



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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One of the Islamic State's numerous supporters and propaganda spreaders on Twitter.

## AL-SHABAAB VIOLENCE IN SOMALIA AND KENYA UNDERSCORES GROUP'S RESILIENCE

James Brandon

A series of fresh low-level attacks by the al-Shabaab militant group in parts of southern Somalia and northern Kenya underline that the group, while under pressure from a range of counter-insurgency measures by local and international forces, remains active and resilient in both countries. For instance, on May 25, 13 Kenyan police officers were reported missing and presumed dead after being caught in a complex al-Shabaab ambush, which involved the use of landmines and a subsequent gun attack, in the north of the country, near Yumbis in Garissa County ([Standard Digital](#) [Nairobi], May 26). Earlier, on May 12, a Kenyan soldier had been killed in a gun attack by suspected al-Shabaab members, in a town some 30 kilometers south of the Somali border ([Shabelle Media Network](#), May 13). Separately, in an attack in Somalia on May 22-23, at least 24 people were killed after al-Shabaab fighters attacked government troops in Awdigle district and Mubarak village in the Lower Shabelle region, located to the south of Mogadishu ([Standard Digital](#) [Nairobi], May 26). In the capital, meanwhile, sporadic low-level attacks have also continued. For instance, gunmen killed a transport official in a drive-by shooting in Mogadishu on May 23 ([Midnimo](#), May 23).

The developments, which illustrate the group's continuing but relatively reduced tempo of attacks in Somalia and a relative uptick of attacks in northern Kenya, show how al-Shabaab is being squeezed in its homeland and is accordingly shifting instead toward conducting attacks in Kenya, while retaining some operational capability in Somalia. The above attacks, like others in recent months, also suggest a relative decline in the group's capabilities, with previous tactics such as the frequent use of suicide bombers being replaced by less sophisticated, opportunistic gun-attacks. The group, nevertheless, also retains the ability to conduct large-scale attacks such as its April 2 attack on Garissa University in Kenya. In a further recent set-back for the group, Shaykh Hassan Abdullah

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Hersi al-Turki, one of the group's veteran leaders, died in southern Somalia of natural causes at the age of 73 on May 27 ([Shabelle Media Network](#), May 28). Al-Turki had been one of the group's longest-standing leaders, having been active with the Islamic Courts Union (al-Shabaab's predecessor), and he had been designated as terrorist financier by the U.S. government in 2004. Although al-Turki was reported to have been suffering from a long-term illness that likely reduced his active involvement in the group, his death is nonetheless likely to damage the group's morale at a time when it has already been driven out of most of its strongholds in southern Somalia.

Much of the recent relative decline in al-Shabaab's activity in Somalia is due to the increasingly sophisticated humanitarian and counter-insurgency work being undertaken by a range of regional and international actors, particularly in the capital, which buttress the kinetic military actions being undertaken by the African Union and Somali government forces. For example, in early June, the United Arab Emirates opened a public hospital in Mogadishu that will provide free medical care to local people ([Somali Current](#), June 4). Such initiatives—which have also notably been undertaken by Turkey—have the potential to help address some of the grievances that have previously driven local people to support al-Shabaab, whose initial popularity was partly driven by its promises to restore a measure of normality to Somalia. Supporting such efforts are two camps in Baidoa and Mogadishu that aim to rehabilitate and de-radicalize former al-Shabaab members and are funded partly by the German and British governments respectively ([BBC](#), May 24). At the same time, however, Kenya is taking more concrete steps to protect itself against al-Shabaab incursions, notably pressing ahead with plans to construct a border wall with Somalia, although this has recently provoked strong opposition from Somalia politicians ([Horseed Media](#), June 5). However, al-Shabaab is far from defeated, and also it increasingly relies on supporters inside Kenya, notably among the Somali refugee population, which mean that attacks on both sides of the Somali-Kenyan border are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

## AFGHANISTAN'S MILITARY BEARS THE FULL BRUNT OF FIGHTING SEASON FOR FIRST TIME

*Kathryn Basinsky*

Afghanistan's 2015 fighting season is shaping up to be the worst in nearly a decade. Over 1,000 civilians have been killed so far according to Tolo News, and the UN deputy special representative for Afghanistan predicts more civilian casualties this year than in 2014, which itself saw the greatest number of civilian deaths since 2009, when the UN began recording casualties ([Tolo News](#), June 9; [Reuters](#), April 30). Significantly, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) are bearing the full brunt of these attacks, partly because this is the first fighting season without the presence of NATO combat forces, although U.S. drone strikes are continuing.

According to Ministry of Interior spokesperson Sediq Sediqqi, Afghan forces are currently fighting militants in ten of the country's 34 provinces, which gives an indication of the range of the fighting ([Tolo News](#), June 10). Already casualties among the security forces have increased significantly, and these rose 33 percent from April to May ([Tolo News](#), June 9). In one of the most deadly militant attacks, in April, 27 ANA soldiers were killed by militants in northeastern Badakhshan province, eight of whom were beheaded ([Pajhwok](#), April 27). Separately, ten police stations in Uruzgan province were overrun by Taliban militants in June after two weeks of heavy fighting ([Press TV](#), June 7). Recent attacks are not just limited to armed security personnel, however; Hamidullah Khan, a prosecutor in a district near the Turkmenistan border, was killed by a bomb attached to his car, and in a separate incident in Uruzgan province a prison administrator was gunned down ([Press TV](#), June 11). Attacks have also occurred in the capital, with the Ministry of Justice building in Kabul being bombed by Taliban militants in May, killing five ([Press TV](#), May 19).

One reason for the increased attacks is due to neighboring Pakistan's year-long Operation Zarb-e-Azb against militant strongholds in North Waziristan. A side-effect of this has been to push Taliban forces across the porous border into Afghanistan. Partly as a result, the increased violence in Afghanistan is taking a toll on the Afghan-Pakistan relationship ([VOA](#), June 10). Some Afghan politicians claim that Ashraf Ghani, the president of Afghanistan, had an agreement with Pakistani officials: they allege that Ghani pushed to increase counter-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan over the objections of other Afghani officials, and that in return, Pakistan agreed to encourage their contacts within the Taliban to push for peace talks. While talks

between Taliban and Afghan officials have occurred—with many supportive statements from Pakistan—in Qatar, they were specifically not termed peace talks, and the continuing fighting season has not yet shown signs of a change of heart by the Taliban leadership (VOA, May 3).

Despite the above overall negative trends, the Afghan government is having some successes in combating militants. For instance, 41 militants surrendered to government forces on June 9 in Kunar Province, joining 419 others who have already done so there (Tolo News, June 10). The number of civilian casualties has also fallen, dropping 40 percent from April to May; there has been a corresponding increase in militant casualties indicating that perhaps the Afghan security forces are receiving and using actionable intelligence (Tolo News, June 9). The ANA and ANP have also launched an operation to reclaim Yamgan district in northeastern Badakhstan province from militants (RFE/RL, June 7). The fighting season will last for several more months until the start of the winter season again hampers militant operations, so it remains to be seen if the Afghan security forces can hold their own against militants throughout the country or if the militants prove to be too much to handle in the absence of NATO combat troops.

## The Rise of Jaysh al-Fateh in Northern Syria

*Wladimir van Wilgenburg*

A new Islamist coalition called the Army of Conquest (Jaysh al-Fateh) has in the last few months have scored significant victories against the Syrian government, capturing most of Idlib province (al-Jazeera, June 6). The group also possibly plans to attack the Syrian government positions in Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Lattakia, most recently cutting off a key supply route to Aleppo (al-Sharq al-Awsat, June 6). The newly formed Islamist coalition mainly attacks the Syrian government, but it is also involved in clashes with the Islamic State in northern Aleppo. [1] The new coalition's remarkable success, such as its capture of Idlib only a few days after its official founding on March 24, seems to be due to a number of factors (Syria Direct, March 25). These include: new cooperation against the Syrian government by key regional powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) after years of disunity, the Syrian government's lack of manpower, new coordination between rebel groups and the defeat of U.S.-backed groups in Idlib, which resulted in this coalition acquiring their heavy weapons.

### Foundation

Jaysh al-Fateh was formed in March 2015, and includes most Islamist rebel groups, with the prominent exception of the Islamic State. According to a Jabhat al-Nusra source, the alliance controls in between 12,000-15,000 fighters. [2] The coalition includes most importantly al-Qaeda's Syrian front, Jabhat al-Nusra, which is led by Abu Muhammed al-Julani. Moreover, it also includes other Islamist rebel groups such as Jund al-Aqsa, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna, Ajnad al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 6). The coalition also has relations with other groups such as the Islamic Army, which it cooperated with against Assad in Jisr al-Shughur and against the Islamic State in north Aleppo. [3] Reportedly, Faylaq al-Sham is backed by Saudi Arabia, while Ahrar al-Sham reportedly receives support from Turkey (Zaman al-Wasl, May 15; al-Jazeera, April 5).

### Cooperation Between Allies

According to some sources, the new success of the rebel coalition is the result of a new détente between Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which aims to stop what they see as Iran's expansion in the region, leading to a joint decision to collectively support Sunni rebels against the

Syrian government ([al-Jazeera](#), May 24). There are several indications that Turkey and Saudi Arabia at least support members of this new alliance against the Syrian government, and several meetings were held in Turkey. In addition, a statement released by Faylaq al-Sham in May supported Saudi Arabia's actions against the allegedly Iranian-backed Houthi movement in Yemen, underlining the regional dimensions of this anti-Iranian alliance ([Zaman al-Wasl](#), May 15). Moreover, Turkey maintains a close relation with Ahrar al-Sham, and Turkish intelligence has most likely been shipping weapons to Ahrar al-Sham ([al-Jazeera](#), April 5; [Al-Monitor](#), June 2).

It is not only Western analysts who suggest that Jaysh al-Fateh is backed by regional groups; the Islamic State also accuses Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar of funneling aid to the rebel coalition to help them to both combat Assad in Idlib and Qalamoun and to attack the Islamic State in Qalamoun. [4] The Islamic State has tried to argue that any group that allies with such "apostates" is itself apostate, in order to discredit Jabhat al-Nusra and to justify attacks against the group. Other rebel groups see no problem in receiving support from other states, as long as it is used against the Syrian government of Assad and not other Islamic rebel groups. This indicates that more clashes between the Islamic State and Jaysh al-Fateh (and Jabhat al-Nusra) will happen in the future in northern Aleppo and Qalamoun. And that even if Assad is weakened in Idlib and Aleppo, there might be more clashes between the Islamic State and its rivals.

### Coordination

However, a Jabhat al-Nusra fighter nicknamed Abu Muhammad Hollandi, who is in contact with that group's leadership, denies any financial link between Jaysh al-Fateh and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, and says that there is no joint cooperation to stop Iran's expansion in the region:

It should be mentioned that the Jaysh al-Fateh alliance does not receive any foreign backing. This was one of the preconditions of forming the alliance. With this support, I mean financial support, since within Jaysh al-Fateh there are a few groups that receive support from foreign countries. [5]

He suggested that the main reason for the successes of the alliance is not due to foreign support, but coordination and unity between the rebel groups that defeated Assad in Idlib. Moreover, he said that the fact the groups share with Saudi Arabia and Qatar a common enemy in Iran does not necessarily make Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups allies: "There is no cooperation at all with these countries,

everything that Nusra carries out is in cooperation with these groups."

While the Islamic State wants other groups to swear allegiance, Jabhat al-Nusra's comparative flexibility and pragmatism has led to it receiving support from some parts of the Syrian population, which has enabled it to fight the Syrian government more effectively. In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra has reportedly formed several joint operation rooms with other groups which are part of Jaysh al-Fateh, which are also better equipped through receiving arms, ammunition and supplies from Turkey and the Saudis ([International Business Times](#), March 31).

### Increased Capabilities

Jabhat al-Nusra's supporters also say that another key factor in the group's rise is its earlier defeat of U.S.-backed groups, such as Harakat Hazm and its allies and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) in November 2014, have also enabled it to refocus its efforts on defeating Assad. Hollandi said:

We see that since the U.S.-supported groups were driven away or beaten by Nusra, this resulted in a reversal in the fight between us and Bashar. Due to the fact that these insidious groups were removed, this cleared the way for the sincere groups to completely concentrate on the battle against Bashar. [6]

The defeat of the U.S.-equipped groups and the capture of their equipment also substantially empowered Jabhat al-Nusra. This equipment included anti-tank TOW missiles that were used against Assad by Jaysh al-Fateh in Idlib ([Washington Post](#), March 1). On these, Hollandi remarked: "Furthermore, there is now a high amount of a certain weapons. Guided anti-tank missiles now provide us an opportunity to inflict heavy damage on the army of Assad in other ways. The battle changed from a guerrilla war into a real army versus army war." It is unclear if the non-Jabhat al-Nusra groups in the coalition are also receiving guided anti-tank missiles from regional Sunni countries backing the alliance.

### Conclusion

Jaysh al-Fateh is likely to continue to expand in Sunni areas around Idlib and other parts of northern Syria due to Jabhat al-Nusra's relative pragmatism, its coordination with other groups, the Syrian government's lack of manpower, increased regional cooperation to stop Iranian expansion and its newly acquired weapons. If the alliance is not attacked by the Islamic State, it is possible for it to continue to expand in

Aleppo and other Sunni-majority provinces in the coming months. It is, however, unlikely that the new alliance will take the capital Damascus in the near future, or the Alawite heartland of western Syria, and it is also likely that Assad's allies (such as Iran) will try to send more support to counter Jaysh al-Fateh's advances. That said, further support of regional Sunni countries for the Islamist factions that compose Jaysh al-Fateh would most likely lead to more tensions between these countries with the United States, which is more concerned with halting the Islamic State than toppling Assad. In addition, it is possible that further successes by Jaysh al-Fateh will likely lead to renewed clashes between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in northern Syria and the Qalamoun region. In this scenario, the more territory Jaysh al-Fateh takes, the more competition will erupt between the jihadist factions of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. Moreover, the Jaysh al-Fateh alliance itself is new and potentially shaky, and could fragment, as have other rebel alliances previously, for instance, due to different policies of Syria's neighboring countries and pressure from outside powers to contain Nusra's influence.

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#### Notes

1. Testimony of Shaykh Abdullah al-Muhaysini regarding the attack by the Islamic State group against the mujahideen in North Aleppo, June 1, 2015, <http://justpaste.it/lhfu>.
2. Author's online interview with Abu Mohammed al-Holandi, May, 2015. Al-Holandi's real name is reportedly Abdelkarim al-Atrach. He is a Jabhat al-Nusra fighter based in Aleppo, and is also in contact with the group's leadership. He gained notoriety in the Netherlands for releasing a video message after the U.S.-led coalition airstrikes killed three Dutch Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in September 2014, where he called for a "strong act" in the Netherlands in response.
3. Author's interview with Abdurrahman Sy, spokesperson of the Islamic Army, through Skype, June 8, 2015.
4. *Dabiq*, 9th edition, Al-Hayat, May 21, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/21/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-9/>.
5. Author's online interview with Abu Mohammed al-Holandi, May, 2015.
6. *Ibid.*

## Taliban Reach Out to Iran

*Hekmatullah Azamy and Abubakar Siddique*

In an effort to break free from Pakistan's influence, two different groups of Afghan Taliban leaders have during the last year reportedly explored the possibility of establishing a Taliban safe haven in Iran, while also seeking Tehran's support for their insurgency. In October 2014, Abdul Qayum Zakir, the former leading Taliban military commander, visited Iran in secret and independently to discuss the idea according to reports in the media. A Taliban source who was recently briefed about Zakir's trip said he was accompanied by two senior commanders, Mawlawi Awas and Mawlawi Zakir. Mawlawi Zakir's real name is unknown, but his network is inspired by Abdul Qayum Zakir, while Mawlawi Awas is a well-known figure who serves as the Taliban shadow governor of Bala Buluk district, in western Farah Province, which borders Iran. The three apparently held talks with Iranian intelligence officials for several days, but Zakir, a hardliner, achieved little concrete in his visit. [1] A Taliban source said:

Tehran refused to host a safe haven for Taliban combatants, but offered that the Taliban could live as refugees on its soil. Iran even agreed to provide treatment to injured Taliban fighters and was willing to support the group financially, but refused to supply Iranian-made weapons. [2]

The source also said an Iranian official told Zakir, a hardline Salafist, that the Taliban need to completely sever ties with al-Qaeda and resist allying with the Islamic State. However, "Zakir was reluctant to accept any conditions regarding links with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," the source said.

Following Zakir's failed attempt, Tayab Agha, the head of the Taliban's office in Qatar, led a delegation of senior Taliban members to Tehran with similar demands in mid-May, this time on behalf of the Taliban's leadership council (*Khaama Press*, May 19). These events follow the Taliban's first visit to Iran in 2013, when a delegation travelled there to participate in an "Islamic Awakening" religious conference (*Press TV*, June 14, 2013). Iran offered similar conditions to Tayab Agha's official delegation as to Zakir's, although this visit was reportedly marginally more productive. This was partly because both the Taliban and Iran view the Islamic State as a common threat, albeit for different reasons. "I think they and Agha will meet again," a Taliban source said. [3]

The Taliban's recent outreach to Iran's Shi'a government is unprecedented, particularly given that the latter has opposed

the hardline Sunni Taliban movement since its emergence in southern Afghanistan two decades ago. However, the Taliban leaders' apparent moves to seek potential sanctuary in Iran come amid a growing rift among Taliban leaders, and are also in response to pressure on the movement from Pakistan. A third important factor influencing the Taliban's effort to reach out to Iran is the emergence of Islamic State in Afghanistan as a potential rival to the group.

Zakir's outreach to Tehran reportedly began soon after he was sacked by his arch-rival, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, a former minister in the Taliban's government, in April 2014. Their differences intensified in the following months when the Taliban indicated it might be willing to join peace negotiations with the new Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani, which Zakir, a hardliner, opposed. A Taliban commander who requested anonymity told one of the article's authors:

Zakir thought that Mansour was Pakistan's puppet and would agree to peace negotiations [with the Afghan government], and thus he should do something to be able to continue fighting. Moreover, Zakir was unhappy over being sidelined and complained [to his confidants] that Mansour and his close associate Gul Agha Akhund have seized the Taliban leadership. [4]

The source said that Zakir felt humiliated over his sacking last year and had been trying to chart an independent course, particularly regarding Iran:

Zakir did not inform or seek Mansour's permission, but was telling his fellow commanders that [Taliban supreme leader] Mullah Muhammad Omar and the Taliban leadership council [in the southwestern Pakistani city of] Quetta were aware of his plans to visit Iran, and they should not worry about the consequences. [5]

The essential context to this apparent move by Zakir, perhaps with some level of support from Mullah Omar, is that it comes after Pakistan's powerful military, the Taliban's principal foreign backer since its emergence in 1994, sought to establish a friendly relationship with President Ghani since he assumed office last September. Islamabad reportedly agreed to facilitate talks between Kabul and Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban leaders (*RFE/RL*, November 12, 2014). China, Pakistan's closest international ally, is reportedly supportive of improved relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and has additionally pressured Islamabad to deliver the Taliban to the negotiating table (*RFE/RL*, February 16). Disappointed by these developments, Zakir decided to explore the possibility of creating a new sanctuary for the

Taliban in Iran. When it ruled in Kabul, however, relations between the Taliban and Tehran were highly strained, and the two sides nearly went to war in 1998 after nine Iranian diplomats were killed following the Taliban's recapture of the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif (*New York Times*, September 10, 1998).

As there are no signs of the Taliban scaling down their operation, there is some possibility that Pakistan will respond to President Ghani's overture by taking action against the Taliban leadership currently hiding in Pakistan. In such case, it is not only Zakir, but his senior colleagues including Mansour—who have enjoyed the protection of Pakistan—who may also become worried. Meanwhile, Zakir's outreach to Iran additionally reflects the challenges facing Taliban's Pakistan-based leadership, who are struggling to reassert control over commanders and fighters inside Afghanistan. It also reveals ongoing rifts among Taliban leaders. When Zakir was sacked as chief Taliban military commander in April 2014, a Taliban statement said he “resigned from the burdensome duties of the Military Commission because of his prolonged battle with ill health.” [6] In a thinly-veiled slight, the statement said Zakir was never a deputy to Mullah Omar, the Taliban supreme leader. Taliban sources say Zakir viewed this as a deliberate effort by Mansour to insult him and push him out of Taliban leadership circles. [7] Their rivalry has now seeped into insurgent cadres and is even turning into a tribal rivalry. Moreover, the recent outreach to Iran also indicates that the Taliban are divided on their response to the Islamic State, which would play a role in shaping the future relationship between the Taliban and Iran. For instance, while Iran might be willing to support anti-Islamic State Taliban, this, in turn, would increase the likelihood that pro-Islamic State Afghan militants would openly ally with the Islamic State.

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#### Notes

1. Azamy interview with Mawlawi Amin (name changed), March 15, 2015.
2. Azamy interview with a Taliban commander who requested anonymity, March 12, 2015.
3. Azamy interview with Mawlawi Rahmani (name changed), Taliban figure in Helmand, June 8, 2015; Azamy interview with a Taliban commander, *ibid*.

4. Interview with Mawlawi Amin, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. The statement can be found at <http://shahamat-english.com/category/statements/>.
7. Azamy interview with Mawlawi Amin, *op. cit.*

## Islamic State Propaganda: Key Elements of the Group's Messaging

*Charlie Winter*

Following the Islamic State's lightning-fast expansion in the Middle East and beyond, rarely a day passes without it securing a place in the headlines. This is the inevitable outcome of the group's well-honed messaging strategy, which skillfully uses social media to project the group's propaganda globally. [1] By dissecting and examining the various strands of the group's propaganda, narrative and brand, this article will deal with the message itself, focusing on how the Islamic State has gained the international traction it has. The analysis below draws on an archive of over 1,700 separate official propaganda campaigns produced and disseminated by the Islamic State since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared caliph in June 2014. From this aggregated perspective, it has been possible to distill the Islamic State's vast propaganda machine down into the six key narratives that are behind the caliphate brand, things that inspire fear in its enemies and awe in its potential recruits: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism. [2, 3]

### **Brutality**

Although it is by no means the sole component of Islamic State propaganda, "brutality" enjoys pride of place in the group's messaging (as well as in media coverage, too), whether it is videos depicting mass executions by decapitation in the Syrian desert or firing squad in Libya. [4]

All of the Islamic State's ideological supporters derive satisfaction from this content. It is what Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has termed "winner's messaging" and aims to demonstrate the group's presumed supremacy. [5] However, this content is not just aimed at declared supporters of the group. In fact, these are not even the primary target audience. More than gratifying supporters, this propaganda seeks to provoke outrage, even further intervention, from the group's enemies. The Islamic State has a great many enemies, so who is being targeted varies depending on the production unit responsible for a given report, and who is being executed. For example, a video documenting the execution of members of President Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has a very different target audience to one in which British jihadist Mohammed Emwazi (a.k.a. "Jihadi John") beheads a Japanese journalist. [6] Both videos were brutal and shocking, but only one—that which featured Emwazi—had international traction. By weaving brutality into the fabric of its propaganda, the Islamic State aims to

intimidate its enemies, provoke international outrage and prompt knee-jerk responses from policymakers. Often, all three of these motivations are both sought and achieved in the same release. [7]

### Mercy

The notion of “mercy” is regularly featured in tandem with brutality. Perhaps the most striking example of this was in the idiosyncratically titled “Clanging of the Swords IV” video that was released six weeks before al-Baghdadi was declared caliph. [8] It presented an orgy of violence that was carefully juxtaposed with scenes in which Sunni Muslims in Iraq’s Anbar Province are seen responding to the Islamic State’s *istitaaba*, its appeals for repentance. Upon repenting, the footage shows them being received into the embraces of balaclava-wearing jihadists. The message is clear: the Islamic State will forgive one’s past affiliation, provided that it is wholly rejected and that said the individual can guarantee their obedience to the caliphate. If these conditions are met, then the newly repentant individual may become “one of the gang.”

It is a narrative that has been repeated countless times over the last eleven months as the Islamic State seeks to attract defectors from its enemies and rivals and win support from local tribes. In one interesting variation, for example, fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army and the SAA are shown repenting and joining the Islamic State together. [9]

It is worth noting that this idea is not only conveyed by video: in May 2015, two Islamic State communiques were published online—one in Damascus province and one in Aleppo province—informing enemies that they will be granted clemency if they repent using the phone numbers advertised. [10] Furthermore, such “mercy” does not just extend to fighters, but to everyone, including former government employees. For example, in the run up to the caliphate’s inaugural school year, teachers in Syria have regularly been shown in Islamic State videos repenting en masse. [11]

In sum, the narrative of mercy is at least as prominent as brutality—with which it has a strong symbiotic relationship—in Islamic State propaganda. The two themes are closely entwined, and they present a stark choice to populations that are under attack from the Islamic State: resist and be killed, or repent, submit and be rewarded with mercy.

### Victimhood

The next narrative, “victimhood,” is a timeless theme in jihadist and Islamist propaganda, and it is predicated on the perception of an alleged global war on Sunni Islam. As with mercy, the idea of victimhood is often used in tandem with brutality. For example, in the Islamic State’s most shocking video to date, in which the Jordanian Air Force pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh is burned alive before rubble is bulldozed over his body, the binary opposites of victimhood and retributive violence were strikingly manipulated. [12] Seconds before the sequence depicting al-Kasasbeh’s final moments, footage of the aftermath of coalition airstrikes was cut in to the video. This aimed to remind the observer of the justification for the Islamic State’s continued war of defense, while driving home the Islamic basis from which this means of execution was derived, namely *qisas*, or retaliation in kind. [13] A similar juxtaposition of violence and victimhood was also used in a November 2014 video in which 22 members of the SAA were simultaneously beheaded. [14]

On a fairly regular basis, too, Islamic State propagandists eschew this juxtaposition, choosing to generally solely document the immediate aftermath of air-raids instead of combining it with the Islamic State’s own violence in order to motivate support for their cause. To this end, dead babies and maimed children are routinely instrumentalized and incorporated into a catalogue of purported Crusader-Zionist-Shi’a crimes to be used as a rallying point for the group’s supporters. [15]

### The War Machine

The Islamic State “war machine” is the fourth constituent part of its brand, with the Islamic State’s propagandists routinely focusing on the organization’s military gains by depicting military parades and frontline scenes through photographs, videos and even radio dispatches. [16] This output shows a particular preoccupation with *ghana’im* (booty)—the looting of enemies’ weapons and ammunition—something that plays well into the propagandists’ intention to portray the Islamic State’s momentum, supremacy and, crucially, the conventional nature of its military machine. [17]

Although this content is ostensibly aimed at instilling fear in hostile forces and raising its fighters’ morale, it also serves a more subtle, tactical purpose by disseminating disinformation. Although the Islamic State likes to give the impression that it is publicizing the whole of its war, it does not actually do so. For instance, on a number of occasions its propagandists have intensively documented fighting on one front while imposing a media blackout on another.

The Islamic State's Ramadi offensive in spring 2015 was a prime example of this. Throughout the early weeks of the final offensive, which began many weeks before the city fell, visual evidence that it was taking place was almost totally non-existent, while Islamic State propagandists saturated the airwaves with photographs and videos from a separate assault on Baiji oil refinery. In a conflict where human intelligence is scarce, open source intelligence has never been more important and, taking this into account, the Islamic State seeks to control the intelligence available to its enemies by cultivating a monopoly on battlefield reporting with which to distort media and governmental understanding of the conflict in its favor.

### Belonging

The next narrative, "belonging," is one of the Islamic State's most powerful themes for drawing in new recruits, particularly those from Western states. Through the publication of videos and photo reports depicting things like *istiraahat* (recreation) *al-mujahideen*—fighters relaxing with tea and singing with each other—the Islamic State's propagandists emphasize the idea of brotherhood in the caliphate. [18] The carefully marketed camaraderie that one can enjoy upon arrival in Islamic State-held territories is, as the propagandists would have their audience believe, almost overwhelming. Indeed, in most of its foreign-language videos, "brothers" from around the world are filmed hanging out in parks, playing on fairground rides and generally having a good time. [19] More often than not, their faces are a picture of serenity. It is not difficult to understand why the Islamic State distributes this footage: if it is to replenish its ranks, which are, by all accounts, being constantly depleted, the group needs to attract foreign recruits.

Understanding radicalization better than most, the Islamic State's al-Hayat Media Center team recognizes that promises of friendship, security and a sense of belonging are powerful draws for its supporters abroad, many of whom are attracted to the Islamic State precisely because they feel isolated from their respective societies and crave a sense of belonging. Of course, it is not just international supporters that this narrative appeals to; for example, in "On the Prophetic Methodology," the al-Furqan Foundation's propagandists insert clips of new local recruits rapturously embracing their Islamic State brethren after pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi. [20] In such productions, the Islamic State turbo-charges the concept of the *ummah* and takes it beyond al-Qaeda's elite vanguard narrative by democratizing the ability to engage with the struggle. Along with the aforementioned thematic elements, Islamic State propagandists incorporate the notion of brotherhood into the final component of the

Islamic State brand: Islamist utopianism.

### Utopia

"Utopianism" is perhaps the broadest and most important narratives that Islamic State propagandists exploit. It is a theme that is fertilized with new content multiple times a day, and one that runs strongly through all Islamic State propaganda. All of the aforementioned narratives feed directly into it. Its constant presence makes sense: the Islamic State's establishment and implementation of a perceived Islamic utopia, the caliphate, is the organization's unique selling point and the more "evidence" of this that the group can produce, the more resilient it becomes to assertions that it is illegitimate.

Examples of the group's desire to demonstrate its "state"-hood can be found in the group's videos and photo reports of the most mundane-seeming activities: from fishing fighters and *da'wa* (proselytization) caravans to sheep cleaning and road-building. [21] Although this content may seem relatively benign, when it is understood in the wider context of the group's propaganda campaign, it becomes clear that it is the most important element of all Islamic State messaging. Usually produced by the caliphate's provincial media organizations, predominantly as photo reports, it is the group's way of proving that it is not just talking about the caliphate, but that it is enacting it, too. Typical photo essays therefore show the group teaching children to recite the Quran, establishing Shari'a courts, implementing *hudud* (punishments for perceived "crimes against God") and collecting and dispensing money raised from *zakat* collections. [22]

As noted in the discussion on "brutality," such material affects different audiences differently, in particular when it comes to the Islamic State's portrayal of its penal system – the amputations, stonings and beheadings. For locals, the Islamic State's use of the *hudud* demonstrates that, despite the fact that it is being attacked from all sides, it can provide security and stability. In the context of crippling warlordism and rampant lawlessness in many parts of Iraq and Syria, the harsh and full imposition of law can be appealing. [23] For ideological supporters, this content is promoted as evidence that the Islamic State is implementing God's will more effectively than any other group, jihadist or Islamist. And, for hostile audiences abroad, publics and governments, these punishments are simply integrated into the brutality narrative.

By declaring the re-establishment of the caliphate, the Islamic State seized the initiative and asserted itself above

all other jihadist and Islamist groups as the implementer of *the* utopia that they all aspired to create. Seeking to amplify and sustain this conception, the Islamic State propagandists instrumentalize eschatology by arguing that, now that the caliphate has been established and, as of August 8, 2014, the Crusaders are being confronted, the Day of Judgment is looming (BBC, August 8, 2014). The resulting message to would-be recruits is simple: join the Islamic State now or miss the boat and face an eternity in Hell. [24]

Notably, some groups have responded to this call and incorporated themselves, at least in terms of their messaging, into the caliphate. At every opportunity, group assimilations are celebrated. Whenever a new *bay'a* (oath of fealty) to al-Baghdadi is announced, it is projected far and wide on Islamic State social media as evidence of the group's divinely ordained success, even if it is just symbolic. In the weeks that follow one such pledge, supportive videos emerge from the Islamic State's various provinces showing the population's happy reactions. [25] This form of propaganda revolves around maintaining a sense of momentum. After all, the perception of continually growing power is not just symbolic, it spawns real authority.

## Conclusions

Through its expert synthesis of the above six narratives, the Islamic State presents an intoxicating message; one that captures the imagination of the vulnerable and the disillusioned, and therefore makes its effort to randomly incite attacks far more successful than its rivals. By combining eschatological urgency and religio-political legitimacy, the imperative to act—whether through joining the group or carrying out an attack—is perceived by its followers to be greater than ever before, something that is forever emphasized by the group in its countless videos calling for new recruits to make *hijra* (migration) from their home countries. [26] This, in combination with the easy accessibility that social media facilitates between its supporters, has been of untold assistance to the Islamic State as it has struggled to maintain the perception of its momentum in the first year of its caliphate.

None of the narratives that the Islamic State exploits are novel ideas, nor are they mutually exclusive. The group is distinct in the way that it is able to manipulate each of them into one far-reaching and ambitious media strategy that strengthens the perception of its supremacy and the urgency of its eschatological claims. It is time that the singular importance of the Islamic State's propaganda is properly appreciated, for it is here that the organization is at once most formidable and most vulnerable. If the coalition is to stem the caliphate's

advances, it cannot do so by military means alone. Regional and international stakeholders must therefore engage in the battle of ideas and work to undermine the Islamic State brand.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census," Brookings Institution, March 20, 2015, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf).
2. In an effort to quantify it, the author assembled an archive of the organization's official messaging recorded over the course of the first eleven months of its existence. In that time, over 1700 pieces of propaganda—photo reports, radio programs, statements and videos—have been archived, within which there have been identified 75 distinct, but not discrete, types of content. Considered together, these 75 types of content were motivated by fifteen distinct themes, which, in turn, can be refined into six narratives.
3. "This is the promise of Allah", al-Furqan Foundation, June 29, 2014.
4. "Although the disbelievers dislike it," al-Furqan Foundation, November 16, 2014; "A message signed with blood to the nation of the Cross," Al-Hayat Media Center, February 15, 2015; "Until there came to them clear evidence", al-Furqan Foundation, April 19, 2015.
5. "Jihad 2.0: social media in the next evolution of terrorist recruitment," Full Committee Hearing, Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs, May 7, 2015, <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/jihad-20-social-media-in-the-next-evolution-of-terrorist-recruitment>.
6. "Execution of three officers from the Nusayri army," Raqqa Province Media Office, November 6, 2014; "A message to the government of Japan," al-Furqan Foundation, January 29, 2015.
7. "Healing of the believers' chests," al-Furqan Foundation, February 3, 2015.
8. "Clanging of the swords IV," al-Furqan Foundation, May 17, 2014.
9. "From the darkness to the light," Khayr Province Media Office, April 16, 2015.
10. "Statement 779," Damascus Province, May 5, 2015; "To all besieged soldiers in Kuwayris Airbase," Aleppo Province Media Office, May 7, 2015.
11. "Istitaba of teachers in the east al-Karama region," Raqqa Province Media Office, March 6, 2015.

12. "Healing of the believers' chests," al-Furqan Foundation, February 3, 2015.
13. "What is the ruling on burning the *kafir* until he dies?," Office for the Research and Issuance of Fatwas, January 20, 2015.
14. "Although the disbelievers dislike it," al-Furqan Foundation, November 16, 2014.
15. "The bombing of the Crusaders on Muslims," Aleppo Province Media Office, May 3, 2015.
16. "Parade of the army of the caliphate in Barqa Province," Barqa Province Media Office, November 16, 2014; "Correspondents' program – the raid to liberate Baiji refinery," Salahuddin Province Media Office, May 13, 2015; "Battles in Ayn al-Islam," Aleppo Province Media Office, December 9, 2014.
17. "Some of the booty from al-Karmeh," Anbar Province Media Office, May 13, 2015.
18. "Photographic report of the break-time of the mujahideen on the Euphrates river," Raqqa Province Media Office, December 29, 2014.
19. "Eid greetings from the land of the caliphate," Al-Hayat Media Center, August 2, 2014.
20. "Upon the Prophetic methodology," al-Furqan Foundation, July 28, 2014.
21. Fishing: "From inside Halab," Al-Hayat Media Center, February 9, 2015; "*Da'wa* caravan for cubs of the caliphate," Nineveh Province Media Office, April 20, 2015; "Taking care of livestock," Jazira Province Media Office, April 27, 2015; "Overview of the work of the Services Bureau in the southern region," Khayr Province Media Office, March 20, 2015.
22. "Honoring the cubs that have memorized two parts of the Quran," Raqqa Province Media Office, March 29, 2015; "Establishment of *hadd* for theft in the city of Dar al-Fath," Aleppo Province Media Office, February 17, 2015; "Establishment of *hadd* for drinking wine in before the door of the Shari'a court," Barqa Province Media Office, October 22, 2014; "Distribution of *zakat* in one of the mosques of Raqqa Province," Raqqa Province Media Office, July 9, 2014.
23. "Establishment of *hadd* for banditry on two individuals who erected checkpoints for theft in the name of the state," Aleppo Province Media Office, April 30, 2015.
24. In Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's latest statement, for example, he speaks of "the signs of the Malahim," urging Muslims to join the Islamic State to "feed the winds of victory within them"; see "Go forth, whether light or heavy," al-Furqan Foundation, May 14, 2015.
25. For example, see "Joy of the monotheists regarding the *bay'a* of Nigeria's mujahideen," Dijla Province Media Office, March 11, 2015.
26. For the most recent example of this, see, "Message to the Muslims of Somalia," Furāt Province Media Office, May 21, 2015.