no difference here between Arab and not Arab, nor between black and white. Here, the American is the brother of the Arab, the African is the brother of the European, and the Easterner is the brother of the Westerner. There is commanding of good and forbiddance of evil. Here, Allah’s Sharia is implemented. Here, by Allah’s grace, the religion is entirely for Allah. Here, there is an open declaration of tawhīd. Here is the land of Islam. Here is the land of the Caliphate” (al-Furqān Media, 2015).

Prophecy

An essential part of IS ideology, finding a later reflection in propaganda, was a reference to an apocalyptic prophecy in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English), where

the most significant battle between Muslims and the crusaders (the West/the enemy) takes place.

There are several elements of the prophecy adopted as crucial by the IS propaganda. Firstly, the place itself – Dābiq – is an area in Northern Syria. Occupation and control over this territory were to fulfill the underlying assumptions of the prophecy – the location of an apocalyptic battle controlled by Muslims. Hence the name of Dabiq – ISIS’ Propaganda Magazine. There are references in propaganda materials to the “The Dābiq Appointment” e. g.:

“So do not rejoice, o America. You will continue to assemble your forces and that of your crusader allies until you step into the arena of Dābiq, wherein you will be crushed and defeated. This is the promise of Allah; indeed Allah does not fail in His promise” (Say to those, 2014).

A video message published by wilayah Niniwa “The Dābiq Appointment” (New video, 2015), shows the final battle with armies in the West including IS tanks advancing toward Rome, etc.

Conquering the Dābiq by the Turkish army in October 2016 was a hard hit to the propaganda of caliphate. Also, Aamaq, the central news agency of IS, is called after a town adjoining Dābiq. According to hadith, „the Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A’maq or Dābiq (two places near each other in the northern countryside of Halab). Then an army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them” (Sahih Musli, Book 41).

Huddud

A critical element of IS legitimization is proving that this state is led strictly according to the rules defined by the Quran and hadiths, and at the same time rejects fiqh (jurisprudence) in compromising versions and interpretations. So again, IS did not need to do much in the area of the promotion of values. The literal understanding of the Quran and hadiths, a rejection of any compromises with the values of the Western world were promoted through years in Salafist and Wahabbist mosques around the world. During the preaching, the followers were called to comply with fundamental values, to reject hypocrisy, which is distinctive to “moderate” interpretations, and to act according to the provisions of the Quran.

Thus, the Islamic State, implementing several basic rules and promoting the fact of their realization, responded to the demand of a multimillion population

of people subjected to Salafist indoctrination all over the world, especially in Western Europe. Al-Adnani, the spokesman of IS, has been speaking about those values, pointing out the measures of victory which already took place, because for the first time in modern history IS realized something that other organizations just proposed.

“We achieved victory the day we declared walā’ and barā’, crushed the idols, proclaimed tawhīd in every masjid, street, and place, stoned the adulterer, killed the sorcerer, amputated the hand of the thief, flogged the drunkard, and returned virtue to the Muslims’ women through hijab. We achieved victory the day we broke the ballot boxes and appointed a caliph through ammunition boxes and by striking necks. We achieved victory the day we established prayer, gave zakāh, ordered the good, and forbade the evil” (al-Furqān Media, 2015).

In every town taken by IS troops during the territorial expansion of the caliphate, the administrative structure for collecting and distributing zakat was immediately implemented. IS propaganda was publicizing photos taken during certain operations and presented info-graphs with statistical data (Collecting Zakat, 2015). Similarly, the execution of penalties, envisaged in the Quran for certain crimes, such as theft, adultery, spreading depravity on earth (treated as thuggery), was implemented. For example, „the woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication – flog each of them with a hundred stripes” (Quran, An Nur [24:2]). The Islamic State tried to document all of its public executions – flogging, adulterers, decapitations, cutting off arms – not to shock with violence, but to provide proof that it realizes the Quran’s provisions accurately and literally. The purpose of this was an indication of the purity of worship, placed in opposition to its distortion in those Muslim countries where huddud is not applied.

Reprisal (kisah)

From the beginning of the military intervention by the US-led coalition, the Islamic State has presented itself as an executor of the Quranic rule of reprisal – kisah performed on behalf of the attacked and bombed population. “And if you punish, then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted” (Quran, An Nahl [16:126]).

It was and still is one of the essential elements of IS’ propaganda, especially when shrinking territory did not allow developing other elements. Every act

of violence in the West, every terrorist attack, including the attacks on 15th November in Paris, was advertised in IS' propaganda as a reprisal for military operations and bombing conducted by the coalition. The movie "Healing the Believers Chests" can serve as a showcase (Healing, 2015). It presents the execution of a Jordanian pilot who was burnt alive for taking part in air raids on Raqqa. An implicit IS' message, intended for recruitment, was to indicate that only IS is capable of shooting down a coalition airplane and of taking revenge on the enemy inaccessible to other military groups. Similarly, the attacks in Western Europe are a case in point.

The essential elements standing behind the successes of Islamic State's propaganda are at the same time the factors influencing its potential failure. Questioning the legitimization of caliphate proclamation by jihadist ideologists constrained the flow of fighters to IS and prevented the Somali Al Shabab, an Islamic Maghreb Al-Khaida groups and Syrian Nusra (and its consecutive emanations) from joining IS. Losing territory, including the area connected with the apocalyptic prophecy, undermines the theological legitimization of caliphate. Shrinking territory makes it de facto impossible to realize an actual state governed by sharia and limits the abilities to

postulate state – and this makes IS not different from other groups – just posing changes without abilities to implement them. Similarly, limitations in military capabilities reduce IS attractiveness for migrants from Western Europe, whom the role of conquerors and soldiers of global caliphate would suit very well, but not the part of pursued guerillas.

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