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The strategic logic of Islamic State information operations

HARORO J. INGRAM*

Drawing on English and Arabic Islamic State (IS) communiqués produced by its central media units, wilayat information offices and broader supporter base, this study examines the strategic logic of IS information operations (IO). It argues that the overarching purpose of IS's IO campaign is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of audiences via messages that interweave appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors. Pragmatic factors—such as security, stability and livelihood—are leveraged in IS messaging by promoting the efficacy of its politico-military campaign and denigrating its enemies' efforts via rational-choice (logic of consequence) appeals. Perceptual factors—which are tied to the interplay of in-group, Other, crisis and solution constructs—are leveraged via identity-choice (logic of appropriateness) appeals that frame IS as the champion of Sunni Muslims (the in-group identity), its enemies as Others complicit in Sunni perceptions of crisis, and IS as the only hope for solving this malaise. With this approach, IS seeks to resonate its message across a diverse 'glocal' constituency and supercharge supporters towards action. IS simultaneously targets its enemies with messaging that manipulates the inherent dualities underlying perceptual and pragmatic factors, vigorously counters criticisms and 'baits' opponents into ill-conceived IO responses.

Keywords: information operations; ISIS/ISIL; Islamic State; media; radicalisation; strategy

The war against Islamic State (IS) is one of the most pressing security issues facing the world today, and combatting IS's information operations (IO)—i.e. its multi-dimensional communications strategy—has been identified as a crucial component of this campaign (Abbott 2015; Brandis 2015; Obama 2015;). Horrific IS videos, typically released by one of its central media units (for example, al Hayat), have dominated media reporting since the beheading of James Foley in August 2014. From this perspective, and it is one which has significantly shaped

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public strategic-policy discourse, it would seem that IS's IO campaign is dominated by its central media units, whose communiqués act as instruments of proselytisation and terror. While this is true to a degree, as is the case with so much about IS, the reality is more complex. First, IS's central media units produce only a small portion of IS's total IO output, of which violence is far from a universal theme. A more nuanced perspective of IS communications will be essential if its influence on both local and transnational audiences is to be thwarted.

This article examines the strategic logic of IS's IO campaign by drawing on a large and eclectic collection of Arabic and English communiqués produced by IS's central media units, provincial information offices and broader supporter base.¹ It argues that the overarching purpose of IS messaging is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of contested populations—both friends and foes. To this end, IS communiqués interweave appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors. IS draws on pragmatic factors—such as security, stability and livelihood—in messages that promote the efficacy of its politico-military campaign and denigrate the efforts of its enemies via rational-choice (logic of consequence) appeals. Perceptual factors tend to be tied to the interplay of in-group, out-group (Other), crisis and solution constructs, which are fused in narratives that are designed to shape how IS's audiences understand and evaluate the conflict and its actors. By leveraging identity-choice (logic of appropriateness) appeals, IS produces narratives that frame itself as the champion of Sunni Muslims (the in-group identity) and its enemies as malignant Others (out-group identities) responsible for Sunni perceptions of crisis, and thus presents IS as the sole bearer of the solution to the lethal malaise facing Sunnis. Moreover, IS's IO is calibrated to simultaneously communicate with IS's enemies via messages that play on the inherent dualities underlying these two sets of factors.

What emerges from this study is that slick production design and graphic violence—two traits of IS communiqués that are regularly identified as crucial to its seemingly magnetic appeal for supporters—are, in fact, the more superficial features of IS's IO campaign. This article offers the field both a broad framework through which to understand IS IO and a comprehensive empirically based analysis of its campaign that draws on two sets of primary source materials: English and Arabic communiqués disseminated by IS *and* interviews with Syrians and Iraqis conducted by the author. IS messaging seeks to do more than just synchronise narrative and action in order to functionally boost the pragmatic appeal of its politico-military campaign. It is also designed to provide supporters with a competitive system of meaning—i.e. an alternative perspective of the conflict and its actors (indeed the world) to that perpetuated by its opponents—as a 'lens' to fundamentally shape audience perceptions. This is the juncture where the true potency of IS's IO campaign lies. By fusing appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors in its communiqués, IS messaging is designed not only to resonate with a diverse global and local ('glocal') potential constituency (Sunni Muslims), but also, by aligning rational- and identity-choice appeals, to supercharge the transition of potential supporters from the sidelines to action. IS deploys a

diverse range of communication strategies to boost the overarching ‘perception and polarisation’ dynamic of its campaign. This analysis pays particular attention to the vigorous and multidimensional way that IS counters enemy narratives and its use of ‘baiting’ to coax opponents into ill-conceived IO responses, which IS then leverages in waves of secondary messaging.

The IS phenomenon: a snapshot of current literature

IS has had a meteoric rise in public consciousness since mid 2014 following its capture of Mosul and its subsequent series of videos featuring the beheading of several Western journalists and aid workers. IS’s rise is even more remarkable given that it was almost wiped out in Iraq by the simultaneous Sunni ‘Awakening’ (*sahawat*) and US military surge in 2007–08. However, in order to find its origins, it is necessary to go back even further, to training camps in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. From those humble origins and despite seemingly insurmountable odds, IS is now embedded across Syria and Iraq, with *wilayats* (‘provinces’) in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.² Throughout this history, IS has changed its name on several occasions, with each title reflecting a milestone in the group’s evolution. Indeed, IS’s leaders are fond of reminding its supporters of this history, especially the continuing ideological and politico-military legacy of its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the group’s organisational transitions and the reasons underpinning its various name changes (see, for example, Al-Adnani 2014a; Al-Baghdadi 2013). For example, when announcing that the Islamic State of Iraq had been retitled the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), al-Baghdadi framed the change as indicative of IS’s rise and growing authority:

The names of the Jihadi groups aren’t names revealed from the sky or names of tribes or clans which cannot be abandoned or changed or replaced, rather they are names that were founded due to the legitimate necessity, and the supreme legitimate necessity permits to cancel and replace it with others to be at the level of growth and sublimity.

This ascending needs new names that carry the fragment of Islam in its expansion and extending and spreading for the Ummah to carry the hope of returning (Al-Baghdadi 2013, 2).

For the sake of consistency and in order to avoid confusion, this article uses its current name—Islamic State (IS)—when referring to the organisation, regardless of the historical period.

A snapshot of major literature

With IS’s most recent resurgence has come a wave of literature devoted to analysing the IS phenomenon. The bulk of this literature has been short analytical works mostly for non-specialist audiences (see, for example, Farwell 2014; Wood 2015). There is, however, a rapidly expanding body of larger publications.

While it is outside the scope of this article to analyse most of these works, it is useful to outline broadly the analytical trends that have characterised recent book publications, particularly relating to IS's IO campaign, in order to contextualise the current study.

Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger's (2015) *ISIS: The State of Terror*, Benjamin Hall's (2015) *Inside ISIS: The Brutal Rise of a Terrorist Army*, and Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan's (2015) *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* reflect current trends in IS literature. Sweeping in scope and broad in their analysis, all three books outline IS's history and devote a significant portion of their study to IS's media campaign. Regarding the latter, Stern and Berger's (2015, 101–126 and 199–218) analysis largely focuses on the violence in IS messaging and the sheer volume of its media output. However, their analysis looks almost exclusively at the communiqués produced by IS's central media units, particularly al Hayat's *Dabiq* magazine and al-Furqan's 'Clanging of Swords' video series, as well as the group's use of the Internet, especially Twitter and other social media forums (see 127–146 and 147–176). Stern and Berger's focus on violence, volume and social media in their analysis of IS's IO campaign is a common trend in the current literature.

Journalists have tended to dominate book publications on IS thus far. Hall (2015) and Weiss and Hassan (2015) are journalists, and their works are similarly broad in scope and analysis. Hall explores the rise of IS with a particular focus on the violence that has characterised its politico-military and IO campaigns. Hall dedicates several chapters to the journalists and aid workers who were beheaded in the 'A Message to ...' video series and, like Stern and Berger (2015), devotes a chapter to IS's social media efforts (Hall 2015, 235–245). Weiss and Hassan also engage in a broad analysis of IS's evolution, from al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq to the self-described caliphate. Devoting a chapter to IS's IO campaign (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 170–178), they similarly focus on the violence in IS messaging, with an analysis of 'Clanging of Swords' and *Dabiq*, while highlighting the importance of social media to IS's IO campaign.

Arguably one of the most comprehensive analyses—and one of the earliest in this first wave of IS literature—is West Point Military Academy's *The Group That Calls Itself a State* (Al-'Ubaydi et al. 2014). Based on a large collection of primary source materials, the report contains an excellent analysis of IS's evolution and history (see Lahoud 2014) and a detailed organisational examination of IS, including a study of its media apparatus (see Milton 2014). Despite focusing on the violence in IS messaging, the report outlines the diversity in IS's IO campaign within the context of its broader politico-military efforts. As an analysis of *how* IS facilitates its IO campaign, Milton's analysis of IS's media architecture is a vital contribution to the literature.

Locating the current analysis

Four major themes have dominated analyses of IS's IO campaign in major publications: the violence in IS messaging, its slick production, the volume of IS's IO output and the role of social media in disseminating its communiqués

(see Stern and Berger 2015, 101–126; Hall 2015, 235–245; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 170–178). Moreover, these studies have tended to broadly analyse a variety of IS communiqués but have typically focused exclusively on messaging produced by IS's central media units. Furthermore, these publications engage in this analysis without necessarily offering a conceptual framework through which to understand IS's IO campaign. This is understandable, given that these works are part of the first wave of publications released since IS's 2014 successes, and, in offering a broad analysis of the IS phenomenon, they have made vital contributions to the field. In many respects, this article is part of the second wave of publications that seek to offer nuance to the analytical picture.

This study offers two distinct contributions to the research field. The first is a broad framework through which to analyse IS's IO campaign. It argues that IS messaging seeks to appeal to pragmatic and perceptual factors in order to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of its audiences. As detailed below, this framework is based on an analysis of a global cross section of modern insurgency doctrines which found universal agreement regarding not only the central role of IO in insurgency strategy, but that IO messaging should promote insurgents' politico-military activities (via appeals to pragmatic factors) and generate support for their 'cause' (via appeals to perceptual factors). Additionally, the perceptual dimension of the framework is broadly based on an interpretive model for radical narrative analysis (see Ingram 2013, 2014, 2015a). This model argues that radical insurgent groups, such as IS, tend to disseminate messages that are designed to build an affinity between the group and potential supporters via appeals to a shared identity (i.e. an in-group identity), of which the group constructs itself as the champion and protector, while framing its enemies as evil Others (i.e. out-group identities) that are responsible for crises. By focusing on how IS leverages identity, crisis and solution constructs in its narratives, this article seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature that is interested in understanding insurgent IO and, in particular, how insurgent messaging may radicalise supporters towards mobilisation (see, for example, Foxley 2008; Johnson 2007).

Secondly, this study offers the field a comprehensive and empirically based analysis of IS's IO campaign that draws exclusively on Arabic and English communiqués released by IS. Rather than focusing on messaging produced by IS's central media units, this analysis draws broadly on messaging produced across IS's *entire* media apparatus. This approach facilitates a more complete picture of IS's IO strategy, which is not possible by focusing myopically on one level of IO production or one aspect (for example, violence) of IS messaging. It is only by capturing the breadth of IS's IO campaign that the nuances of its strategic logic can be explored and strategies for countering its campaign can be deduced.

The central role of IO in IS strategy

IS is a fascinating example of a modern insurgency. A hallmark of IS's campaign has been the central role of IO in its overall strategy. However, this strategic trait

is not unique to IS. Analysis of Mao Tse-Tung's (2000 [1937]) *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Che Guevara's (2007 [1961]) *Guerrilla Warfare*, Ho Chi Minh's (2013 [early 1940s]) 'Guerrilla Tactics', Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin's (2009 [2003]) 'A Practical Course for Guerrilla War' and the Irish Republican Army's (1985 [c.1950s]) *Handbook for Volunteers* reveals universal agreement regarding the central strategic role IO must play as a means to shape how contested populations perceive a conflict, evaluate 'competing' politico-military apparatuses (i.e. 'competitive systems of control')³ and make decisions about who to support. As Robert Taber (2002, 12) asserts in his seminal *War of the Flea*: 'The guerrilla fighter is primarily a propagandist, an agitator, a disseminator of the revolutionary idea, who uses the struggle itself—the actual physical conflict—as an instrument of agitation'. Moreover, this global cross section of modern insurgency thinkers broadly agrees that IO messaging needs not only to promote the insurgency's politico-military activities (i.e. via appeals to pragmatic factors), but also to win the population's support for the insurgency's 'cause' via narratives that give value and meaning to the conflict and its actors (i.e. via appeals to perceptual factors). IS has adopted this core principle of modern insurgency strategy—as Milton (2014, 75) asserts: 'there is very little that happens within the territory controlled by the IS that does not have a media component to it'—and adapted it for the twenty-first century.

IS's media architecture

West Point Military Academy's *The Group That Calls Itself a State* contains a comprehensive analysis of IS's media organisation, and the picture that emerges is one of an insurgency that prioritises IO as a central pillar of its campaign:

the media proficiency of the IS exists because of an extensive media infrastructure that allows it to produce high-quality, timely products in different languages to different audiences that fit the narrative that the group wishes to convey. In addition to the production side, the IS is also capable of pushing this narrative out along a number of mediums, to include the internet, broadcast airways, and traditional publications (Milton 2014, 47).

There are three levels to IS's media architecture: central media units, provincial information offices and its broader membership/supporter base. IS's central al Hayat, al-Furqan, al-Itisam and Ajnad media centres tend to produce IO that are disseminated online and designed for transnational audiences.⁴ Messages from its central media units focus predominantly on major announcements from IS's central command, raising the profile of key events and issues or, in the case of Ajnad, producing audio *nasbeeds* ('hymns') and sura recitations. Targeting predominantly regional and local audiences, IS's *wilayat* information offices produce communiqués that focus on more localised issues and events, using mainly local platforms such as billboards, radio, posters and public events to disseminate its messages.

In addition to these ‘official’ streams of IS messaging, IS’s members and supporters play a crucial role in disseminating IS’s official communiqués (exponentially increasing the reach of its IO) and producing and disseminating ‘unofficial’ IO messaging (exponentially increasing the volume of IS’s IO output). J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan’s (2015) *The ISIS Twitter Census* reveals how IS supporters from around the world have used thousands of Twitter accounts, attracting large ‘follower’ numbers, and high-volume messaging and activity in an effort to dominate the social media forum. The efficacy of IS’s IO, or what Milton (2014, 47) describes as its ‘media proficiency’, is undoubtedly *enabled* by IS’s tri-tiered media architecture. Much of the literature that currently dominates the field, such as that by Milton (2014) and Berger and Morgan (2015), is an excellent source for addressing the issue of *how* IS facilitates its IO campaign. The purpose of this analysis is to address another important question: what is the *purpose* of IS messaging?

Shaping perceptions, polarising support

Whether produced by one of its central media units or a *wilayat*-based ‘information office’, IS messaging seeks, first and foremost, to shape the perceptions of its audiences—both friends and foes—and polarise their support. IS communiqués are designed to *influence* how its audiences understand and evaluate the conflict as a clash of competing politico-military apparatuses (systems of control) and agendas (systems of meaning). Like almost any modern insurgency, IS recognises that, in attempting to implement its own competitive system of control, it must be seen to be filling not only a politico-military void—and the pragmatic needs of stability, security and livelihood that entails—but also a vacuum of values and meaning, which is addressed by influencing the populations’ perceptions in such a way as to stir them towards its vision. In the twenty-first century, this requires a multidimensional communications strategy targeting glocal audiences.

Two sets of factors play a central role in IS messaging, as graphically represented in Figure 1. The first is pragmatic factors—of which stability, security and livelihoods are central—which IS appeals to by promoting the efficacy of

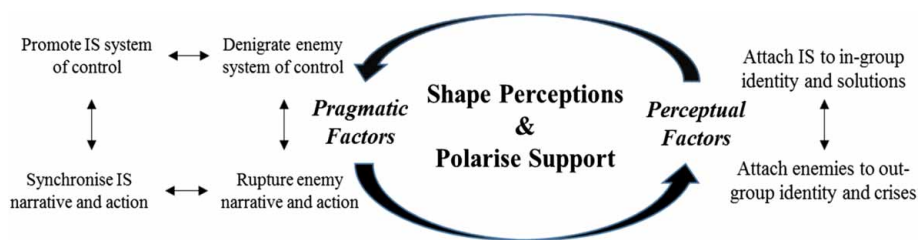


Figure 1. The strategic logic of IS IO.

its politico-military campaign and synchronising the link between its narrative and action. Conversely, IS draws on these same factors to denigrate the politico-military efforts of its opponents (i.e. their inability to provide stability, security and livelihoods) while constantly looking to rupture the link between its enemies' narrative and action. Ultimately, IS's appeals to pragmatic factors seek to leverage what March and Heath (1994, 1–56) define as 'logic of consequence' decision-making (i.e. rational choices based on cost–benefit analysis of alternatives).

Secondly, perceptual factors—characterised by the interplay of in-group identity, out-group identity, crisis and solution constructs—are used by IS in messages to leverage identity-choice rationale, or what March and Heath (1994, 57–102) describe as 'logic of appropriateness' decision-making (i.e. choices made in accordance with one's identity). The interplay of dichotomous identities, crisis and solution constructs is a common communication strategy used by radical groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban (Ingram 2015a; see also Ingram 2014, 6), and charismatic leaders, such as Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki (Ingram 2013, 165–197 and 199–224). IS's narratives portray IS as the champion of Sunni Muslims (in-group identity), its enemies as evil Others (Shias, Christians, non-conformist Sunnis) who are responsible for Sunni perceptions of crisis, and IS as the only source of solutions. The result is a competitive system of meaning that acts as a framework through which IS's audiences perceive and evaluate the conflict and its actors, generate meaning and legitimise actions.

IS communiqués rarely appeal to pragmatic or perceptual factors in isolation. Rather, these appeals are woven together into narratives that are reinforced by emotive imagery and powerful symbolism. This approach imbues IS messaging with a greater potential to resonate with the broadest spectrum of potential supporters. For example, pragmatic factors are likely to be more pertinent for local populations—a sentiment that was expressed to the author in a series of interviews in December 2014, January 2015 and March 2015 with former residents of IS- and rebel-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq. In contrast, perceptual factors are likely to have greater resonance with transnational audiences. Furthermore, simultaneous appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors create mutually reinforcing narrative cycles, whereby the veracity of IS's system of meaning is evidenced in the efficacy of its politico-military apparatus (and vice versa). This may go some way to understanding how IS messaging seems to rapidly radicalise its supporters because, in weaving together appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors, IS communiqués are designed to align rational- and identity-choice decision-making in its audiences. The more rational-choice decisions are processed from the perspective of IS's system of meaning, the greater the potential for its messages to resonate, influence and act as a driver of mobilisation. The remainder of this study draws on IS communiqués to explore these dynamics in detail.

Promoting and synchronising, denigrating and rupturing

Two factors fundamentally shaped the characteristics of IS's IO efforts in support of its politico-military campaign. Firstly, the philosophical and intellectual roots of IS's holistic reform agenda lie unequivocally in al-Zarqawi's founding vision, and it remains a driving force in IS's current campaign. As the senior Al Qaeda (AQ) figure Sayf al-Adel (2015, 9) recalls in his personal memoir, *My Experiences with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi*, soon after receiving approval from AQ to run his own training facilities in Afghanistan, '[i]t was clear to us that brother Abu Musab and his comrades had agreed on sketching an organisational structure for a complete community'. When al-Baghdadi (2014) delivered his first address as caliph from the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, it was a symbolic homage to al-Zarqawi and his vision. As al-Adel asserts:

Abu Musab had an admiration for the character of the distinguished Islamic leader 'Noor Al Deen Al Zinky' who led the operation of liberation and change ... and his launch from Al Mosul in Iraq had a major role influencing Abu Musab to move to Iraq after the fall of the [Taliban] (Al-Adel 2015, 11).

Secondly, IS appears to have learned crucial lessons from its predecessor's near annihilation in 2008. IS's narrow and coercion-centric system of control—which focused almost exclusively on security and law and order activities alongside a bloody campaign of asymmetric warfare—was arguably the most significant driver of Iraq's Sunni Awakenings that swept through its areas of control and, ultimately, led to the US military's successful 2007–08 'surge'. IS now devotes a significant portion of its IO activities to portraying its governance apparatus as multidimensional, sophisticated, bureaucratised and well resourced. This prioritisation is reflected in IS's IO output.

IS members/supporters regularly post weekly summaries of 'official' IS IO products. A summary for the week ending March 2, 2015 (see 'All the Islamic State' 2015) was analysed in order to contrast the output of IS's central media units with its *wilayat* information offices and delineate the contents of this messaging. Table 1 contains the results of the breakdown of IO output by media unit. Approximately 96 percent of the IO products captured in the data set was attributed to *wilayat*-based information offices.⁵ Seventeen information offices across IS's territories were active during the sample period, with Ninevah (6), Aleppo (5) and Raqqah (5) being the most active. During this period, IS's central media units produced material for largely transnational consumption, with Ajnad's recitation of *Surat al-Hadid* (2015) and al-Itisam's *A Message to Jordan* (رسالة الى الاردن' 2015). What is clear, even from this relatively small sample, is the broad range of active IO producers regularly disseminating 'official' IS messaging. Moreover, despite the media attention given to communiqués released by IS's central media units, it is IS's *wilayat* information offices that produce the bulk of IS's official IO output.

Table 1. Breakdown of IS IO output by media unit (weekly summary)

<i>Media unit</i>	<i>Total (51)</i>
<i>Central media units</i>	2
Ajnad	1
Al-Itisam	1
<i>Wilayat information offices</i>	49
Aleppo	5
Al-Jnoub	1
Al-Khair	1
Anbar	3
Barakah	4
Barqah	3
Damascus	2
Diyala	3
Fallujah	1
Furaat	3
Homs	2
Ninevah	6
Raqqah	5
Salahuddin	4
Sinai	3
Tigris	1
Tripoli	2

Table 2 contains a breakdown of IS IO output by content for the same data set. Almost half (25) of all IO products disseminated during the sample period related to IS political/governance initiatives. While it is perhaps not surprising that 32 percent of this content related to security and law and order activities (for example, 'تقرير مصور (6) || إقامة حد السرقة' ['Establishing Hudd for Theft'] 2015), the remaining 68 percent covered a broad range of issues, such as economic

Table 2. Breakdown of IS IO output by content (weekly summary)

<i>Content</i>	<i>Total (51)</i>
<i>Military operations/training</i>	15
<i>Political/governance initiatives</i>	25
Security, law and order	8
Economic reforms	4
Social and civil welfare programs	3
Education	1
Infrastructure	5
Information operations	2
Tribal relationships	2
<i>Message to Sunni Muslims (in-group)</i>	4
<i>Message to enemy (out-group)</i>	7

reforms (for example, 'تقرير مصور (4) || إنشاء أسواق للمعاش في منطقة اليرموك بمدينة الموصل' [‘Establishing Markets’] 2015), social and civil welfare programs (for example, 'توزيع اللحم على العوائل الفقيرة والمحتاجة' [‘Distributing Meat’] 2015), building relationships with local tribes (for example, 'تضامن عشائر العراق و الشام مع دولة الخلافة الإسلامية' [‘Islamic State Solidarity’] 2015), and even the promotion of local IO activities (for example, 'توزيع المطويات الدعوية على المسلمين في دار الفتح' [‘Distributing Da’wah Leaflets’] 2015). Less than a third (15) of all IO products in the sample related specifically to military operations/training (for example, 'لهيب المعارك 4' [‘Flames of Battle’] 2015).

Political/governance initiatives. By promoting a diverse array of political and governance initiatives, IS is attempting to appeal to the broadest potential supporter base. This is especially important in its appeals to local populations that may be directly affected by its system of control. From the establishment of a forensics team in Kirkuk ('صور من المعهد الشرعي في ولاية كركوك') [‘Photo Report of Forensic Office in Kirkuk’] 2015) to a bustling fish market in Mosul ('صور من سوق السمك في مدينة الموصل') [‘Photo Report of Fish Market in Mosul’] 2015), the distribution of charity to the poor in Aleppo ('توزيع أموال الزكاة على الفقراء والمحتاجين في أخترين وماحولها') [‘Photo Report Giving Charity to the Poor’] 2015) and infrastructure repairs in Fallujah ('مركز الخدمات 2 إعادة النور إلى أسواق و شوارع الولاية') [‘Repairing the Street Lights’] 2015), IS is actively portraying itself as the only viable source of security, stability and livelihood for local contested populations. However, these messaging trends are also mirrored in the communiqués disseminated by IS’s central media units for transnational consumption. For example, al Hayat’s online publications have included headlines such as ‘Caring for the Orphans’ (2014), ‘Fresh Produce Injects Life into Halab Market’ (2014), ‘On the Beat: ISR Examines How the Islamic Police Safeguards ar-Raqqah and Their Importance in State Building’ (2014) and ‘The Currency of the Khilafa’ (2014). IS is quick to highlight that political and governance successes have been achieved while fighting a multi-front war:

The Islamic State was now on show for the world to see. The courts were established; prayer was being enforced; the *hudood* were being implemented; the people were being invited to good; and the zakat was being collected and distributed. Light glowed from the mujahideen, who were soft towards the believers and harsh against the *kuffar*. This harshness never wavered and was a constant trait of the brothers. So the war on the *kuffar* raged on (Flames of War 2014).

The military. A crucial means by which IS IO leverage pragmatic factors is by presenting IS as a highly capable, adaptable and ruthless military force. IS’s description of the military campaign which captured Mosul was designed to highlight its military acumen and present it as a long-term fixture in Iraq:

This past Monday, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham liberated the city of Mosul in its entirety ... This followed a shift in the Islamic State's strategy, which now saw its forces leaving their desert strongholds in Iraq and making their way into the cities. Since the start of the jihad in 2003, the province of Al-Anbar has traditionally been the stronghold of the mujahidin, with Fallujah serving as its jihadi capital. In spite of the advantage of having a strong power base, the Islamic State understood that having just a single power base in any given region would work against them by giving their enemies a point of focus for their strikes ('Islamic State Liberates' 2014, 1).

In order to reinforce its apparent expertise in modern insurgency strategy, IS communiqués have flaunted its application of a full spectrum of combat operations, including terrorism (for example, suicide attacks), guerrilla tactics (for example, hit-and-run ambushes) and conventional warfare (for example, artillery). Indeed, IO is used to support IS's military campaign both tactically—as a 'force-multiplying' psychological operations tool to coerce its opponents (on display in its capture of Mosul)—and as a means not only to paint the strategic and historical context for its operations, but also to weave these narratives into a cosmic struggle between good and evil (Clanging of Swords 2014; Flames of War 2014). In order to secure the support of and mobilise loyalists, coerce the acquiescence of undecided locals and terrorise its enemies into retreat, IS addresses friends and foes with the same message: 'We are an unstoppable military force'.

Counternarratives. Finally, portraying the efficacy and diversity of IS's politico-military campaign has featured prominently in IS counternarrative efforts. This strategy has been central to IS videos featuring the captured British journalist John Cantlie, who, presumably under significant duress, has delivered IS counternarratives in a style that is meant to be personalised and journalistic. Since the 'Lend Me Your Ears' series (see Ingram 2014, 5–6), al Hayat has released videos with Cantlie providing 'on-the-ground' reporting from Kobani (Inside 'ayn al-Islam 2014), Aleppo (From inside Halab 2014) and Mosul (From inside Mosul 2015). While Cantlie's 'report' from Kobani emphasised the military ineptitude of the Kurdish resistance and US air support—at one point remarking that 'the mujahideen are being resupplied by the hopeless United States Air Force, who parachuted two crates of weapons and ammunition straight into the outstretched arms of the mujahideen' (Inside 'ayn al-Islam 2014)—his other reports stressed the functionality of the economies, education and health-care systems in Aleppo (From inside Halab 2014) and Mosul (From inside Mosul 2015):

The media like to paint a picture of life in the Islamic State as depressed, people walking around as subjugated citizens, walking around in chains, beaten down by strict totalitarian rule... All I can see is thousands of people, thousands of Iraqis, going about their daily business here in Mosul

after years of oppression under Saddam's rule and the descent into chaos that followed the American invasion. Sunni Muslims can now walk on the streets of Mosul without fear of Shia repression (From inside Mosul 2015).

By synchronising its politico-military activities with its IO campaign, IS wants to portray itself as true to its word, which further boosts the appeal of IS promises to provide stability, security and livelihoods, especially when its enemies are portrayed as malevolent and inept. Inevitably, IS's pragmatic appeals are cloaked in narratives that 'load' politico-military actions with dichotomous values linked to the identity of its actors. Actions in the field thus reflect more than just a politico-military struggle for control of territory and support of civilians; they are the ebb and flow of a cosmic war.

Divine duty and cosmic war

IS leverages perceptual drivers in its IO campaign by producing narratives that link IS to the in-group identity (i.e. Sunni Muslims) and solutions (i.e. IS's politico-military agenda) whilst framing its enemies (i.e. anyone who is not Sunni and IS-aligned) as malevolent out-group identities (Others) responsible for Sunni perceptions of crisis. These dichotomised in- and out-group identities thus act as 'cognitive prisms' through which the perceptions of its audiences are shaped. As al-Baghdadi declared:

the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy—the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews (Al-Baghdadi 2014, 3).

This narrative of the benevolent in-group confronting the crisis-generating Other tends to resonate particularly strongly in socio-historical contexts characterised by acute perceptions of crisis and intergroup conflict, such as war (see Ingram 2013, 2014, 2015a). IS exacerbates this sense of crisis by plunging its audience into not just a deeply historical war, but also a divine one:

Muslim blood that was shed under the hands of your religion is not cheap. In fact, their blood is the purest blood because there is a nation behind them [that] inherits revenge ... Our battle is a battle between faith and blasphemy, between truth and falsehood, until there is no more polytheism and obedience becomes Allah's on its entirety (Until There Came to Them Clear Evidence 2015).

This dense pall of crisis is designed to magnify the appeal of the in-group collective as a physical and psychological sanctuary from these crises, and in-group narratives (for example, the ideology attached to this identity) as an existential and socio-political blueprint for *the* solution. As IS's senior spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, stated:

The time has come for those generations that were drowning in oceans of disgrace, being nursed on the milk of humiliation, and being ruled by the vilest of all people, after their long slumber in the darkness of neglect—the time has come for them to rise ... the dawn of honor has emerged anew. The sun of jihad has risen ... The signs of victory have appeared (Al-Adnani 2014b, 3).

IS's system of meaning. From IS's perspective, the world's inherent bipolarity is absolute, lethally uncompromising and perpetual. Naturally, IS portrays itself as the epitome of the in-group, its champion and protector. As al-Baghdadi states:

O soldiers of the Islamic State, do not be awestruck by the great numbers of your enemy, for Allah is with you ... I also remind you to attend to the Muslims and the tribes of Ahlus-Sunnah (the Sunnis) with goodness. Stay awake guarding them so they can be safe and at rest. Be their support ... Know that today you are the defenders of the religion and the guards of the land of Islam (Al-Baghdadi 2014, 5).

IS messages present politico-military actions, whether its own or those of its enemies, as manifestations of a divine war. The politico-military vacuum IS seeks to fill, through the lens of IS's system of meaning, now appears as merely symptomatic of a deeper problem—a vacuum of values and meaning, which is the real disease: 'For what good is there in liberating a city only to leave its inhabitants steeped in misguidance and misery, suffering from ignorance and disunity, and disconnected from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of his Messenger' ('Da'wah and Hisbah' 2014, 17).

While IS seems to emphasise appeals to pragmatic factors in its messages to local populations that are disseminated by its *wilayat* information offices, perceptual factors are decidedly prominent in its appeals to transnational constituencies. IS's central media units bombard its transnational audiences with messages that fuse narrative, imagery and symbolism to emphasise the primacy of one's Muslim identity over all others. The dissolution of the Sykes–Picot border (see, for example, *The End of Sykes–Picot* 2014; 'Smashing the Borders' 2014), multilingual transcripts of IS speeches, and videos featuring militants speaking in English (*There Is No Life without Jihad* 2014), French (*Al Hayat Media Mujatweet 6* 2014) and Indonesian (*Join the Ranks* 2014) all contribute to this theme. The mass beheading scene in *Although the Disbelievers Dislike It* (2014) is filled with powerful symbolism. It begins with the words 'Although the disbelievers dislike it' on-screen, an excerpt from the Quranic verse 61:8 and a reminder of IS's holy war. A multi-ethnic group of militants dressed in khaki and led by the black-clad 'Jihad John', representatives of IS's transnational army, march out with their captured *kuffar*, and the beheadings are performed to ensure the blood flows through a shallow ditch in order to elicit comparisons with the epic Battle of the Trench, the fate of the Qurayzah and the march of IS's army in the shadow of the Prophet. Even the prominence of the Black Standard—whether on flags, the

badge of IS police, IS food packaging or military vehicles—contributes to the single message that the world’s Muslims belong with their caliphate, where they will be embraced and valued:

So rush O Muslims and gather around your khalifah, so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. Come so that you may be honoured and esteemed, living as masters with dignity (Al-Adnani 2014b, 4–5).

However, IS affords a special duty to Muslims in the West. Fuelled by a narrative that transforms their Muslim identity, so often a source of shame and persecution, into a source of honour amongst peers and terror amongst foes, IS calls its supporters in the West to action:

target the crusaders in their own lands and wherever they are found. We will argue, before Allah, against any Muslim who has the ability to shed a single drop of crusader blood but does not do so, whether with an explosive device, a bullet, a knife, a car, a rock, or even a boot or a fist. Indeed, you saw what a single Muslim did with Canada and its parliament of shirk, and what our brothers in France, Australia, and Belgium did (Al-Adnani 2015, 4).

Counternarratives. IS recognises that its system of meaning must compete against the systems of meaning perpetuated by its opponents: ‘False accusations and spreading untrue propaganda is a static method for the Tawaghit to confront the Dawah and combat the mujahidin, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham is facing in this field the most fierce of wars’ (Al-Adnani 2013, 4). IS responds vigorously to denunciations by fellow Islamists with targeted waves of counternarrative messaging. IS recognises that attacks by Islamist groups—such as AQ (see, for example, AQ General Command 2014; Zawahiri 2014) or Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) (see, for example, Al-Muhajir 2015)—and Salafi-jihadist scholars—such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (2014) or Abu Qatada al-Filistini (2014)—threaten to erode the support of its core constituencies.

The *manhaj* (‘method’) adopted by IS to achieve its politico-military objectives is *the* central issue at stake in this ongoing IO ‘civil war’. While JN and AQ figures frequently deride IS, potentially the most damaging criticisms have emerged from al-Filistini, who described IS as ‘the dogs of hellfire’ (Al-Filistini 2014), and al-Maqdisi (al-Zarqawi’s former mentor), who declared IS to be

a deviant organisation from the path of truth, [they are] aggressors against the Mujahideen. They lean towards *ghuluw* (extremism). They have become embroiled in the spilling of unlawful blood, the sequestration of their wealth, war booty [and have] besmirched the name of Jihad and the elite Mujahideen (Al-Maqdisi 2014, 3).

He goes on to ‘call upon the members of [IS] to join the ranks of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, giving *bay’ah* [pledges] to its leaders. This is our *fatwa* to them’

(al-Maqdisi 2014, 3). What is at stake in this IO civil war is more than just the legitimacy of IS's campaign in the eyes of its entire community of potential support. Its legality under Islamic law is being contested.

In response, IS has launched a sustained, multidimensional and often savage counternarrative campaign against its denouncers. Al-Adnani has been at the forefront of these counternarrative efforts, with addresses that have broadly defended IS's *manhaj*, the more controversial aspects of its politico-military agenda and the jurisprudential legitimacy of its caliphate (see, for example, Al-Adnani 2013, 2014b), as well as directly confronting JN and AQ criticisms (Al-Adnani 2014a, 2014c). IS's central media units have also contributed to this campaign: for example, with an article in *Dabiq* that featured a photograph of al-Maqdisi and al-Filistini accompanied by the heading 'Misleading Scholars' (2014, 38) with the following excerpt below: 'Abu Dharr asked him [the Prophet Muhammad], "What is this that you fear for your Ummah more than the Dajjal [anti-Christ]?" He responded, "The misleading imams"'. Fusing narrative and action, IS has also disseminated messages promoting the establishment of education centres for teaching imams the 'correct' (read IS's) *manhaj* ('Propagating the Correct Manhaj' 2014). In many respects, IS's survival may rest on whether it can win this IO civil war.

Baiting: a signature strategy of IS IO

IS often engages in military operations that are designed to provoke misguided or disproportionate responses from its enemies in order to ferment perceptions of crisis in its communities of potential support. IS then leverages these increased perceptions of crisis to present itself as the only viable source of protection and stability for its constituencies. This strategy broadly reflects Guevara's (2007) 'foco' strategy—i.e. the idea that a small band of guerrillas can fuel and spread the conditions for revolution via targeted politico-military efforts. Indeed, al-Zarqawi made it a hallmark of IS's politico-military campaign in Iraq (then al-Qaeda in Iraq), most notably by using targeted terrorist attacks to enflame Sunni–Shia sectarian tensions and leverage the ensuing malaise to its advantage. As al-Zarqawi (2004) stated in a 2004 letter to AQ leaders: 'If we succeed in dragging them [Shia] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans'. Less appreciated within the field, but just as important, is the way in which IS applies a similar approach in its IO campaign. Described here as 'baiting', IS often uses a combination of narrative, imagery and structure in communiqués that is designed to elicit misguided, but often predictable, IO responses from its enemies. This, in turn, generates opportunities for IS to reinforce its core narrative in waves of secondary messaging generated by all levels of its media architecture. IS's IO messaging surrounding its release of *Healing the Believer's Chests* (2015) epitomises this strategy.

IS captured a Jordanian air force pilot in December 2014 and immediately publicised the feat. It maintained its media presence with *Dabiq* featuring an interview with the pilot ('The Capture of a Crusader Pilot' 2014), and, more broadly, rumours circulated of a possible prisoner exchange. Then, in January 2015, IS released the video *Healing the Believer's Chests*, which showed the pilot being burned alive. For 18 minutes prior to the execution scene, IS methodically presented the jurisprudential, moral, ideological and political reasoning for the pilot's execution. In the immediate minutes prior to the scene, graphic images of the burned bodies of children, civilians buried under rubble and the aftermath of air strikes flashed on-screen as the pilot walked through bomb-ravaged streets towards a cage. Thus, the vast majority of the video was devoted to increasing perceptions of crisis in its in-group audiences and unambiguously constructing the pilot as a symbol of the malevolent Other. Moreover, in another hallmark of IS IO, the video was cloaked in powerful symbolism: the 'prisoner' was dressed in a Guantanamo Bay-style orange jumpsuit; rubble was used to extinguish the burning body; and, at least according to chatter on Twitter between IS supporters, fuel from the downed aircraft was used in the execution.

As global condemnation reached a crescendo, IS took the opportunity *it had generated* to react by pointing to the hypocrisy of condemning the burning death of a single fighter pilot but not the daily burning deaths of children in Syria and Iraq. During a number of interviews with Syrians conducted by the author in March 2015, many respondents expressed a sense of incredulity regarding the global outrage at the IS video, given the frequency with which such actions occur in Syria. While all of the interviewees expressed disdain for Daesh (IS), this is the type of fissure issue that IS baiting targets. IS supporters on Twitter were quick to highlight the world's hypocritical silence when Muslims in other parts of the world are burned to death. For example, many posted and retweeted a photograph of a Buddhist monk reportedly throwing a Rohingya infant into a fire pit. As the lead article in *Dabiq* declared:

In burning the crusader pilot alive and burying him under a pile of debris, the Islamic State carried out a just form of retaliation for his involvement in the crusader bombing campaign which continues to result in the killing of countless Muslims who, as a result of these airstrikes, are burned alive and buried under mountains of debris ('The Burning of the Murtadd Pilot' 2015, 6).

For its Arabic-speaking audiences, IS released *A Message to Jordan* (رسالة الى الاردن '2015'), which not only methodically presented its multifaceted justification for the execution, but also specifically addressed the pilot's family, Jordanian tribes and the reaction of the Jordanian regime. Meanwhile, IS's local information offices publicly showed these videos and publicised the reactions of locals, all of which were, unsurprisingly, positive and supportive. All the while, IS's supporters used social media to disseminate IS's official messaging whilst directly countering the arguments of dissenters.

IS's IO campaign prior to and after its release of Healing the Believer's Chests is a powerful example of its use of 'baiting' as an IO strategy. IS's communiqués were not about winning over 'undecided' viewers, but unambiguously reinforcing the perceptions and polarising the support of friends and foes alike, while, yet again, capturing global media attention. As a senior producer from a Syrian opposition radio station told the author during an interview in December 2014:

The important thing is how you react to Daesh media. Daesh made a media trap and all of the Western media fell in it. They know the fears and images that the Western media is hungry for, so Daesh give it and the media spreads it.

Conclusion: key contributions, counternarrative development implications and future research

Key contributions

Empirically supported by a large and diverse range of Arabic and English IS communiqués, this analysis has explored how IS strategically weaves together appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors in messages that are designed to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of its audiences. In doing so, this research has contributed to the research field by presenting and applying a framework through which IS's IO campaign can be understood and engaging in a comprehensive analysis of this campaign based exclusively on primary source materials. The picture that emerges is one of a complexly multifaceted IO campaign that belies simplistic generalisations of IS propaganda as merely a tool of proselytisation and terror wrapped in slick production. Indeed, IS's campaign does more than just appeal to pragmatic and perceptual factors. It fuses these appeals into potent narratives, reinforced by politico-military actions in the field, and uses 'baiting' to coax its adversaries into misguided IO responses. Countering IS's IO efforts will require carefully calibrated strategies.

Implications for counternarrative development

It is pertinent to conclude this study by identifying two broad considerations for counternarrative strategies based on the key findings of this research. Firstly, more needs to be done to target IS's *wilayat*-based information offices. As this research has shown, the middle tier of IS's media architecture is the most active producer of 'official' IS messaging and operates at the coalface of the IS campaign at that crucial nexus between IS's politico-military activities and the civilian population. Targeting IS's information offices would likely have significant knock-on effects for the upper and lower tiers of IS's broader media apparatus. While the appropriate deployment of military assets may be an important part of such efforts, the primary focus should be on resourcing and training pre-existing local indigenous IO efforts. For instance, during interviews in December 2014

and March 2015 with staff from Syrian opposition radio stations, the author was informed of a variety of programs designed to counter the appeal of extremists within local populations (see also Ingram 2015b). Moreover, locally produced IO are far more likely to capture sociocultural and situational nuances, which would likely be missed if produced externally.

Secondly, government counternarrative strategies must avoid confronting IS ideologically. A major implication of this study is that the potency of Islamist ideology is unleashed when suras and Hadiths are presented as mechanisms to understand broader contextual issues related to identity, crisis and solution constructs. Even the most jurisprudentially sound counter-IS case reinforces IS's central narrative if it is delivered or expedited by non-Muslim actors (i.e. the Other). Islamic proselytising by non-Muslims not only commands zero credibility, especially amongst those most susceptible to radicalisation, but also inadvertently undermines the 'moderate' ideologues and community leaders who are so crucial in fighting extremism. Moreover, IS's ongoing IO civil war is far more damaging than any ideological case any non-Muslim actor could produce. Government resources would be better used in developing counternarrative strategies based on 'reverse-engineering' the core principles underpinning the strategic logic of IS's IO campaign. Messages that *pertinently* attach IS to perceptions of crisis, denigrate its system of control, and expose ruptures between its narrative and action *will* be more effective than counter-proselytising efforts.

Future research

As an examination of the strategic logic of IS's IO campaign, this article has offered a *necessarily* 'top-down' perspective of its communications strategy. However, a crucial adjunct to this analysis is the 'bottom-up' perspective of how IS messaging is interpreted by its various audiences. While the resilience of IS in its strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa, the large number of foreigners who have reportedly travelled to the Middle East to join IS, the emergence of transnational IS *wilayats*, and attacks and thwarted attempts by IS-inspired 'lone-wolf' actors in Europe, North America and Australia may anecdotally help to support the contention that IS's IO strategy is effective, empirical data is required. The collection of interview material and other primary sources has begun, a small sample of which has appeared here. It will, however, take some time before preliminary findings can be published.

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Notes

1. IS communiqués disseminated online are regularly removed by webhosts, making referencing to the original forum unreliable. All sources referred to in this article are available from the author on request.
2. In November 2014, al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of *wilayats* in Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Algeria and Saudi Arabia (Although the Disbelievers Dislike It 2014; ‘Remaining and Expanding’ 2014, 20–33). In January 2015, the Khorasan *wilayat* was formally accepted by IS (‘Wilayat Khurasan and the Bay’at’ 2015, 33–37). Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakr Shekau, pledged his allegiance to IS in an audio message released on March 7, 2015 (‘Bay’ah Jama’at Ahl al-Subbah li-l-Da’wah wa-l-jihad’ 2015).
3. First coined by Bernard Fall (1998), the concept of a ‘competitive system of control’ is well established in counterinsurgency literature to describe the politico-military apparatuses that compete for the support of contested populations during small wars (see, for example, Kilcullen 2013, 116–168).
4. Al Hayat Media produces a range of print (for example, *Dabiq*) and video (for example, *Flames of War* 2014) messages. Its products are predominantly for English-speaking audiences, although German (‘Mujatweets Episode #4’ 2014), French (‘Al Hayat Media Mujatweet 6’ 2014) and Indonesian (‘Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah’ 2014) messages have featured in some productions. Al-Furqan Media releases statements by IS’s senior leaders (see, for example, al-Baghdadi 2014) and produces videos (for example, *Clanging of Swords* 2014). Al-Itisam produces Arabic-language content and videos that are similar in style and format to Al Hayat productions (for example, *Breaking of the Border* 2014). The Ajnad Foundation produces recitations of suras (Quranic verses) and *nasheeds* (‘hymns’).
5. The data in Tables 1 and 2 does not include four photo-eulogy reports identified in the original source (<http://justpaste.it/joc3>) because the original contents could not be verified due to a faulty link.

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