Netwar in Cyberia:
Decoding the Media Mujahidin

By Ali Fisher

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by Ali Fisher

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By Ali Fisher

This paper has benefited greatly from input by Nico Prucha.

Introduction

At the dawn of mass access to the internet, Douglas Rushkoff wrote *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace.* In his book, he observed a very special moment in our recent history in which it was possible to imagine the path ahead, before most of what daily users of the internet now experience even existed.

> [It was] a moment when anything seemed possible. When an entire subculture ... saw the wild potentials of marrying the latest computer technologies with the most intimately held dreams and the most ancient spiritual truths.

> Cyberians question the very reality on which the ideas of control and manipulation are based; and as computer networking technology gets into the hands of more cyberians, historical power centers are challenged.

> Do-it-yourself technology and a huge, hungry media empire sews the seeds of its own destruction by inviting private citizens to participate through 'zines, cable shows, and interactive television. The hypnotic spell of years of television and its intense public relations is broken as people learn to deconstruct and recombine the images intended to persuade them.

> Using media "viruses," politically inclined cyberians launch into the datasphere, at lightning speed, potent ideas that openly challenge hypocritical and illogical social structures, thus rendering them powerless.[1]

He also foresaw that dissident groups would use technological innovation and the networks of our postmodern society in unconventional ways and toward subversive goals. That time has come.

David Rothkopf has already argued for a change in mindset within diplomatic practice to recognize the "tectonic shifts that are transforming the very nature of global society" due to the "information revolution." He noted:

> The realpolitik of the new era is cyberpolitik, in which the actors are no longer just states, and raw power can be countered or fortified by information power. The mighty will continue to prevail, but the sources, instruments and measures of that might are dramatically changed.[2]

As the sources and instruments of power have adapted to a new information age, the extent to which different groups have access to influence has also shifted. As Geoff Miller has observed, "National borders have become both less immutable and more porous, and the ability and inclination to see over or behind them have grown."[3] In 1999, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt presented a similar perspective, arguing that "some global actors are thus looking at the world more in terms of widespread networks than in terms of distinct groups and nations located in specific places."[4] The movement toward increasingly network-based organizations creates an environment to which the jihadist movement is particularly well adapted because it projects a shared belief and identity rather than focusing on

geographic boundaries or a post-Westphalian concept of the nation state.

The contemporary jihadist movement combines a long history of theological writing and strategic thought with new technologies. It has become the challenge to society that Rothkopf and Rushkoff foresaw. Jihadists have used mobile phone networks to detonate IEDs. Video footage of the resulting explosions is then captured via cameras intended for home movies. GoPros, more often seen on the helmets of snowboarders, are now mounted on the barrel of an AK-47 to give a game console-inspired "first-person shooter" perspective of the battle. Video sequences from the battlefield, edited into high-quality HD movies, are distributed via social media and file sharing platforms.

In 2007, the late Reuven Paz noted, "The war against global jihadi terrorism is becoming also a war of 'soft powers,' in which the Jihadis are doing quite well."[5] Since then, as the use of the internet has grown, extremists have exploited the opportunity for influence it has created. Prior to 2011, al-Qaeda (AQ) had established a "jihadist cloud" which, Nico Prucha argued, allowed AQ to remain resilient within "its virtual spaces and niches on the Internet," despite setbacks on physical fronts. Since 2011, jihadist information dissemination has evolved rapidly into complex multiplatform systems, fueled by the conflict in Syria and Iraq. As extremist groups have adopted ever more aggressive internet penetration techniques, public diplomacy organizations representing a range of governmental and non-governmental international actors, are being challenged to confront the jihadist movement online.[6]

The jihadist use of the internet echoes the Cyberia prophecy of an internet-enabled ideological struggle: "The battle for your reality begins in the fields of digital interaction."[7] In this vision, warfare would be "conducted on an

entirely new battleground; it is a struggle not primarily over territory or physical   boundaries but over the very definitions of these terms" in combination with the expression of a specific identity online.[8] This is the type of conflict for which public diplomacy should be most suited: one based on information, ideas, persuasion and engagement with communities around the world.

In the struggle over definitions, one word that particularly concerned some members of the jihadist movement, including Abu Mus'ab as-Suri,[9] was the contest over the word "terrorism:"

> I think that one of the most important fields of success in the recent American Jewish Crusader campaigns is that on the media fields. They have succeeded in imposing terminologies and definitions of people, and in forcing upon humanity a meaning of these terminologies, corresponding with their view. Among the terms which they have imposed today, in a distorted way, in order to express the ugliest of activities, manners and practices... are the terms 'terrorism', 'terrorists', and 'combating terrorism'...

> With all simplicity and courage we say: We refuse to understand this term according to the American description. 'Terrorism' is an abstract word, and like many of the abstract words, it can carry a good or bad meaning according to the context, and what is added to it and what is attached to it. The word is an abstract term, which has neither positive nor negative meaning.[10]

Anwar al-Awlaki shared similar thoughts, encouraging listeners to exchange the word

"terrorism" for jihad and "terrorist" for mujahid when hearing the terms used in Western news media.[11] Another struggle over definition recognized by jihadists and those producing "counter-narratives" such as the Global Coaliation against Daesh, is the debate over the name used for ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, or Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-sh-Sham (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق و الشام)—or, in short, *daesh* (داعش). These arguments originate in the struggle to define the identity of a group that believes it is the sole representatives of Sunni Islam and on the path of God as opposed to all others. The impact of these theologically rooted arguments extends to the legitimacy of manmade geographic borders, challenges the post-Westphalian concept of nation state, and redefines the battle space in which these struggles all play out.[12]

Indeed public diplomacy and strategic communication programs and initiatives have struggled to produce a meaningful challenge to the use of "soft power" by jihadist groups (as Paz outlined in 2007) or *The Battle of the Hearts and Minds* (as described by al-Awlaki), Rather, the "Media Mujahidin"—the supporters of jihadist groups who disseminate propaganda content online—have made increasingly effective use of a range of digital platforms to create a complex information ecosystem that disseminates rich audiovisual content as part of a multiplatform zeitgeist. Public diplomacy responses cannot keep pace with the speed, agility and resilience of the Media Mujahidin and their communication techniques. As a consequence, public diplomacy has failed to significantly undermine the coherent messages projected by Sunni supremacist groups such as Islamic State Iraq, subsequently ISIS and Islamic State.[13]

One of the most important developments in jihadist use of the internet is the "Swarmcast." As the author has described previously, the Swarmcast relies on the speed of dissemination, the agility of users and the resilience of

network structures. As a result, the movement can leverage collective behaviors across multiple platforms to maintain a persistent presence for their content. Due to its networked structure, the Swarmcast defies understanding if researchers continue peering down a soda straw at a large-scale complex problem, to borrow an analogy from the book *Kill Chain*.[14] The soda straw is created by drawing conclusions based on linear proxy metrics, short and cherry-picked timeframes, an artificially narrow selection of the content, or focusing on predominantly Western languages without genuine access to Arabic language sources.[15]

As a result of the nature of the Swarmcast, public diplomacy strategies to challenge the jihadist movement must be based on a holistic approach to the information landscape. To decode the Media Mujahidin, the Swarmcast has to be understood within the context of the breadth of content they produce and the jihadists' struggle to maintain a persistent presence for that content.[16]

Through a strategic assessment of the information dissemination systems that underpin jihadist strategy, this paper will decode the way the Media Mujahidin operates, what they are trying to achieve, and what they view as success or victory. The research is based on the jihadist strategy in their own words, words which have much in common with the Western concept of Netwar.

> The term [netwar] refers to societal conflict and crime, short of war, in which the antagonists are organized more as sprawling "leaderless" networks than as tight-knit hierarchies. Many terrorists, criminals, fundamentalists, and ethno-nationalists are developing netwar capabilities.[17]

Drawing on this mode of conflict, the analysis will focus on the patterns that emerge from the aggregation of

individual actions and expose their collective behavior. It will become clear the Swarmcast represents a continually evolving multiplatform zeitgeist. It exists across a network of platforms that fulfill specific roles: from the beacons used to direct users to new content, to content stores where individual pieces of content are located and aggregators that act as collection points linking individual pieces of content together and to an overall theology.[18]

Part 1. Decoding the Media Mujahidin

Section 1.1 focuses on calibrating public diplomacy strategies for the struggle against the Media Mujahidin. It draws on previous research to outline the environment in which the Media Mujahidin operate. This section also addresses the often-misunderstood purpose of the Media Mujahidin and integrates the information-centric aspects of Netwar to highlight the Media Mujahidin's dynamic and dispersed approach.

Section 1.2 analyzes key concepts that describe and shape the way the Media Mujahidin imagine themselves and, subsequently, operate on a tactical level. This section demonstrates how a strong sense of history informs their approach and intersects with the information-centric aspects of Netwar. The jihadist content has deeply encoded meanings that convey specific messages to those viewing them from an Arabic socio-cultural and theological perspective, messages not recognized or understood by many Western, English and other European language-centric commentators. Finally, this section lays the foundation for an analysis of the Swarmcast.

Section 1.3 draws on the concepts outlined in sections 1.1 and 1.2 combined with relevant data to illustrate how the Swarmcast developed. It charts the evolution of the approach used by the Media Mujahidin and emphasizes that,

along with disruption, increased utility has been a driving force in the selection of new platforms and tactics. This is fundamental to the understanding of the current jihadist information ecosystem. This section also discusses the need for a non-linear assessment of the Swarmcast in order to understand its endurance. It is clear that what appeared to be a decline in Swarmcast power and influence was instead merely a reconfiguration of its resources and tactics.

Part 2. A Contemporary Assessment of the Swarmcast

Drawing on the findings of *Netwar in Cyberia: Decoding the Media Mujahidin*, a forthcoming second *Perspectives* issue will focus on the information ecosystem, beginning with the Media Mujahidin's 2016 adoption of Telegram as the beacon for communication with supporters and sympathizers. This paper will use 24 months of data from Telegram to analyze the contemporary jihadist information ecosystem to get beyond the current anecdotal references to five or six secretive channels or so-called "core Nashir." This data will show that much of jihadist communication now takes place out of sight of most researchers. This strategically important content is shared in hard-to-reach Arabic groups and channels only accessible to genuinely fluent Arabic speakers who can identify theological and historical reference points.

1.1 Calibrating Public Diplomacy for the Netwar Against the Media Mujahidin

Public diplomacy in the 21ˢᵗ century has to navigate the complex architecture of multi-hub, multi-directional networks that exist between communities around the world.[19]   The complex challenges with which public diplomacy is tasked to influence often straddle borders, continents, and of course, the rich blend of languages in use. The level of interconnectivity and complexity creates

forbidding challenges for those pursuing strategies based on information dominance, assertions of identity and soft power. Public diplomacy in the 21st century, particularly when facing a highly effective adversary such as the Media Mujahidin, must be finely calibrated to assess challenges and identify opportunities for influence. It can ill afford to stumble on simple concepts against an adversary ready and willing to exploit any misstep.[20]
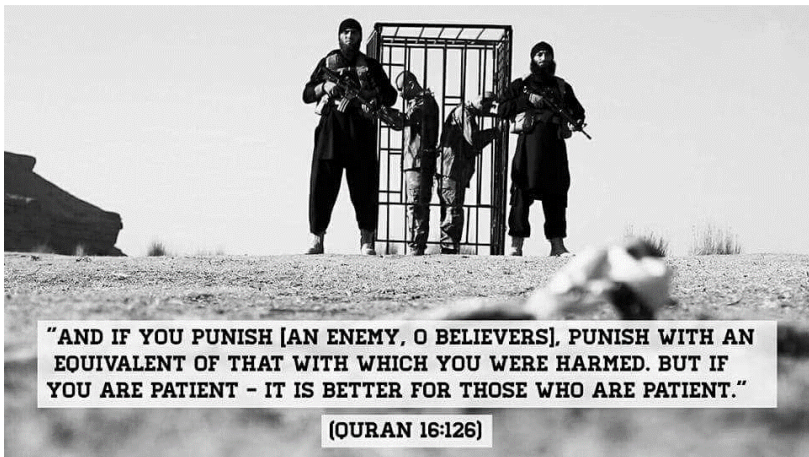
Images from videos are often paired with religious quotation to claim theological justification.

Calibrating public diplomacy and strategic communications to face the specific challenge of the jihadist movement, including ISIS, requires fine-tuning the public diplomacy approach to engagement with foreign publics as well as an understanding of the tactics employed by the adversary to influence those same publics.

The need for a more networked approach to interaction with foreign publics is clear, as Kathy Fitzpatrick notes:

> More relational—and more collaborative—forms of public diplomacy will define the field in the 21st century. Public diplomats increasingly will be called on to use their talents and skills to bring people together in addressing shared challenges and common interests in global society.[21]

The importance of collaboration when facing shared challenges has been evident for many years, particularly for those charged with facing the jihadist movement, which includes groups such as AQ, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and ISIS. Ten years after Paz highlighted the soft power of the global jihadist movement, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report "Public Diplomacy and National Security in 2017" argued that public diplomacy has a critical role to play in advancing this strategy:

> While the U.S. government has invested much in hard power tactics to fight terrorism, it has overlooked the soft power necessary to blunt the appeal of extremist ideologies. Weakening violent extremism is a generational challenge and lasting results will likely not be seen in the next four years. But it is paramount that steady, consistent attention and leadership be applied to stop people from being radicalized to violence in the first place.[22]

One challenge, as Nicholas J. Cull has noted, is that "like all forms of communication the effectiveness of each form of PD hinges on credibility."[23] Yet, as David Sorenson argued, "The United States faces significant obstacles in launching a counter ISIS information campaign, as they lack credibility in the minds of most Muslims."[24] R.S. Zaharna has also aptly

demonstrated the difficulty the USG has had in developing believable and actionable content.[25]

   To add to the problem of credibility, the U.S. counter-messaging operation has at times during this period been "in disarray," according to Will McCants, then a Middle East scholar at the Brookings Institution.[26] In addition, in 2015 a National Security Council report surfaced that questioned the viability of the USG's social media strategy against ISIS.[27] This appeared only months after the *New York Times* reported on an internal memo that concluded, "The Islamic State's violent narrative—promulgated through thousands of messages each day—has effectively 'trumped' the efforts of some of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations."[28]

   Technological advances alone cannot guarantee the success of public diplomacy. From the last three feet to the last three tweets, public diplomacy has always been about the way individuals connect around an issue and how communication around that issue is understood. The struggle against the jihadist movement is no different; public diplomacy must be calibrated appropriately based on the strategy and focus of the movement.[29] After all, as al-Awlaki emphasized in his discussion of the important role women could play by joining the "media jihad" and "internet jihad:" "This battle for the hearts and minds is a very important battle, because we are not only fighting on the battlefield but we are also fighting in the realm of ideas."[30]

   The importance of ideas, religion and theology are clear in jihadist writings, yet, the study of the movement has tried to interpret it in terms of street criminals, gangsters, individuals obsessed with computer games (particularly first-person shooters) and a desire to go from zero-to-hero.[31] Other interpretations have focused on "jihadi cool" and gangsta rap or counting the number of battlefield pictures.[32] In reality,

references to gangsters and crooks in jihadist media, such as in al-Awlaki's *State of the Ummah*, appear as pejorative terms. Al-Awlaki uses these negative references to describe what he views as illegitimate political leaders in Pakistan and Yemen.[33] This is similar to the references to criminals that recently appeared in a speech by the official spokesman of the Islamic State, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir. Titled *So Follow Their Guidance* the speech states:

> Thus, our Lord, the Wise and All-Knowing, revealed in His Book the reality of these disbelieving criminals and commanded us to fight them and kill them until the religion is entirely for Allah. So either they embrace Islam, or submit to the command and rule of Allah in lowliness and humiliation. He made it obligatory on us to cleanse the earth of the stench of their shirk, their jahiliyyah, their buffoonery, and their tyranny in the land, and our Lord—the Blessed and Exalted—commanded us to fight the mushrikin collectively just as they fight us collectively.[34]
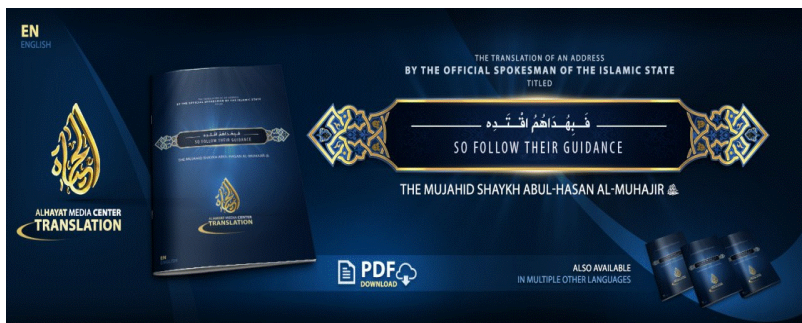
Translated transcript of audio statement by Official Spokesman of the Islamic State, Sh. Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir (April 2018).

The attempt to reach for explanations focusing on criminals, gangsters and computer game-obsessed losers often originates in a tendency to view the subject matter—jihadist media—through a Western and predominantly English-language lens, what Pierre Bourdieu calls habitus.[35] This perspective fails to pick up on the rich blend of Arabic-dominated theological motifs and terms that appear in jihadist writings.[36]

This narrow interpretive lens poses a problem for public diplomacy, which requires nuance and cultural meaning, to be effective. Rüdiger Lohlker describes the problem:

> An intense debate has raged for many years in Europe and North America as to whether the ideational products of jihadi groups are to be understood as religious or merely ideological. The dominant narrative among Western governments, policy experts and the mainstream media has been that Al Qaeda and other jihadi groups embrace a violent "ideology," rather than specific religious doctrines that pervade and drive their agenda.[36]

That the jihadist movement has produced hundreds of thousands of pages of text and gigabytes of audiovisual material specifically about religious matters should indicate, even to the uninitiated, "the role of religious ideas for the construction of jihadi identity."[38]   Rüdiger Lohlker continues,"It is crystal clear to virtually anyone who has the linguistic capacity to grasp and the opportunity to witness what jihadists are actually saying, writing and doing, both online and offline, that religion matters."[39]

Not all public diplomacy approaches need to address the theological aspects of the movement directly, but a certain level of sensitivity to religious nuance is essential. Moreover, public diplomacy efforts intended to directly challenge

jihadist messaging must accurately identify and understand what is being communicated by the messenger to the intended audience, especially since neither the messenger nor the intended audience view the content from the same perspective as many European and American researchers and public diplomacy practitioners.

Moreover, even simple references to jihadist concepts in the titles of media products often go unnoticed by Western media analysts.[40]   As a consequence, much of the analysis of Media Mujahidin output is dislocated from the concepts that anchor contemporary jihadist media to its historical foundations. In the absence of an understanding of historic and theological references and the neglect of contemporary texts within the jihadist movement, it is difficult to see how current public diplomacy and "counter-narrative" efforts can be successful.

As an illustration of this problem, most discussion and interpretation of the video series *Salil al-Sawarim (SAS)*, located in a Western habitus, focuses on Hollywood style or slick production values—just as the broader understanding of the movement often revolves around ideas of "brand" and "marketing."[41]   However, this video (*SAS Part 4*) from 2014 is particularly illustrative of the emphasis on theology. For example, readers sufficiently initiated into the Arabic language corpus of Sunni extremist theology will understand the title's particular reference immediately: it refers to the book *al-Sarim al-maslul 'ala shatim al-rasul*, "the Sharp Sword on whoever Insults the Prophet," written by 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328 AD).[42] This is why the sound effect used to underscore references to Ibn Taymiyya's writings in ISIS videos frequently recreates a sword being drawn from its scabbard.

Failing to appreciate the theological content, references and encoded cultural understanding undermines the

potential impact of public diplomacy. As R.S. Zaharna noted, "Culture and communication are intertwined, in that culture shapes the production of information by political sponsors and the interpretation of that information by publics."[43] If the interpretation of jihadist media content is limited to Western perceptive dispositions (what Bourdieu called habitus), without appropriate attention paid to its theological roots and historical references exploited, the potency of the subsequent counter effort is likely to be undermined. As Zaharna warned, "While a political sponsor may be blind to culture's influence on programming content and style, culturally diverse publics often find it glaring and even offensive."[44]

Calibrating public diplomacy efforts to counter the impact of jihadist media relies on both an understanding of what the jihadist movement is actually saying, and the credibility of those seeking to counter those ideas. To that end, the Global Coalition against Daesh has been at pains to highlight the collaboration of many nations against ISIS.[45] The coalition's approach has been to recognize the ability of ISIS, and the jihadist movement broadly, to utilize innovative approaches to communication through digital networks and social media platforms. In response, the Coalition was "committed to exposing the falsehoods that lie at the heart of Daesh's ideology, and to present a positive, alternative future for the region."[46] The combined resources of 70 nations, the Arab League, Interpol, NATO and the EU should be able to dwarf the communication ability of the relatively small jihadist groups, especially given the coalition's military might.[47] Groups such as ISIS have been exposed for three years to airstrikes (27,566 by the coalition),[48] missile strikes, white phosphorus, barrel bombs, cyber bombs, attacks by special forces and Shia militias with Iranian backing while fighting ground battles with Iraqi and Syrian military, often

backed by Russian or U.S. airpower. Yet, as General David Petraeus recently observed:

> The threat posed by jihadist extremism online has, in fact, metastasized in recent years. During that time, it has evolved into a scourge that blights the internet and allows jihadists to reach into our societies and to tear at the very fabric of them.[49]

This ability to disseminate content, attract recruits and inspire attacks by those who pledge allegiance is due in part to the increasing use of social media generally. The adoption of social media has had an impact on, and has been a key element of, 21st century public diplomacy. It has changed the dynamics of the way "audiences" engage with content. "The user's ability to dynamically select, manipulate, integrate and format the information to suit particular and changing needs" defines this changing information landscape.[50]

Netwar

The evolution in the communication environment has created opportunities for the practitioners of public diplomacy who have been charged with challenging the jihadist movement. However, this is much more than being "good" at social media: "The information revolution is as much about organizational design as about technological prowess, that this revolution favors whoever masters the network form."[51]

Despite these changes, and the opportunities created by the 'information revolution', many public diplomacy efforts still focus on delivering "messages" and "narratives" *ex cathedra*, rather than embracing the potential of a collaborative or open source approach to public diplomacy.[52] In line with the evolving information environment, open source public diplomacy recognizes that:

Ideas can no longer be seen as owned by a country; mass communication provides the means to see beyond national claims of unity. Recognizing this and embracing the means to engage with communities that are defined by ideology rather than physical borders provides the potential to render public diplomacy initiatives more relevant to the target audience and ultimately more influential.[53]

Analyzing the opportunities created by the information revolution, David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla coined the term Netwar, defining it as:

[A]n emerging mode of conflict in which the protagonists—ranging from terrorist and criminal organizations on the dark side, to militant social activists on the bright side—use network forms of organization, doctrine, strategy, and technology attuned to the information age.[54]

Netwar is part of the increasing "irregularization" of warfare since the end of the Cold War.[55] The irregularization of warfare includes the growing use of information technologies (IT), both military and civilian. The interrelated development of IT and irregularization assures that conflicts increasingly depend on information and communication technologies. As argued in the *Advent of Netwar*, "Cyberwar and netwar are modes of conflict that are largely about 'knowledge'—about who knows what, when, where, and why, and about how secure a society, military, or other actor is regarding its knowledge of itself and its adversaries."[56]

"Information-age threats are likely to be more diffuse, nonlinear, and multidimensional than industrial-age threats."[57] An archetypal Netwar actor described by Ronfeldt and Arquilla consists "of a web (or network) of dispersed,

interconnected 'nodes' (or activity centers) ... These nodes may be individuals, groups, formal or informal organizations, or parts of groups or organizations."[58]

These networks are "very hard to deal with. ...What all have in common is that they operate in small, dispersed units that can deploy nimbly—anywhere, anytime," they wrote. In addition, successfully executing Netwar strategy requires that a group know "how to swarm and disperse, penetrate and disrupt, as well as elude and evade."[59]

> The capacity of this nonhierarchical design for effective performance over time may depend on a powerful doctrine or ideology, or at least a strong set of common interests and objectives, that spans all nodes, and to which the members subscribe in a deep way. Such a doctrine can enable them to be 'all of one mind' even if they are dispersed and devoted to different tasks. It can provide an ideational, strategic, and operational centrality that allows for tactical decentralization. It can set boundaries and provide guidelines for decisions and actions so that they do not have to resort to a hierarchy—'they know what they have to do'.[60]

Containing nodes pursing a common purpose, organizations engaging in Netwar are often diffuse, leaderless and incredibly resilient. The information age advances have empowered networked forms, which traditional hierarchically organized diplomatic organizations find difficult to deal with. This includes the Media Mujahidin, who have developed a strategic communication approach through a dispersed method akin to that foreseen in the concept of Netwar.[61] Their approach, which draws on clusters having a closely aligned shared purpose rather than rigid organizational structure, was outlined by as-Suri and has been observed in studies of the jihadist Swarmcast.[62]

Swarmcast

Jihadist groups use dispersed forms of network organization and strategy to disseminate rich audiovisual content, including from the battlefield, in near-real time.[63] This interconnected network constantly reconfigures itself, much as a swarm of bees or flock of birds constantly reorganizes in mid-flight. The Swarmcast utilizes speed, agility and resilience to maintain a persistent presence of jihadist content online—and has been utilized frequently by ISIS in particular.

The Swarmcast marks a shift from the traditional broadcast models of communication during conflict, with which public diplomacy is often more comfortable, to a new, user-curated format that is both dispersed and resilient.[64] This new communication model makes it a challenge for traditionally hierarchical organizations to counter ISIS owing to its great flexibility and non-linear nature.[65]

As noted in the original articulation of the Swarmcast,[66] Ronfeldt and Arquilla define swarming as:

> seemingly amorphous, but it is a deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to strike from all directions, by means of a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire, close-in as well as from stand-off positions. It will work best—perhaps it will only work—if it is designed mainly around the deployment of myriad, small, dispersed, networked maneuver units (what we call "pods" organized in "clusters").[67]

Interpretations of swarming in a military setting often depend on a paradigm of centralized design, thereby contrasting hierarchies with networks as modes of operation.[68] However, swarms in nature occur without direction or design. Similarly, in their most extreme incarnations, beyond

those which Ronfeldt and Arquilla envisioned, the Media Mujahidin and other dispersed networks cease to depend on centralized direction, and instead adopt genuine swarming behaviors akin to those observed in nature. This extends the understanding of Netwar and requires Netwar to include the importance of emergent behavior and the impact of collective action in complex systems.[69]

The work by Deborah Gordon on ant colonies[70] and Evelyn Fox Keller on slime mold behavior indicates that the concept of centralized organization has overshadowed, and often obscured from view, the potential for individual interactions to aggregate into system-wide behaviors in complex systems.[71] As Jeffrey Goldstein put it, "Emergent phenomena are conceptualized as occurring on the macro level, in contrast to the micro-level components and processes out of which they arise."[72] Emergence refers "to the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems."[73]

> Emergent properties of groups are not surprising in view of recent research on complexity demonstrating the ability of large populations of simple, identical units (for example, spin magnets) to self-organize, form patterns, store information, and reach "collective decisions."[74]

As has become clear since the emergent nature of the Media Mujahidin was first observed, the group has the ability to adapt and continue to evolve without requiring centralized direction.[75] This creates challenges when deploying linear measurements that purport to show degradation or decline. While some things can be measured in two-dimensional line graphs, an authentic understanding of the jihadist movement and the Media Mujahidin rests as much in recognizing the

variation and creativity that results from their "struggle for existence." As Charles Darwin put it:

> Owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals of any species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive.[76]

Pressures in the information ecosystem drive variations in tactics. A greater proportion of the Swarmcast adopts those that are likely to assure success for the Media Mujahidin. These variations, transmitted by the many interactions between individual participants, feed the further development of emergent behaviors in complex systems. As such, when linear measures appear to indicate the Media Mujahidin are in decline, the Swarmcast has in reality merely reconfigured.[77]

Continuing the ecosystem metaphor, while members of a swarm of bees or a flock of birds constantly reorganize mid-flight to prevent collisions with one another, they also respond to external influence from predators.[78]

> Classically, protection from predators has been viewed as an important selective advantage to group membership, with benefits including dilution of predation, group vigilance, and the confusion effect (an inability of predators to visually lock onto one target among many).[79]

The herd or swarm type of behavior, observable in a range of animals from sand eels to zebras, causes confusion effects in predators,[80] making it difficult to pinpoint specific individual targets. This swarm effect has many parallels to the speed and volume of content produced by jihadist groups. In addition, observable nature and computer simulations demonstrate that when a predator strikes, the swarm shifts to evade them.[81] If the predator keeps looking in the same place, the number of available prey will appear to decline. But, if the predator shifts its perspective and looks elsewhere, it will be clear that the prey has not disappeared nor has the size of the swarm declined. Instead, the swarm has moved.

However, swarming behavior also increases target visibility. For example, "marine mammals use the tendency of their prey to be concentrated to facilitate successful attack."[82] In the case of the information ecosystem, when the Media Mujahidin and their supporters cluster in one place, they are able to distribute information quickly but garner greater attention. The jihadist movement initially had largely untrammeled use of social media; for example the online release of (صليل الصوارم 4) *SAS Part 4* went unchallenged for almost 48 hours.[83] However, as the movement became increasingly successful, it drew greater attention and called for social media companies to respond.[84]

When predation or disruption efforts become more effective, the struggle for existence causes increased variation in tactics. So it is with the Swarmcast. External pressure drives variation in approaches; successful tactics spread throughout the ecosystem augmenting the existing complex structures. The most successful of these tactics become formally sanctioned based on their potential impact, as evidenced by the shift from classical message boards and online forum to social media platforms and then to Telegram. Western observers originally hailed each shift in distribution method as a sign of decline or degradation of

the networks. However, as is now evident, with each shift the jihadist movement had reconfigured rather than degraded.[85]

The Media War Upon The Islamic State

Jihadist strategists, including those who pledged allegiance to AQ or ISIS, had long studied Western tactics in the global media space and understood how they would be leveraged against their movement. In fact, identifying and analyzing the tactics of those opposing jihadist forces is a practice deeply ingrained into modern jihadist writing and "Jihadist Strategic Studies."[86] In fact, the ISIS newspaper *al-Naba' 128* (April 2018) reinforced the belief that Iraq continues to be "the University of Jihad." Jihadists have a scholarly tradition of publishing "after-action-assessments" and oftentimes are frank in analyzing both failures and success.[87] This analysis enables them to adapt rapidly to imminent threat. Public diplomacy and strategic communication should recognize and be able to mirror this iterative process to be truly effective.
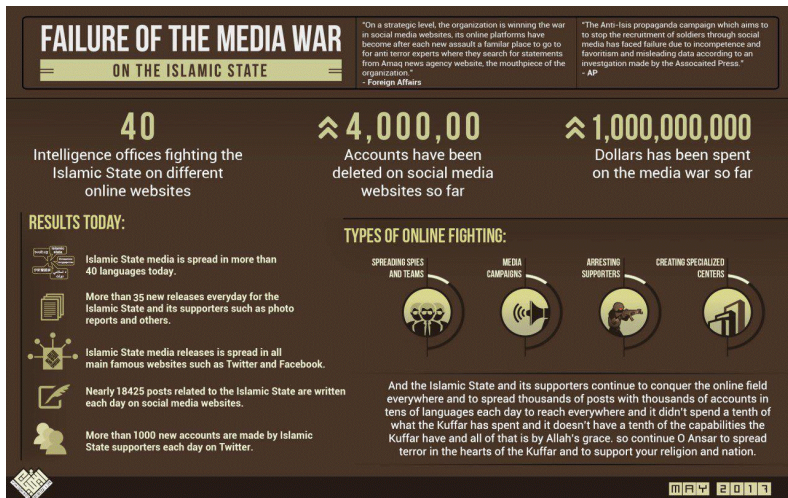
Infographic produced by *Yaqeen Media* quoting *Foreign Affairs* and *AP*.

Jihadist scholar Abu Mus'ab as-Suri highlighted the importance of reflection in his work, *The Global Islāmic Resistance Call*, a section of which appeared in the first edition of jihadist online periodical *Inspire.*

> "In accordance with our method, our military theory was born through a study of our own experiences in the jihādī current, as well as through enduring and living in the field throughout the various stages".[88]

Similarly, al-Awlaki opened his March 2009 lecture, *State of the Ummah* by saying:

> I believe that as Muslims we should advise each other sincerely and we should talk with honesty, sugar coating is not going to do anyone any benefit, so if we want to change our situation we really need to sit down and think about it and decide what the illness is, what the symptoms are, and how to cure it.[89]

This method follows a tradition reaching back to the historical figure of Khalid ibn al-Waleed, who reflected on the success and failure of military engagements both against (e.g. Battle of Uhud) and later for the Muslim army. As A.I. Akram described in a biography of Khalid ibn al-Waleed:

> For several days after his return to Makkaeh, the Battle of Uhud occupied the mind of Khalid. He thought time and again of how the opportunity had arisen when the archers abandoned their position, and how quickly and accurately he had grasped the possibilities of manoeuvre. Khalid was to repeat such counterstrokes in later battles of his career. But the one fact that weighed heavily on his mind, and which he found difficult to explain, was the courage and tenacity of the Muslims.[90]

Historian and scholar Ibn Kathir, author of *Al-Bidāya wan Nihāya* ("The Beginning and the End"), quotes az-Zuhari saying: "in studying the battles (of the Prophet) lies the knowledge of this world as well as the Hereafter."[91] This after-action analytical model applies to cyberwar and Netwar, which, as "modes of conflict that are largely about 'knowledge,'" relies on "its knowledge of itself and its adversaries."[92]   As Abdul-Qadir Ibn 'Abdil-'Aziz put, it "the happy one is one who learns from others (mistakes)."[93]

Using this approach, the jihadist movement has developed knowledge about its adversary as demonstrated by the release of *The Media War Upon The Islamic State: The Media Techniques of Misleading the Masses* (by Ansar al-Khilafah). This work lists different information warfare techniques used against ISIS. Grouped into "Media Deviation," "Propaganda" and "Psychological Warfare." The document argues that these "three foundations" provide the tools to "make people stand with them or to turn away from al-Mujahidin."[94]   Two of the techniques identified in the *Media War* document are of particular relevance to the public diplomacy effort: an awareness of the attempt to challenge the credibility of the Islamic State and restriction of the flow of information that might be useful to ISIS.

The Media War Upon The Islamic State warns jihadists that "the camp of al-Kufr"[95] will try to cast doubt about the strength and credibility of the mujahidin:

> They will use words such as "so-called" or "alleged" or "apparently". For example, they will say the "so-called fighters" or "so-called leader al-Adnani" and so forth, as if to give the impression that they do not really exist or that they are insignificant. They imply that there is something suspicious or false about the sources of al-Mujahidin or any news of their successes or strengths.[96]

The Media War Upon The Islamic State also details the adversarial attempt by the 'camp of al-Kufr' to use media blackouts to control the information available about the struggle with AQ and ISIS, especially with respect to the insurgency in Iraq and the current fighting against ISIS.

> "Sometimes [the Western coalition] do not want to admit casualties, and that is why you find many cases of several operations by al-Mujahidin and news of this coming out of the battlefield or even their videos and evidence of it, yet you do not find any news about it in the mainstream media, as if it never happened."[97]

The mass ISIS Twitter suspension offers another "perfect example" of the attempt to black out ISIS media. In addition, through official accounts such as the "UK Against Daesh" Twitter handle, the "Global Coalition" has also attempted to dissuade users and journalists from reporting or sharing Amaq content. In short, reducing AQ and ISIS online media presence by removing content and suspending accounts has been a principle Western tactic, supported by many politicians and the heads of security services.[98]

Tweet by UK Foreign Office Twitter account
"UK Against Daesh" (October 2, 2017).

In contrast to the jihadist tradition of in-depth study of the adversary, 10 years ago Paz complained that "the number of Western analysts who can fully understand this phenomenon is quite small, even though there are many 'so-called experts' for terrorism."[99]

> Most of the Western intelligence and security analysts are still unable to read the information in the original Arabic language, and lack the knowledge, insights, and tools, required to analyze Islamist radical groups and their *mindset*.[100]

The jihadist movement is now, as it was then, "almost entirely directed in Arabic and its content is intimately tied to the socio-political context of the Arab world."[101] For Western public diplomacy efforts, this represents a problem of both language and context. Insight into jihadist media requires an intimate understanding of the linguistic nuances of jihadist Arabic in addition to familiarity with relevant cultural, historical and theological references. As Prucha described it:

> Without proper Arabic skills and with no deep-rooted research on Islamic theology, the Sunni extremist movement remains hidden behind a firewall. Without knowing this content by heart and being able to decipher visual codes, uncovering extremist networks online is a challenge and has led to the assumption there is a decline of ISIS media production.[102]

Without the right linguistic skills and historical and cultural understanding, Western public diplomacy efforts and research remain largely on the fringes, reduced to quantifying the volume of content produced, such as the number of photos of military action or the volume of pro- and anti-ISIS tweets. There is a grave danger in focusing solely on what the uninitiated can manage to find, rather

than on what is actually being communicated by the jihadist movement to a sophisticated and often theologically aware public. The movement is significantly more complex than fringe interpretations based on counting photos might suggest.

> Ignoring the huge library of writing by focusing on only the narrow daily announcements, or English language material, leads to dangerous misinterpretations of the movement—even more so, when not even the Latinized Arabic keywords which appear in English language propaganda releases are taken into consideration [for analysis]. Facing the contemporary challenge of the Jihadist movement, policy cannot afford to fall for superficial interpretations, which emphasize memes, general simplifications, infographics, and flashy videos—and generally ignore the deep theological nuanced Arabic publications.[103]

This challenge to understanding is not limited to language. Its complexity is also highlighted in the role of gendered interpretations of the movement. Specifically, as Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal write:

> Portrayals of women terrorists rarely if ever characterize them as having individual agency in general or with respect to their violence specifically. This voiceless picture of women terrorists shows a lack of knowledge and understanding of the 'subject' on the part of the media (and even on the part of the academy).[104]

The lack of nuance and failure to recognize the agency and faith of many martyrdom operatives (of both sexes) has led policymakers and some academics to see the use of females as indicative of "a degree of desperation among

terrorist groups."[105] In fact, research has shown the many and varied reasons women have had for engaging in such operations, well beyond typical gender stereotypes such as "mothers, monsters and whores."[106] Notably, few acts of violence carried about by men are interpreted with reference to their biological sex.[107]

In addition to the perceived gender of martyrdom operatives, Katherine E. Brown highlights the role played by the geographic origin of the martyrdom operative and target location in the extent to which they garner attention.[108] She observes vastly greater attention is paid to the acts and the individuals involved when the target or individuals are Western. This is problematic, as Carol Gentry highlights in commenting on neo-Orientalism:

> The othering so intrinsic to neo-Orientalism is deeply troubling because it blinds scholars, researchers, and law enforcers to any deeper realities or nuances in people's lives.[109]

The focus on Western locations and fighters, exacerbated by the interpretation of content within a Western habitus, and over-emphasis on European languages has led, with limited exceptions, to a near "veil of silence" about content written in Arabic for primarily Arab (and Arabic-speaking) audiences.[110] In a similar vein, according to Richard Jackson's review of academic publications since 9/11, "The vast majority of this literature can be criticized for its orientalist outlook, its political biases and its descriptive over-generalizations, misconceptions and lack of empirically grounded knowledge."[111]

Research on the online environment suffers a similar over-generalization and tilt toward content in European languages. Moreover, there is a need to get away from the repeated and "persistent tendency to treat the current

terrorist threat as unprecedented and exceptional."[112]   For example, despite a rash of studies that focus on branded (so-called "official") ISIS media as a relatively recent phenomenon, the Media Mujahidin have actually evolved over two decades of online activity and draw on physical publication experience from jihadist media activities against the Red Army in Afghanistan.

In the 1980s scholars had to find ways to physically gather print material, audiotapes, VHS and later DVD. However, the growing use of the internet by the jihadist movement since the 1990s created the opportunity for sympathizers and scholars around the world to accesses, read, watch, listen and engage with that content digitally. What began as electronic scans of print material and video content transferred from VHS and DVD, is now a digital publishing system delivering content simultaneously in physical and digital form.

The movement has a strong sense of history. Through an awareness of the information operations against them and the tradition of reflection on their previous encounters, the jihadist movement has continued to evolve. The Media Mujahidin continue to shift techniques, tactics and platforms through which they can propagate their faith and religious instruction (to give *da'wa*) and ensure a persistent online presence for their content.[113] The struggle for survival has driven the evolution of tactics on the electronic front (*ribat*). Public diplomacy and strategic communications responses must be cognizant of and anticipate the media experiences that have influenced the development of the Media Mujahidin.

1.2 Reading Their Lips

Basing public diplomacy initiatives on a robust understanding of the information ecosystem requires more than peering down soda straws at a few handpicked

Quotes from *Al-Naba Magazine*.

Image produced by al-Taqwa using quotations from
al-Nabaa (May 2018).

examples, or focusing on narrow time frames. It also requires an analytic framework that is not overwhelmed by European and particularly an English-language dominated Western habitus. Jihadist groups fight using their own concepts, historical references and strategies developed during years of recursive reflection about physical battles and previous encounters on the electronic *ribat*. As Paz concluded in "Reading Their Lips:"

> The long Jihad, which the West—and indeed much of the world—is currently facing uses the Internet to provide both Jihadists and us, a wide spectrum of diversified information. Western analysts can learn more about modern Jihad by *reading the lips of Jihadi clerics, scholars, operatives, commanders, leaders*, as well as the response of their growing audience. Improving their ability to do so, and above all in the original language, must be a priority.[114]

One of the fundamental requirements for a nuanced interpretation of the way the movement operates is an understanding of the underlying jihadist concepts on which they draw. No public diplomacy or "counter-narrative" initiative can expect to counter the impact of the jihadist movement until it reflects an understanding of what the movement is actually trying to achieve. The following sections examine important terms that underpin the activity of the Media Mujahidin, their concept of success (victory), their purpose (*da'wa*), the fronts on which they fight (*ribat*), their self-image (*murabiteen*) and the resultant tactics (*ghazwa*).[115]

Victory

A key aspect of any struggle is how victory occurs within the minds of an adversary, and when an adversary is likely to believe it has been victorious or defeated. In other words,

what does success look like in an adversarial struggle? For the jihadist movement, victory is a multifaceted concept, the timeline for which extends to a spiritual dimension beyond death. Yusuf al-'Uyairi noted 11 meanings of victory in his book, *Constants on the Path of Jihad*, of which only one meaning is what a post-Westphalian state would refer to as victory on the battlefield.*116* As such, it is not limited to the temporal or physical constraints of victory that dominate the mindset of post-Westphalian states. As al-Awlaki explained in *44 Ways to Support Jihad*:

> Victory here doesn't necessarily mean against their enemies in this world. It means that they would succeed in preserving the religion and fighting for it until they die and meet Allah. It means they will never give up, compromise, or falter in carrying on the banner of Islam.[117]

To illustrate this point, in 2009 al-Awlaki recalled the story of the "people of the ditch," who remained steadfast in their faith until death, a theme which appears frequently within the Sunni extremist literature:[118]

> These were a nation who became Muslim and the king wanted to force them to apostate and they refused. So he dug for them trenches and he filled these trenches with wood and he set fire to them and he would throw them one after the other in the fire until they would burn to death. They didn't win, they were all killed till the last man. Men, women and children were all burnt alive and they did not win. It was the king who won against them. But what does Allah say about it in Quran? After he mentioned the story Allah (Azza wa Jal) says: "That is the great victory". Why is it called victory? Because they were steadfast till the last moment, they didn't give up. If they gave up, they would have lost.[119]

As described by al-Awlaki, the concept of victory is clear and would be familiar to readers of other texts produced by the jihadist movement. In *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, for example, as-Suri quoted Sura at-Tawbah:

> Verily, Allah has purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the Paradise. They fight in Allah's cause, so they kill and are killed. A promise binding on Him in truth in the Taurat [Tora] and the Injeel [Bible] and the Qur'an. And who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah. Then rejoice in the bargain which you have concluded. And that is the great victory.[120]

The concept of victory is equally clear in the current media produced by ISIS. For example, a *nashid* (vocal music sung *a cappella*) released by al-Hayyat Media Center about the battle for the Philippine city of Marawi begins:

> Diamonds and pearls and palaces are waiting the men of tawhid, virgins and wine, never ending time in gardens with rivers beneath. Holding firm to the rope of Allah are the brothers in Marawi. Engraved in their heart is the love for their lord and for him they continue to bleed.[121]

Those "brothers" who remain steadfast, by "holding firm to the rope of Allah" anticipate reward for victory "in gardens with rivers beneath." This is not a new development of the modern jihadist movement. 15th century scholar Ibn-Nuhaas quoted Surah as-Saff, Ayat 12, of the Quran (61:12), to outline the anticipated rewards for the mujahidin in his book *Mashari al-Ashwaq ila Masari al-Ushaaq* (also referred to as "The book of Jihad").[122] This is the same verse to which

the *nashid* is also referencing with the "gardens with rivers beneath."

In another example of how winning is understood, from a video of the province of Kirkuk (ولاية كركوك), titled *The People Who Are Steadfast* (اهل الثبات), features an ISIS fighter who speaks directly to the camera. He references fighters in both Marawi and Mosul as role models and as demonstrations of the jihadist interpretation of victory.

> I guess it is clear from the overall situation that we have already won the battle on the field of morale and ideas, winning it on the ground is just a matter of time, by the grace of Allah.[123]

He goes on to explain this perspective in a way that illustrates the understanding of victory within the jihadist movement. First, he highlights the importance of hardship in attaining victory by linking the fighters' actions to the experience of prophet Mohamed:

> For a Muslim, trials and tribulations carry great gifts from Allah within them, we've been living under siege in Wilayah Kirkuk, although it seems like a hardship for a moment, however it is a divine honor from Allah to simulate those who were the first carriers of this message. We are under an embargo similar to the embargo that the prophet (Peace and blessings be upon him) along with his followers went through in Mecca. We are under siege just like the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and his companions were under siege during the battle of the trench.[124]

Accordingly, hardship has an important role in attaining victory:

> This is the nature of this path, this is how it has always been for anyone who carries this message throughout history. It is the path of trials and tribulations which purifies our ranks and prepares us for the upcoming victory … and ultimately grants us the highest ranks in Jannah.[125]

This theme draws on earlier writings. For example, Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir uses the following verses in his *Paths to Victory*, in the section titled "The Fourth Path—Patience and Steadfastness," to highlight the importance of struggle on the *ribat*:

> 'O you who have believed, persevere, outlast [your enemy] in patience, perform ribat, and fear Allah that you may succeed' (Reported by Malik from Zayd Ibn Aslam).[126]

> We will surely test you with something of fear, hunger, poverty, death, and lack of food—and give glad tidings to those who are patient" (Al-Baqarah 155). At-Tabari said, "Allah tells the followers of His Messenger that He will test them and try them with hardships in order to distinguish those who will continue to follow the Messenger from those who will turn back on their heels" (At-Tafsir).[127]

While coalition information operations and commentators have portrayed the killing of many fighters and the demolition of formerly ISIS-held cities as signs of defeat for the jihadist forces, jihadists interpret these events differently. Addressing "the crusader coalition led by the

pharaoh of today" (America), the ISIS fighter from Kirkuk continues:

> When will you understand that you are fighting people who view the rockets and bullets or whatever weapons you use against them as keys to the highest ranks of paradise. We chose this path to either live as (honored) Muslims, worshiping Allah as he commanded us, or even better to meet our lord; there is no third option.[128]

Western commentators mistakenly claim that ISIS does not mention losses, but here the video directly references "lost ground" but then makes it very clear that this is not how victory is defined.[129]

> Victory is not measured in square kilometers rather *it is measured by the overall outcome, including the outcome in the hereafter*, and not short-term achievements. It is true that we lost ground, but with every day that passes the reality of the battle is becoming apparent to the Muslims worldwide, that this is a global campaign against Islam and the Muslims. It is a campaign against the Sharia and the very basic fundamentals of Islam.[130]

For the individuals involved, victory is not about the area of land held. The physical destruction caused by Global Coalition and other anti-ISIS operations is used to provide evidence to Muslims around the world that non-believers are killing Muslims and destroying their way of life. By holding steadfast what they believe to be the true path of Allah, and by spreading that faith, they hope these will culminate in their entrance into paradise. Moreover, by demonstrating steadfastness, they serve as role models and inspiration to others.[131] This complex combination of objectives is not an attempt to build a brand around violence, brutality or presenting themselves as victims. Rather, it is giving *da'wa*.

al-Taqwa (2018)

Da'wa

In the context of the jihadist movement, giving da'wa can be understood as the attempt to propagate the faith, in this case, what the movement understands as being on the true path of Allah.

> Global Jihad is deeply rooted in the interpretations of the earliest sources of Islam and Islamic history, and adheres to the strictest doctrines of Salafist scholars; it is primarily a doctrinal development that requires legitimacy on the part of clerics and scholars, in the form of interpretations, rulings, and preaching. It embodies the Islamists' struggle to revive the Islamic civilization through global united solidarity and brotherhood on one hand, and the demonization of the eternal enemy, on the other.[133]
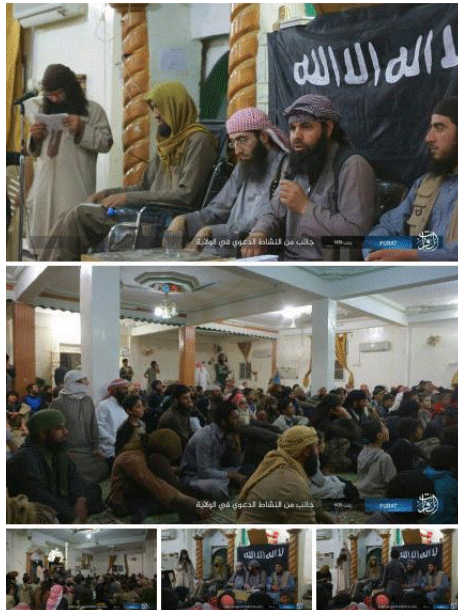
Elements of *da'wa* al-Furat (2018).

This is the purpose toward which all strategy ultimately works; there is no higher calling within the movement than defending or spreading the faith. For those who submit themselves to the theology of AQ, ISIS and the wider jihadist movement, "The militant struggle is intertwined with the duty to call upon others to join the movement (da'wa)."[134] For this reason, Ahmad al-Wathiq bi-Allah, "deputy director" of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), presented AQ as an "organization, state, and university" in a 2003 document that "clearly summarizes the indoctrinative nature of global Jihad."[135]

There are many references to the purpose of *da'wa* from within the literature of the jihadist movement. As the late Abu Yahya al-Libi wrote in his final "letter to the brothers of the jihadi media ports (*thaghr*), "We are industrious in transforming our propagation to Islam (da'wa) into a general da'wa, with the ambition to reach the hearts of the people. We shall inject [our da'wa] into their natural purified composition of their faith."[136]

In his July 2005 "Message to the British and European Peoples and Governments regarding the Explosions in London," Abu Mus'ab as-Suri described the internet as the most important medium to propagate the jihadists' demands and overall frame of reference. He encouraged "the jihadi elite" residing in Europe to partake in this venture.[137]

Similarly, as AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri summarized in his decree, *General Guidelines for Jihad* in September 2013, "It is well known to the brothers that our work in this phase consists of two sections: 1. Military; 2. Propagating."[138]

In Western analyses and commentary, the media activity of the jihadist movement is often misinterpreted as an attempt to build its brand, explained with an ad hoc description of the latest "narrative," or as a means to legitimize the actions

of their group.[139]   However, focusing on tweets, images, infographics and videos as examples of the jihadist brand completely misrepresents the purpose of jihad and *da'wa*: "Jihad is Da'wah with a force, and is obligatory to perform with all available capabilities, until there remains only Muslims or people who submit to Islam."[140]

The purpose of jihadist activity is to advance *da'wa*, or the propagation of the faith, whether working on the physical or electronic *ribat*. In *Paths to Victory* Abu Hamzah al-Muhajii states:

> We do not fight the Crusader occupation or the Arab apostates for the sake of land, but rather, we do so only in order to raise the word of Allah over the land. Any slogan raised for any battle between us and them, other than the slogan of religion, is an utter lie and deception... It is only a battle between kufr and iman, a battle of 'aqidah, a matter of religion.

> We will never allow the sweet rivers that flow in our hearts and pass through our veins to be polluted by the saline seas of their filthy creed and falsehood.[141]

In order for public diplomacy and strategic communication initiatives to effectively challenge the movement, these initiatives must recognize that information and communication activities are not an add-on to brand or to justify military action. The jihadists' purpose is to give *da'wa*, whether through force, acting as a role model or through interpersonal communication.

Enacting and spreading their theology is more than a "propaganda operation" focused on the "dissemination of the 'caliphate' brand," as some have argued.[142] The hundreds of thousands of pages written by the movement demonstrate

that theology and religion matter, and informs their behavior, including communication strategy.[143] Theology frames their understanding of the physical world and hopes for an afterlife. For jihadis, as the Arabic documents explain, life is a struggle to serve God and fight for his cause—hence claiming a jihad "on the path of god."[144]

In this context, the jihadist movement sees the physical world as an abode through which humans pass. To become focused on the physical world is to drift from the path of jihad and risk forsaking the chance of entrance to paradise. Therefore, claiming that for ISIS, the "emphasis on the utopia narrative is unambiguous,"[145] is to fundamentally misunderstand what is being communicated to, and likely to be understood by, the intended target audience. The recent reference to the "transient world" in a speech by the Official Spokesman of the Islamic State, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, illustrates this point:

> They read the statement of Allah, "If you do not march forth," (1) and pounced, and their ears harkened to the call, "If you do not aid him," (2) and they sacrificed [what they had] whether they were in ease or in hardship and whether they were old or young. They did not cling to comfort and bliss or incline to the materialistic heaps of the transient world. They dedicated themselves to the truth and worked to plant it firmly, so it developed and produced ripe, good fruit.[146]

Public diplomacy, counter-narrative and strategic communication initiatives that focus on undermining versions of the so-called "utopia narrative" permit the jihadist movement to continue to distribute their messages untroubled by what, to the target audience versed in a similar socio-cultural context, is obviously a misrepresentation of the movements' objectives.[147]

A brief review of the jihadist scholarly tradition demonstrates why the concept of a worldly "utopia" is not something they would seek to project or communicate. For example, as Abdullah Azzam argued:

> "There is no doubt that jihad by one's person is superior to jihad by one's wealth … the purification of the soul and the evolution of the spirit, is lifted to great heights in the midst of the battle. That is why the Prophet (saw) advised one of his companions in these words: "…hold to jihad, because it is the monasticism of Islam."[148]

Azzam continues a little later in his book, *Defence of Muslim Lands*:

> Furthermore, the Prophet (saw) warned about being preoccupied with the world away from jihad. He once pointed to a plough and said: "It does not enter a people's homestead except that Allah enters humiliation with it".[149] Reported by Bukhari in his Sahih. Also, in sahih hadith: "If you practiced Tabaiya al Ainiya (i.e. selling goods to a person for a certain price and then buying them back from him for a far lesser price), followed the tails of cows, satisfied yourselves with agriculture, and abandoned jihad, Allah will cover you with humiliation and will not remove it until you return to your religion."[150] Reported by Abu Daud.

> Similarly, in the sahih hadith: "Do not take Day'at, it will make you satisfied with the life of this world".[151] Reported by at Tirmithi. Day'at is real estate or craft. In this hadith the Messenger of Allah (saw) has listed the distractions of the world and the sources of preoccupation: agriculture, trading with interest and the con of Al Ainiya,

animal farming, industry and craft (Day'at). To be preoccupied with these, in the time when Islam is being subjected to confrontation in the battle field, verging on eradication, is considered Harram and a tremendous sin according to the Shariah.[152]

ISIS and jihadist adherents are not attempting to communicate that they have become fascinated by the "tails of cows" or living in a "Utopia."[153]   Instead, the purpose of their actions is to give *da'wa*, the rewards and victory from which extend into a post-mortem spiritual realm. As al-Awlaki put it in the *Battle of Hearts and Minds*: The results in the realm of ideas, is more important brothers and sisters, it is more important than the victories of the Mujahidin in the battlefields. It is more important to talk about the methodology that they carry.[154]

If the purpose of the struggle is to advance the propagation of the faith, the location of the struggle frames how the jihadist groups pursue their strategic goals. Despite the misdirected Western focus on a so-called utopia, the idealized form of life pursued by adherents to the teaching of the jihadist movement is encapsulated by the concept of life on the *ribat*.

Ribat

Contrary to misguided Western claims that ISIS seeks to present a so-called "utopia," life on the *ribat* is the life revered by the jihadist movement. In his chapter on the virtues of life on the *ribat*, Ibn-Nuhaas highlights why behavior on the *ribat* is among the best livelihoods:

Abu Hurairah narrated: The Messenger of Allah said:

"Among the best livelihoods of people is that of a man holding the rein of his horse in the path of

Allah, flying on its back whenever he hears the call. He flies in search of killing or being killed. And a man on top of a mountain peak or on the bottom of a deep valley, establishing prayers, paying his zakah, and worshiping his Lord until death visits him. People see nothing from him but good."[155]


Image from the *ribat* (July 2016).

Given the importance the jihadist movement places on *ribat*, a good understanding of the meaning of *ribat* is essential to a public diplomacy or strategic communication effort to counter the movement. In this way of thinking, *ribat* is not just an image of the battlefield but represents a way of life extending to any location where there is a contest with the enemy.

Remaining patient and steadfast (and not being deterred by hardship) are key attributes of those seeking victory on the *ribat*. For the Media Mujahidin, this depth of commitment means that account suspensions and content removal are

unlikely to cause the committed to lose interest, for their concept of *ribat* prepares them specifically to overcome such tactics.
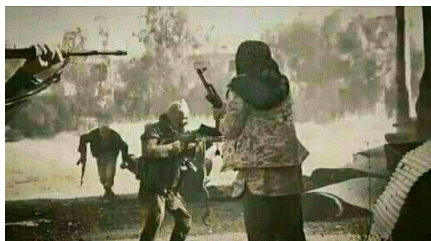
Images from the *ribat* (October and November 2016).

The term *ribat* appears in the 60th verse of the Quran's eighth chapter: the *Surat al-Anfal* (spoils of war).[156]   In his *Advice for the Leaders and Soldiers of The Islamic State*, Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir further elaborated on the concept:

> Ribāt, ribāt! Meaning, dedicate yourself to jihād in the path of Allah, to guarding the frontlines, increasing the numbers of the mujāhidīn, and terrorizing the enemy, even if you have to remain there for a lengthy period of time. And *if you're in a place where the enemy fears you and you fear the enemy, then that is ribāt*. Allah said, {O you who have believed, persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful} [Āl 'Imrān: 200].[157]

Within Western habitus, *ribat*, if discussed at all, focuses primarily on the frontline or "warfare." However, the jihadist interpretation of ribat is, in reality, much broader and deeply rooted in theology. *Ribat*, as it appears in the Quran (8:60) is referenced in the context of "steeds of war" (*ribat al-khayl*) and could therefore be translated as "tied and kept in readiness for mounting."[158]

> In order to "strike terror into [the hearts of] the enemies of God", these steeds of war are to be unleashed for military purposes and mounted (murabit—also a sense of being garrisoned) by the mujahidin.[159]

Importantly, the concept of *ribat* contains a range of different aspects that communicate concepts of vastly greater theological complexity than English terms such as "fighting" or "war." *Ribat* is a mindset based on theological commitment and a state of readiness for battle. Hence the activities of fighters when not actually fighting are a recurring aspect of jihadist content.

As Prucha noted:

> Historically, a ribat was a medieval a military outpost or during wartime as camps on enemy territory and were kept in a state of "being tied to battle and ready for combat". With the Muslim expansion towards the eastern Mediterranean basin in the seventh century, the need for a navy came to light as well as the possibility of raids by the Byzantine. Ribats were used as a network to establish a defensive line and included a sophisticated system of watchtowers.[160]

The concept of *ribat* is particularly important because of the theological emphasis placed on time spent on *ribat* by the jihadist movement. Whether this commitment plays out on a classical physical *ribat* or on the recently emerged electronic *ribat*,[161] the movement anticipates rewards in paradise:

> "The Messenger of God [Prophet Muhammad] said: 'ribat for one day on the path of God is more benevolent than fasting for one month and should death arrive upon him in its deed, when

performing it, he [shall] receive the highest reward and its endowment and protection from the two angels of death' (Sahih Muslim, No. 3537).[162]
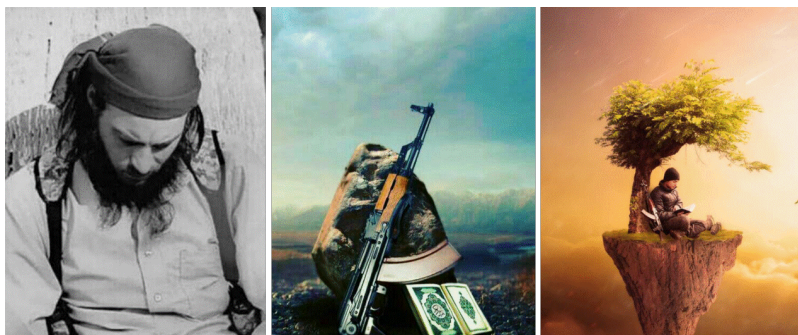
Images depicting *ribat* shared within the jihadist information ecosystem often show the intertwined aspects of faith and readiness for battle.

To underscore the point, Ibn Taymiyya, a Hanbali scholar[163] often quoted in jihadist movement, argues, "The consensus of the scholars is that ribat is more favorable than neighboring the [Grand] Mosque in Mecca."[164] Hanbali is one of the four dominant Sunni Islamic schools of legal thought and jurisprudence. It tends to be more traditionalist and ritualistically conservative on many (but not all) issues than the Hanafi, Maliki and Shafi'i schools.

Following a similar line of thought, Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir,[165] wrote in his *Advice for the Leaders and Soldiers of the Islamic State*:

> Allah's Messenger said, "One day of ribāt in the path of Allah is better than the Dunyā and everything in it."[166]

According to the jihadist movement, life on the *ribat* is the idealized way of life through which the faithful follow the true path anticipating reward in paradise.

Life on the *ribat* is shown as that of a religiously observant warrior.
Here combined with the tree is a reference to *Tawhid*, the concept of
the indivisibility or 'oneness' of God.

As al-Awlaki wrote:

> You must make the intentions of joining the ranks
> of the mujahidin. The Messenger of Allah says:
> "Whoever dies and has not fought or intended to
> fight has died on a branch of hypocrisy" (Related
> by Muslim).[167]

Al-Awlaki expands on this idea in other documents such
as the *State of the Ummah*:

> Rasulallah (saws) says: "If you are busy with eyna
> (a form of business transaction), and you are busy
>
> with agriculture, and you are busy with following
> the tails of cows (meaning that your busy with
> dounya), and you leave jihad in His cause, Allah
> (Azza wa Jal) will humiliate you and that humiliation
> will not be lifted until you go back to your religion".

Think about this hadith. It is telling us about our situation. We're busy with dounya, we're following the tails of cows and we have left jihad in the path of Allah and that's why we are being humiliated now and this humiliation will not be lifted.[168]

Banner (circulated 2018) advertises a 1998 sermon at Tal Afar from a series of sermons by Abu Ali al-Anbari. The banner again features the imagery of the armed mujahid reading while seated under a tree.

The theological justification for the broader interpretation of *ribat* and the requirement for perseverance and steadfastness in face of trials have been reiterated many times. The images, video and text about life on the *ribat* are much more than showing "warfare." The references to *ribat* draw on a long history of written work, and videos from earlier groups including a video released by Al-Furqan, the media arm of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) January 2009. This video lays out the same theological rationale behind *ribat*, while showing U.S. soldiers being killed by snipers, a framework that ISIS videos have subsequently repeated.

For public diplomacy, there is a danger in viewing theological arguments encoded in ISIS images through the "security frame" of "warfare." To view images of *ribat* as "warfare" is the terrorism equivalent of "white men in ties discussing missile size," to use an earlier criticism of the

security frame.[169] If public diplomacy becomes trapped in the idea of violent, weapons-obsessed criminals sharing images of their latest big gun, subsequent public diplomacy initiatives will risk becoming "subject to the tyranny of concepts" in which "the language shapes … categories of thought."[170]

There is a similar danger inherent in viewing the Islamic State as a utopian entity, a perception that originates from an imagination shaped by a Western habitus. ISIS, contrary to Western understanding, is not an unprecedented entity; it draws on a long history of theological writing. These documents make it clear that *ribat* represents a way of life and a religious obligation to protect and safeguard the *Ummah* and the implementation of divine law. These same documents also show that *Hijrah*, in this case travelling to join ISIS, is about emulating the sacrifice of the early Muslims not traveling to engage in a utopian life.[171] As a result, basing a public diplomacy initiative on challenging the ISIS image of utopia, or measuring impact by tracking a utopian narrative, misdirects the effort and risks allowing the movement to continue what they are actually attempting to communicate unchallenged.

Images regularly demonstrate that for members of the jihadist movement, military action does not excuse fighters from religious obligations including prayer and the observant slaughtering of animals. An additional element of *ribat* is the support provided to the mujahidin (those doing the fighting). This emphasizes that there are many ways for an individual to contribute to jihad, including providing food for fighters, building weapons or munitions, and supporting the families of fighters while they are on *ribat*.[172]

Images from the *ribat* (al-Khayr, 2016).

Images from the *ribat* (Dayala, 2018).

The concept of *ribat* also informs the understanding of content. For example, images often interpreted by Western commentators as depicting the violence of combat are actually communicating to the initiated a powerful, theologically rooted concept. This concept represents both a value and a commitment built on theology. Linking the physical and electronic *ribat* reminds those on both fronts that jihad requires patience and steadfastness at times of hardship.

Religious observance on the *ribat* (al-Khayr and Karkuk).[173]

Preparing food for the mujahidin
(Bayda [Yemen], May 2018).

The concept of *ribat* also informs the *modus operandi* of the Media Mujahidin. Individuals can contribute in different ways to the many roles that can be fulfilled on the *ribat*. In fact, points on the *ribat* represent a range of different elements working together to create a dynamic network, both offensive and defensive, patrolled by the *murabiteen*.

A mujahid stands by a tree, a common metaphor for the interconnected nature of faith and oneness of Tawhid. He anticipates reward in paradise (April 2018).

Similar imagery in an image produced by al-Taqwa (2018).

Murabiteen

The image of *murabit* on the classical *ribat* is important to the understanding of the identity and approach of the Media Mujahidin today, as it is the self-image of those on the electronic *ribat*. The image on the right was shared within the jihadist information ecosystem.

Image of horseback riders observed being shared in jihadist ecosystem during 2016.

As Prucha noted:

> Murabita, according to the British Orientalist, translator and lexicographer, Edward Lane, "also signifies a company of warriors; or of men warring against an enemy; or a company of men having their horses tied at the frontier in preparation for the enemy; or keeping post on the frontier; and in like manner."[174]

Image of the horseback rider released from al-Furat (2018).

The combination of the networked concept of *ribat* with the speed and agility of horsebacked riders in classical warfare (*murabit*—plural *murabiteen*), explains the self-image of the Media Mujahidin and provides a useful interpretative device through which to capture their activity.

For example, rapid movement, agility, dynamic decision-making and deploying tactics intended to take the initiative in battle were all elements deployed by Khalid ibn al-Waleed, (also known by his *kunyah*,"drawn sword of Allah", سيف الله المسلول).[175] These attributes are currently used by the Media Mujahidin, who imagine themselves acting in a similar fashion. Just like the classical *murabiteen*, they intend to move fast and hit hard before moving again.

Similarly, the Media Mujahidin follow the tactics from previous battles in which forces rapidly swarmed around a specific location. For example, the four Muslim armies that advanced on Mecca in 629 AD (8 AH) did so from separate sides, allowing the armies to rapidly advance on the Quresh, leaving them unable to defend their position. In this instance Khalid ibn al-Waleed entered via Khandama and Lait.[176]

The ability to swarm through their speed, agility and resilience is because they are not building a citadel, the strength of which might be measured with linear, longitudinal assessments. They are highly mobile, focusing on spreading their ideas about Prophetic Methodology and the true path of Allah.
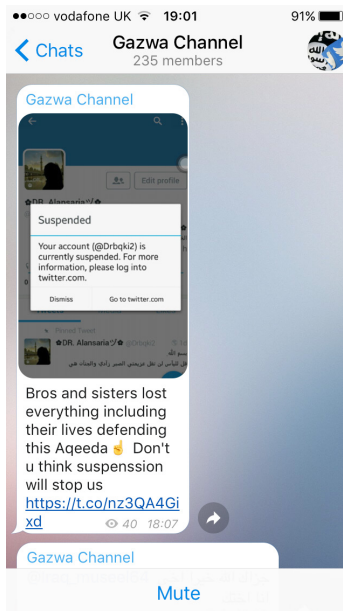
Ghazwa

The *murabiteen* in early Islamic history exploited their ability to move rapidly, have a powerful impact on the target, and move on. The concept of *ghazwa* (غزوة), a raid or expedition, captures this ability.[177] Jihadist groups around the world have used the word to describe their physical operations, such as "ghazwat al-asir," a campaign by the

Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to avenge the imprisonment of Muslims.[178] In 2006, IED attacks in Bouzareh near Algiers, were valorized as "Ghazwa Bushawi" by the "the Media Council of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat" before the group merged with AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).[179]

This image from United Cyber Caliphate combines the classical image of *murabit* with the electronic *ribat* (observed July 2016).

More recently, the same term was used to identify the March 22, 2016 attacks on Brussels. Following the attack, the phrase and hashtag "*ghazwa Bruksil*" was used to circulate a document, "Ten Reasons to Clarify the Raids on the Capital [of Belgium] Brussels," written in Arabic by a woman using the nom de guerre Umm Nusayba and published by the ISIS media outlet *al-Wafa*.[180]

▼ ■ ▼   5:16:41 PM
                                                      ⊚ 5

#Announcement

Get ready today at 9 pm Mosul Timezone for a new gazwa on
twitter.
Prepare more than one account the Kuffar will be enraged -_-

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته.
لدينا غزوة الساعه التاسعة بتوقيت الموصل

جهزو حسابات احتياط لاستمرارية الغزوة .

بارك الله فيكم

Screenshots of ghazwa operations.

In addition to military operations such as attacks in Brussels or Baghdad, *ghazwa* also make up a critical part of the online strategy. For example, *ghazwa* can be raids on specific pages, hashtags or social media accounts. *Ghazwa* channels on Telegram act as coordination points through which these raids are organized. They post the time and target for the raid that day. In addition, as in the case of the attack on Brussels, these channels often provide support with pre-prepared tweets that supporters can copy and post directly onto platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.[181] These raids seek to cause sudden spikes in activity to assure broad message dissemination. There is no attempt at permanence because they know the accounts used will be removed. In fact, they plan for it. In keeping with the image of the warrior on horseback, the users in the online *ghazwa* arrive suddenly, make an impact and then melt away. Just as the prey swarm reshapes to avoid the predator, so does the Media Mujahidin regroup after *ghazwa*.

This approach explains, in part, why linear metrics fail to capture the ongoing ability of ISIS to maintain a persistent, content-rich presence online. For example, although the *VOX-Pol* study "Disrupting Daesh" failed to locate content on Twitter, click data demonstrated that Twitter was still the source of 40% of known traffic to ISIS content.[182]

By combining the image of a classical warrior shaped by early Islamic theology and military strategy with the speed, agility and resilience of the Swarmcast, jihadist groups have been able to give *da'wa* and spread their creed (*aqeeda*).

In practical terms, the increased use of *ghazwa* as a social media tactic has benefitted the Media Mujahidin. While many commentators have interpreted the tactic as the increasing inability to use social media platforms, in fact, ISIS is still able to distribute content via Twitter, getting thousands of views for its content.

The concepts outlined above represent key building blocks for the strategy of jihadist groups. They provide the foundations from which the contemporary Swarmcast evolved. The following section examines the evolution of jihadist online activity and how the struggle for survival has shaped the way they operate in Cyberia today.

Video posted on Twitter with 20,000 views (June 19, 2018).

1.3 Emergence of a Multiplatform Zeitgeist

The jihadist movement has been active on the electronic *ribat* for many years, significantly pre-dating the current incarnations of ISIS or the Caliphate.[183] As discussed previously, jihadist groups have a tradition of examining previous engagements (whether successful or not) to augment their approach. Along with the benefits derived from collective approaches and emergent behaviors driven by the struggle for survival, this process of reflection has served to continually refine the approach that jihadist groups employ.

These are the challenges that public diplomacy organizations face when seeking to counter ISIS messaging. Public diplomacy must resist the "persistent tendency to treat the current terrorist threat as unprecedented and exceptional," as Jackson observed of the study of terrorism.[184] The previous section demonstrated the relationship between Media Mujahidin and *murabiteen* on the electronic *ribat*. This section examines how the practice of the Media Mujahidin has evolved, driven by the struggle for survival and influenced by historic precedents. Understanding how jihadist strategy has evolved constitutes a fundamental element of the strategic assessment of the contemporary Swarmcast and essential for attempts to track or counter the jihadist movement online.

Dawn of the Swarmcast

The electronic *ribat* relies on the sophisticated use of online media platforms by individuals and organizations to distribute a blend of audiovisual media interspersed with writings that help to sanction and justify specific ideological dimensions of jihadist activity. This online presence has rapidly evolved into an open subculture that also uses audiovisual elements to cultivate and strengthen group cohesion within the mujahid vanguard.

Prior to 2011, AQ had established a "jihadist cloud" that allowed AQ to remain resilient within "its virtual spaces and niches on the Internet," despite setbacks on physical fronts.[185]   From 2011 onward, following the disruption of classic discussion forum, which until then had functioned as beacons and aggregators of content, guides to using social media became increasingly circulated within the jihadist movement.[186]

Jihadist groups such as ISIS and AQ have adopted a fluid, dispersed network structure to distribute their media

content online. In this approach, individuals have opted into a loose affiliation as the Media Mujahidin, and they have actively redistributed content in an attempt to ensure it remains available despite ongoing content removal and account suspensions. This approach has evolved among jihadist groups since statements were released following the death of Osama bin Laden. In addition to applauding his martyr's death, jihadist groups rapidly began developing new ways to communicate their self-definition as the only true believers.[187] While the death of bin Laden is a useful reference point in the evolution of the Media Mujahidin, his death did not directly result in a major change in the information ecosystem.

In the wake of the death of bin Laden, as Prucha has demonstrated, jihadist groups emphasized the strong connection between the physical and the digital battlefields—one of the key principles of Netwar. A statement issued by al-Fajr on May 6, 2011, argued, "Internet is a battlefield for jihad, a place for missionary work, a field of confronting the enemies of God. It is upon any individual to consider himself as a media-mujahid, dedicating himself, his wealth and his time for God."[188]

From these initial statements to the release of *The Media Mujahid—First Steps to Professionalize the Media Jihad* by the "al-Qayrawan" media foundation during 2012 and subsequent individual guides to using social media, the jihadist operational approach evolved into one that actively embraces dispersed forms of network organization and strategy.[189]

From this point on, the Media Mujahidin embraced the flexibility of a dispersed network structure rather than the centralized "citadel" approach of the bulletin board-style forums pioneered by AQ.[190] This allowed jihadist groups to disseminate rich audiovisual content from the battlefield in

near real-time. This also served to cultivate and strengthen group cohesion within the mujahid vanguard, while seeking to strike a responsive chord among the general public in the hope of mobilizing it.[191] The ability to produce content that appealed to some users on social media was further augmented by the opportunity for sympathizers to interact through forum and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter with prominent mujahidin or supporters (*Ansar*). As Prucha argued in 2014, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook were natural choices for jihadist strategic communication:

> Whether via 'retweets' on Twitter, posting comments on YouTube videos, or 'likes' on Facebook, by embracing the emergent behavior and 'social search' which sites such as Twitter and Facebook facilitate, anyone can connect with and disseminate propaganda content outside of the 'classical forums'.[192]

Another "Twitter guide" (dalil Twitter) posted on the Shumukh al-Islam (SSI) forum outlined in detail the reasons for using Twitter as an important platform for the electronic front (or *ribat*) and identified the accounts that users should follow. The guide, titled "The Twitter Guide: The Most Important Jihadi Sites and Support for Jihad and the Mujahidin on Twitter," created by SSI member Ahmad 'Abdallah, included 66 Arabic-language Twitter accounts that fellow forum members were encouraged to follow.

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The Guide highlighted that Twitter was: "one of the arenas of the electronic ribat, and not less important than Facebook. Rather, it will be of much greater importance, as accounts are rarely deleted and it's easier to get signed up."[193]

The importance given to Twitter by jihadist groups became increasingly clear when the main AQ forums became active on Twitter, promoting their official Twitter accounts on the main jihadist web forum pages.[194] For example, the Ansar al-Mujahidin network forum advertised its Twitter account (@as_ansar) on its main page, and members of the Shumukh al-Islam forum used Twitter to cheer the return of the forum after it had been removed. These were the early steps in the evolution of a multiplatform zeitgeist, as at this point in the evolution the Twitter account of Jabhat al-Nusra was most frequently followed by other jihadist accounts. Others prominent Twitter accounts amongst jihadists included Walid (Muhammad) al-Hajj, a "former Guantanamo detainee and eyewitness of the Qila-e-Jangji massacre in Afghanistan" and a user who called themselves 'Abdallah bin Muhammad on the classical jihadist forums.[195]

The 11th issue of *Inspire* magazine, released by AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in May 2013, also highlighted the addition of Twitter to the range of communication options. The magazine had a section, "AQTweets," which had a colorful picture commemorating Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

> In the picture, the Boston bomber is depicted as sending an SMS from paradise to his mother: "My dear mom, I will lay down my life for Islam. I'm gonna die for Islam Inshaa Allah."

Reactions taken from Twitter include the user Abu Shamel, who stated: "Allahu Akbar, I feel so happy, only 2 soldiers of Allah defeated America, it's army & #intel America can never stop the decree of Allah."

The magazine took credit for having successfully inspired not only the Boston bombers, but also the Woolwich assailants, in a reasoning phrased as an "eye for an eye," revenge for the occupation of Islamic countries and the deployment of unmanned drones.[196]

That "eye for an eye" logic has become familiar through phrases such as bringing the "flames of war" to Western homes as well as through imagery that depicts the imminent destruction of European cities just as towns and cities in Iraq and Syria have been destroyed by the fighting on the ground.

These images show imagined attacks on London
(observed March 2017).

In 2013, when jihadist forums were more routinely offline, jihadi ideologue Abu Sa'd al-'Amili lamented the decline in the activity on various forums and encouraged users to return.[197] As Cole Bunzel concluded:

Social media has probably benefited the state of online global jihad by exposing the jihadi message

to more potential sympathizers and recruits. This has had the effect of decentralizing the online jihadi environment, leading to relatively less participation on the forums in the form of discussion and analysis. But the forums are hardly in a state of disrepair; comments and analyses are constantly being posted, often in a parallel effort with Facebook and Twitter jihadi accounts.[198]

The transition from forum-centric communication to the increasing use of social media provides key insights that directly relate to the contemporary assessment of jihadist groups. First, the jihadist movement evolved to adopt a more decentralized communication model, owing to an earlier wave of disruption. Second, placing emphasis on the decline of a single form of communication as representing an overall decline or collapse in impact does not provide the full story. In fact, the struggle for survival resulting from disruption motivated jihadist groups to seek out alternatives, which subsequently turned out to have greater utility than the forum-centric approach. This was the inception of the Swarmcast and the first warning that the movement that may have seemed degraded has, in fact, reconfigured and is now stronger.

Trending on Twitter

The social media content produced by ISIS, similar to other jihadist groups, has two main strands: one to reach a mass audience to inspire mass mobilization, and the other to galvanize their vanguard.[199] In an early example of content sharing by the jihadist vanguard, the announcement of a drone strike that killed about 40 AQAP members on April 21, 2014 was shared via Twitter.[200] Shortly after, on April 24, 2014, jihadi-linked accounts on Twitter started posting pictures and names of the alleged slain AQAP fighters using the hashtag شهداء_القصف_الأميركي_باليمن# . As a beacon for the content

about this specific event, the hashtag, which translated as "the martyrs of the American strike on Yemen," appeared between April 24–27. Retweeting of this tag took place in two clusters, which highlighted the likely affiliation to ISIS or AQAP.[201] This interaction between highly initiated members of the vanguard drew little attention from researchers and commentators, but other activities would draw much greater attention to the Swarmcast.

In 2014 much was made of the ISIS Twitter app, "The Dawn of Glad Tidings" (*Fajr al-basha'ir*).[202] As reported at the time, the "app, an official ISIS product promoted by its top users, is advertised as a way to keep up on the latest news about the jihadi group."[203] Despite the hype about the app among journalists, the automated delivery of content was a small part of a much wider human-centric approach in which the Media Mujahidin work collectively to ensure their content has a persistent online presence. Subsequent events would highlight the emergence of the "Swarmcast" and the importance of the relationships created by the users behind the screens rather than the headline-grabbing technological gadgetry.

A hashtag campaign initiated during late spring 2014 and intended to build a mass public show of support for ISIS provides an instructive example. The campaign included the tag #AllEyesOnISIS, which aimed to act as a beacon while garnering exposure and support from a mainly English-language audience. A similar tag, (حملة_المليار_مسلم_لنصرة_الدولة_الإسلامية#), which translates to "#The Campaign of a Billion Muslims to Support the Islamic State," sought similar mass reach and exposure in Arabic and was the more heavily used of the two tags. Within the data was another tag, "#live_the_cause," through which individuals were encouraged to take action—similar to the now more familiar, "Kill them where you find them" ISIS content.

Co-opting Mainstream Tags

Jihadi media activists and planners, however, are keen to spread their content, to give *da'wa*, to a global audience. To do this, ISIS and Syrian rivals Jahbat al-Nusra (JN) have attempted to co-opt trending or popular tags to increase the reach of their message. This was the case with the #AllEyesOnISIS campaign in which ISIS combined trending tags with its own to create a beacon with the potential to distribute content to a significantly wider audience.
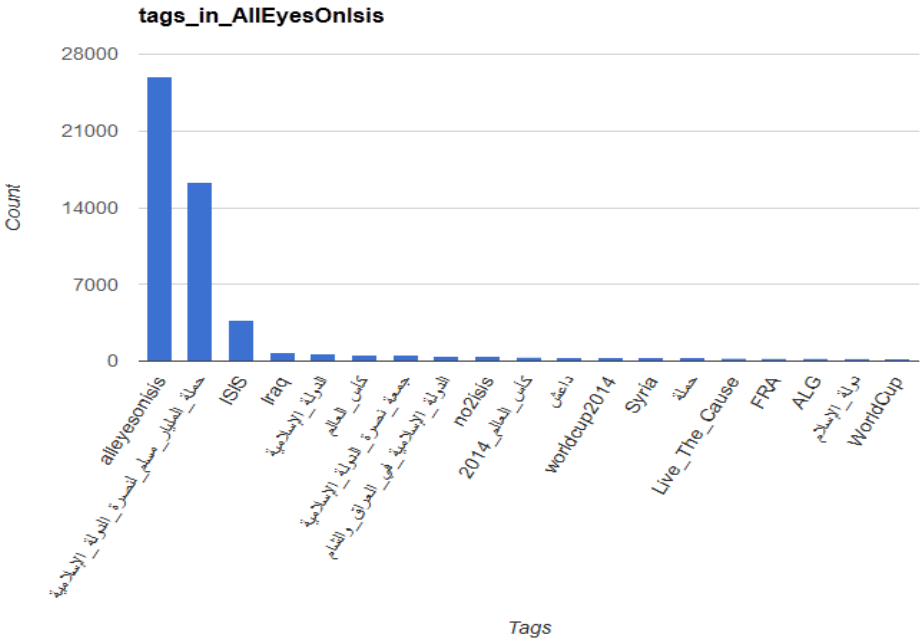
Co-use of tags with "All Eyes on ISIS."

The data on #AllEyesOnISIS shows ISIS supporters combined specific tags with reference to the FIFA World Cup in both Arabic and English. These hashtags were used

in combination with hardcore jihadist tweets. As the jihadist movement and the Swarmcast garnered greater attention on social media, those opposed to ISIS used #NO2ISIS alongside #AllEyesOnISIS to inject anti-ISIS messages into the stream of ISIS-inspired content.

The metadata encoded into each tweet reveals the service used to author that tweet. In the midst of the journalistic buzz created around "The Dawn of Glad Tidings" app, data on both #AllEyesOnISIS and حملة_المليار_مسلم_لنصرة_الدولة_الإسلامية# show that the majority of tweets were produced by mainstream apps and services. This indicated that humans rather than bots produced most of the tweets and that the jihadist movement had already engaged in a social media war built on the ability to swarm rapidly. These early incarnations of what would later become Telegram-coordinated *ghazwa* facilitated the transfer of information through a particular beacon before rapidly dispersing.

The transfer of information is socially mediated; information flows predominantly through the relationships between humans. Interaction on Twitter, such as retweets and @mentions, can be represented on a network graph. In the early iterations of the jihadist Swarmcast, the network coalesced around a few prominent accounts and a greater number of less influential users. These accounts were frequently interconnected, either directly or through a mutually shared connection.

Even at this relatively early stage, the networked structure of ISIS media distribution indicated that the suspension of a few important accounts would have little impact on the flow of information through the network as a whole.[204]   While the release of a new gadget or a surge in tweets might grab the headlines, the underlying dispersed network actually provided the ISIS social media effort with resilience and the ability to rapidly disseminate content.

No Respite

In the wake of the growing profile of ISIS and the jihadist movement generally, social media companies, including Twitter, began removing some accounts and content. This initially slow removal of content meant that ISIS was able to distribute a video via YouTube and get over 100,000 views before it was removed. This happened with the release of the now-famous video (صليل الصوارم 4) *Salil al-Sawarim* (*SAS Part 4*) in May 2014.[205]

> In the first twenty-four hours after the video was posted on YouTube, it was viewed 56,998 times with an average user watching a little over 17 minutes of the hour-long film. By Monday morning when the video file was eventually removed from YouTube, this single posting of the video on YouTube had been viewed over 150,000 times with users collectively spending well over 680 days watching this single version of the video.[206]

While analysts like J.M. Berger believed "that Twitter suspensions have seriously degraded IS ability to game hashtags and distribute content,"[207] it is now clear this was a wildly optimistic appraisal. In 2017 and 2018 researchers have continued to publish studies on jihadist use of Twitter, and politicians are still pressuring social media companies to remove extremist content. This demonstrates the resilience of the Media Mujahidin.[208] Just as the "degradation" of the classical forum forced the Media Mujahidin to reconfigure, so too the Swarmcast evolved to ensure their persistent presence in the face of Twitter account removal. In the struggle for survival, the Media Mujahidin have adapted to leverage both their speed and their use of network structures that result from the relational, or social, aspects of social media.

The messaging surrounding the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 further demonstrates the degree to which ISIS has adapted to and profited from the use of Twitter and the internet broadly. Thanks to their speed and agility, in the immediate aftermath of the Paris attacks the Media Mujahidin were able to rapidly share content and disseminate information before platform owners could react and, in so doing, outmaneuvered those seeking to produce "counter-narratives."

As news of the attacks spread rapidly via #Paris and #ParisAttacks, ISIS used an Arabic tag: باريس_تشتعل# or "Paris burns." Use of the tag spiked rapidly, followed by an equally rapid decline.
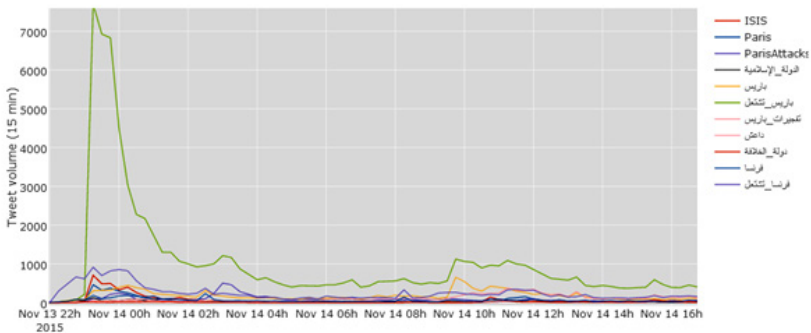
Tracking the use of tags on Twitter following the attack on Paris.

In this instance, users opposed to ISIS tried to prevent information dissemination by flooding the hashtags used by the Media Mujahidin. This meant the volume of tweets containing the hashtag was much greater than just those produced by ISIS sympathizers. Despite these attempts to flood hashtags with anti-ISIS content and the suspension by Twitter of pro-ISIS accounts, the Media Mujahidin and ISIS sympathizers were able to disseminate their content.

The ability to interact despite attempts at disruption originates in the relational behavior of ISIS sympathizers.   Here, the network graph contains loose clusters of a few "influential" non-ISIS users who are retweeted by accounts that only engage with a single user in the network. In contrast, the pro-ISIS group is represented by a single cluster with
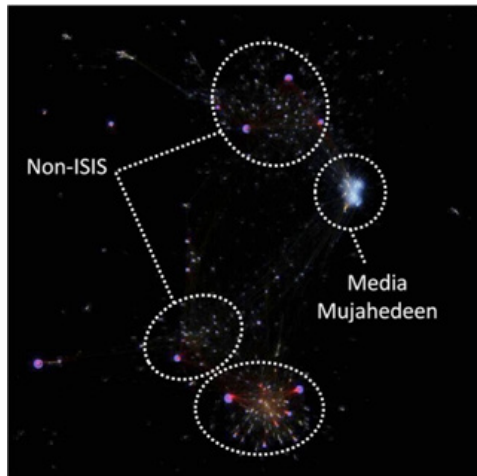
Network graph of retweets observed about the Paris attacks.

a more decentralized or dispersed structure in which there are many less influential users rather than a few "influential" users. This level of interconnection and dispersed structure provides greater resilience to the ISIS cluster as it allows the network as a whole to continue to function despite the loss of some important nodes.[209]

Focusing on the cluster of Media Mujahidin, the usernames collectively make their affiliation clear, emphasizing the importance of being able to recognize the encoded meaning. For example:

1. **ezzislams** = *izzat al-Islam* => might of Islam
2. **Ansar** => reference to the helpers or supporters of the prophet in Medina
3. **alwa3lalislaml** = *al-wala li-Islam* => loyalty for Islam
4. **moslim_1994** => identifying themselves as Muslim
5. **5elafa011** = *khilafa*
6. **nora_aldosari78** = the light of the Saudi tribe of Dosar, a name that often appeared in AQAP 1.0 material
7. **baqya518** = *baqiyah/baqiyya* => from the jihadist slogan, baqiyah wa tatamadad, to remain and grow
8. **almusthmer** = *al-mustammar* => continuation in sense of *baqiyya*
9. **dola24887** => *dawla*, *Diyala* and *Salah ad-Din* are references to provinces in Iraq
10. **rebhy3** = might be *rabhi* => he who gains something invaluable (entry to paradise)
11. **kansa_144** => reference to female prophetic companion al-Khansaa and name of female ISIS police

The data on the sharing of URLs to known ISIS content via Twitter echoes earlier findings about the importance of rapid dissemination. ISIS sympathizers were still able to locate and share content rapidly even in the face of suspensions and attempts to flood hashtags.

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, Justpaste.it and Shortwiki functioned as aggregators through which users could find the storage locations for individual videos. Apart from the YouTube link, content on these sites remained available for at least 10 days after the attacks. Despite the increased pressure on pro-ISIS accounts owing to the success and visibility of the swarm, the evolution in strategy meant content dissemination outpaced account removal, network structure provided resilience, and the aggregators remained available for many days.
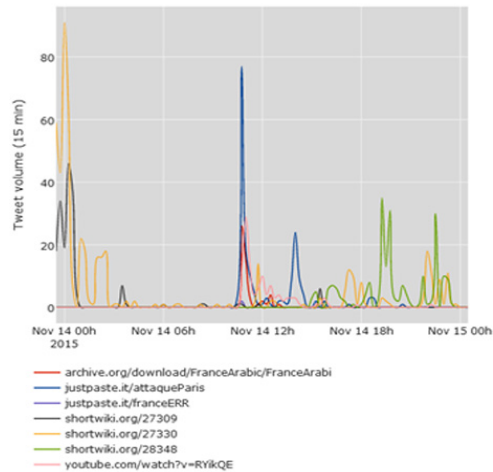
Volume of ISIS content shared via specific URL.

It is possible to think of spikes in social media content as mostly noise or even to suggest that most of them are produced by bots (such as was suggested about the "Dawn of Glad Tidings" app) rather than humans. However, evidence for the human element of the Swarmcast came through the large number of internet users who clicked on links shared as part of the ISIS multiplatform strategy. One of the post-Paris videos, officially titled *No Respite* in English, demonstrated the extent to which the Swarmcast had been able to distribute content to a large number of internet users.

Banner used to promote the video *No Respite*.

The Arabic video title translates as "don't wait" which, in combination with the image of a fighter disrespectfully resting his foot on "America," is intended to communicate that ISIS is ready to fight U.S. forces on the ground and is effectively asking, "bring it on ... what are you waiting for?"
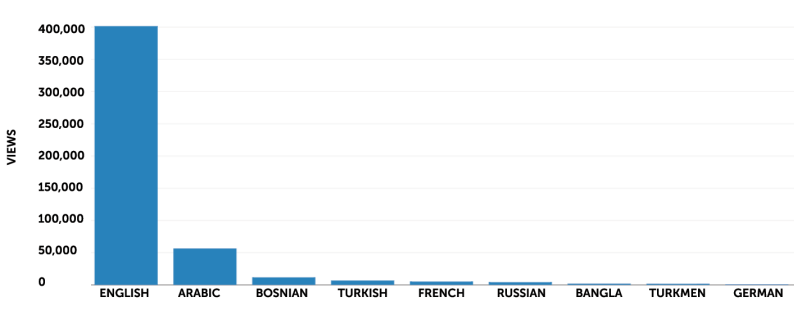
Volume of views on Archive.org by language.

This video, available in multiple languages, has been downloaded or viewed approximately half a million times across multiple postings on *Archive.org* alone. The version in English was viewed around 400,000 times and in Arabic over 50,000 times. In addition, the video was also available on Liveleak, Videopress and YouTube.[210]

While some believed they had "anecdotally seen IS's social network become less cohesive," the dissemination of content following the November 2015 attacks showed that claims of decline and degradation were premature.[211] Because the names of ISIS videos are fairly esoteric, merely Googling random phrases is unlikely to deliver the latest videos, and links are often equally obscure. 400,000 views

of a single video post on a single platform, all occurring in just a few days, is a strong indication that users were being told through the Swarmcast where to find the video.

These and other examples, including an analysis of 3.4 million tweets, demonstrate that the Media Mujahidin have continued to evolve.[212]   The Swarmcast focused on their strategic goal of distributing content as part of *da'wa*. It has enabled the Media Mujahidin to adopt a multiplatform strategy with system-wide emergent structures and collective behaviors to ensure a persistent presence for their content.

Speed of Dissemination

In addition to understanding how the relationships between accounts and the multiplatform zeitgeist allowed the Swarmcast to maintain a persistent internet presence, measuring the impact of disruption at a strategic level depends on identifying just how fast content is shared on a platform (or domain).[213] A focus on the length of time content is shared and how rapidly that content stops being shared will indicate whether removing it disrupts information distribution in a meaningful way.

One approach to this measurement is to calculate how long after the initial observation of a post or URL being shared do subsequent re-shares appear.[214] This data can be displayed as volume over time, in which sharp spikes highlight the peaks in sharing (as in the examples above). However, to make comparison between events, this data must be normalized to time since first observation and the proportion of total observations.[215]   The averages of a range of tweets or URL can then be used to produce a comparable velocity of content for specific events.

Two speeches by an ISIS leader released in July and November 2014 demonstrate how quickly news can spread,

and equally important, how rapidly the Media Mujahidin moved on to sharing other information or content.[216] Using the distribution of the most retweeted content from pro-jihadist accounts, the line in red below represents the median value, with the box and whisker showing the quartiles to illustrate the level of variation in the data. Despite there being comparatively little content removal on Twitter at the time, the median value passes 80% of all observations within an hour and reaches near complete distribution in under two hours. This means that information transmission by the Media Mujahidin (the sharing of tweets) occurs rapidly.
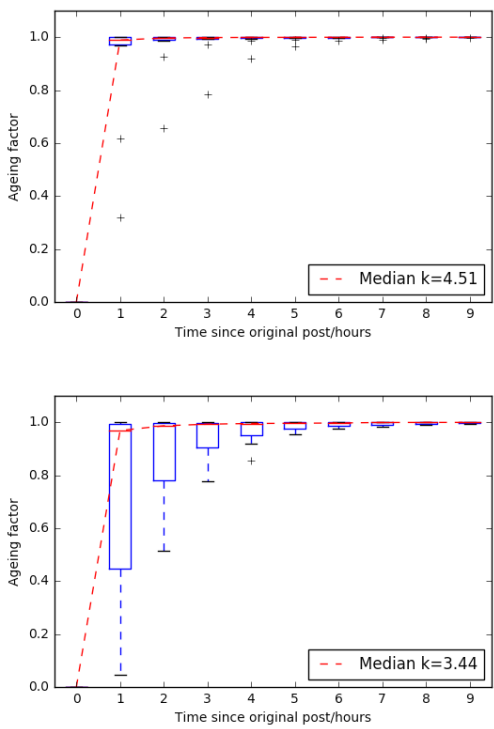
Velocity of distribution of tweets from speeches in
July and November 2014.

The most shared URLs associated with the November speech show a similar, if slightly slower, velocity of distribution. These URLs led to specific content stores from which audio and text versions of the speech, including English translations, could be downloaded, along with a Justpaste.it page that aggregated more links to the content. These URLs reach near complete distribution within three hours, and the median had passed 80% within two hours.
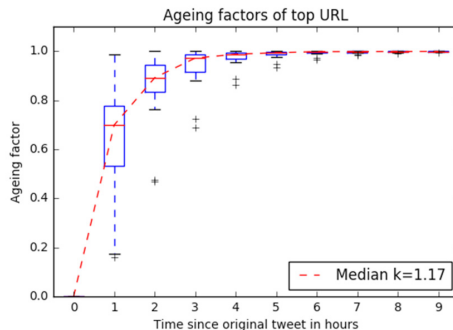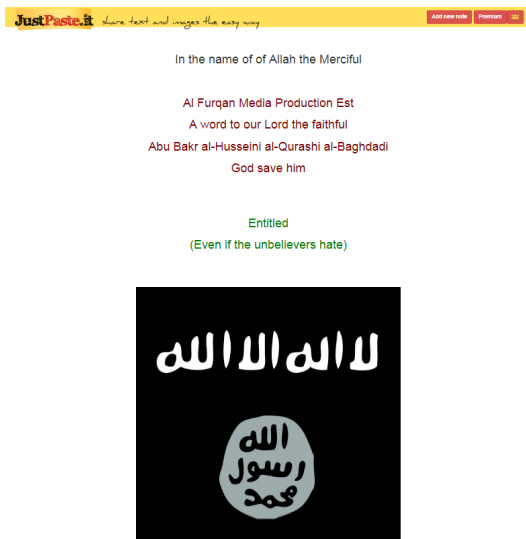
Justpaste.it page and velocity of URL-sharing.

One may wonder whether users stopped sharing the links because these URLs had been removed. However, in 2014 the general level of disruption was low, and as late as 2017 UK Prime Minister Theresa May told major platform providers that the government would like the time taken for removal to be "reduced to two hours."[217] In this specific case, one of the Justpaste.it URLs that aggregated the links to content was still live in January 2018—as was one of the links to the audio version of the speech.[218] For this example at least, users ceased to tweet links for reasons other than the removal of content.

Following the attack in Paris in November 2015, information spread via Twitter. Using the tweets from the cluster of Media Mujahidin (as discussed earlier), the velocity of the most retweeted tweets and URL is shown below. Despite efforts of anti-ISIS activists to flood IS hashtags to make it hard for them to locate content, the URL passed 80% distribution within two hours, with the retweets taking slightly longer (three hours).

This analysis shows just how rapidly information spreads: during the period in which the Media Mujahidin were Twitter-centric, it reached saturation within two to four hours. By the time most attempts at limiting the flow of information took effect, the Media Mujahidin had already stopped sharing it. The point at which the Media Mujahidin had stopped sharing the links can be used as an indication that the content had reached such a wide range of internet users that it was now persistently available. Any removal after this time had the effect of clearing up platforms so the content was no longer where it was originally posted, but the content could now be reposted many times over and even uploaded on request.

Conclusion

As the sources and instruments of power have adapted to an evolving information age, so too has the power of a group to exert influence. The jihadist movement is one that combines a long history of theological writing and strategic thought with new information technologies.

Douglas Rushkoff predicted that dissident groups would use technological innovations and the networks of our postmodern society in unconventional ways toward subversive goals.[219] Calibrating public diplomacy to engage in this new Netwar requires a recognition that Netwar in Cyberia entails a struggle "in which the actors are no longer just states, and raw power can be countered or fortified by information power. The mighty will continue to prevail, but the sources, instruments and measures of that might are dramatically changed."[220]

Some researchers have focused on ISIS disseminating their "brand" or a "utopian narrative." Similarly, some communication efforts have sought to undermine what is claimed as a "utopian picture of life under Daesh rule," or what Rex Tillerson referred to as the "false utopian vision." However, jihadist groups use information power for *da'wa*, the purpose toward which jihad is conducted.

As Abdullah Azzam argued, "Jihad is Da'wah with a force, and is obligatory to perform with all available capabilities, until there remains only Muslims or people who submit to Islam."[221]   Giving *da'wa* on the electronic *ribat* follows a clearly defined logic that the "Internet is a battlefield for jihad, a place for missionary work, a field of confronting the enemies of God."[222] Echoing this, al-Awlaki recognized that "the internet has become a great medium for spreading the call of Jihad and following the news of the mujahideen."[223]

In this influence-based conflict, the Media Mujahidin have remained and endured for almost four years after commentators first began pronouncing the degradation or decline of their activities. During this time, attempts to follow the activities of the Media Mujahidin have been increasingly subject to "metrification," and research has tended toward a two-dimensional quantification of their activities.

At the same time, jihadist groups have continued to evolve, adopting the Netwar-style approach, which focuses on dispersed network structures and emphasizes the importance of information within conflict. The Media Mujahidin have become increasingly agile in developing techniques to swarm a particular page or platform; in fact, swarming has become recognized as a form of *ghazwa*. These *ghazwa* (raids) follow the image of ancient horseback warriors moving rapidly, hitting hard and moving on.

Section 1.1 demonstrated that calibrating public diplomacy and strategic communication for the struggle against jihadist groups requires focusing on what the movement and the Media Mujahidin seek to achieve. Specifically, rather than pursuing a strategy to broadcast an official image of "utopia," jihadist groups seek to give *da'wa*. Victory and success are not, therefore, measured in terms of gain and loss familiar to denizens of post-Westphalian states. Instead, victory consists of remaining true to their particular interpretation of theology, with reward anticipated in paradise, not on earth.

Section 1.2 outlined key concepts that describe and influence the way the Media Mujahidin imagine themselves and subsequently operate tactically. The movement has a strong sense of history yet its tactics are contemporary, hence the information-centric aspects of Netwar and the decentralized approach to the media jihad. The self-image of *murabiteen* influences the Media Mujahidin's operational

methods. They move rapidly, relying on resilient networks rather than building a strong citadel.

Section 1.3 showed how information operations have evolved in practice on the electronic *ribat*. The struggle for survival caused by attempts at disruption has taught the Media Mujahidin to rely on the speed, agility and resilience of their networks, as the *murabiteen* had done in previous centuries. The evolution from classical online forums to social media drove the development of the Swarmcast.[224]

Section 1.3 also demonstrated that the jihadist information ecosystem has evolved to counter the tactics used against it. The Swarmcast on Twitter, for example, continued to develop in ways that defy the two-dimensional metrification and tracking of the movement. This has resulted in numerous pronouncements about the decline or imminent demise of the jihadist movement on the electronic *ribat*. However, it is now clear that these claims of decline were premature. Instead, as predicted in 2014, the Swarmcast has actually continue to reconfigure.

The experience of the activity on the electronic *ribat* have continued to inform their current activities. The experience on Twitter influenced the evolution of methods of interaction. This subsequently informed the later decision to move to Telegram as a means for communication with the mujahid vanguard. This later evolution on Telegram will be the subject of future research as part of the strategic assessment of the contemporary Swarmcast.

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must recognize the role of these concepts to calibrate an appropriate response.

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120. The story of the people of the trench is also recounted in: al-'Uyairi, Yusuf. *Thawaabit 'ala darb al Jihad*. This is quoted in: Mus'ab as-Suri, Abu. "Part One: The Roots, History and Experiences." *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, Dec. 2004.

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122. Ibn-Nuhaas, Mashari Al-Ashwaq Ila Masari Al-Ushaaq (The Book of Jihad), Translated edition by Noor Yamani.

123. Transcription from the audio of *The People who are Steadfast*, Wilayat Kirkuk. Some sentences may have slight errors due to the speaker wearing a balaclava which obscured some words. Punctuation has been added where it seemed appropriate from the speech pattern of the speaker.

124. Ibid.

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126. Hamzah al-Muhaiir, Abu. *Paths to Victory, Jumada al-Akhirah 1438*. Translated by Himmah Productions.

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128. Transcription from the audio of *The People who are Steadfast*, Wilayat Kirkuk. Some sentences may have slight errors due to the speaker wearing a balaclava which obscured some words.

129. Within a day after losing the Syrian city of Manbij, ISIS issued a document explaining how the physical loss does not mean

that the war is lost. After losing the Iraqi city of Tal Afar, ISIS again issued a lengthy statement outlining how they consider themselves in the exact footsteps of early Muslims and that losses are deemed as temporary as "the weapon that can kill belief has yet to be invented," as stated by British hostage John Cantlie in a video released in December 2016.

130. Transcription from the audio of *The People who are Steadfast*, Wilayat Kirkuk. Some sentences may have slight errors due to the speaker wearing a balaclava which obscured some words. The video goes on to encourage attacks in Western cities as these would have a greater impact than traveling to Syria or Iraq. This echoes Abu Muhammed al-Adnani: "If one of you wishes and strives to reach the lands of the Islamic State, then each of us wishes to be in your place to make examples of the crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbour fears his neighbour." This message appeared again in (وحرض المؤمنين)   "And Inspire the Believers," al-Taqwa (25 Feb. 2018) and follows the same logic as work by Abu Sa'eed al-Britani, "Advice To Those Who Cannot Come To Sham" (Dec. 23 2015) and the earlier Abu Mus'ab as-Suri.

131. See for example: 'Abdul-Qādir Ibn 'Abdil-'Azīz. *The Obligation Of Holding Steadfast To The Book And The Sunnah (The Manhaj Of Ahl As-Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah)*. Translated by al-Tibyan Publications.

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Ali Fisher is Explorer of Extreme Realms at Human Cognition, where he is part of an interdisciplinary team that works with governments and tech companies to track, analyze and disrupt the use of the internet by terrorist groups. As part of this work, Ali created BlackLight: a cloud-based system that delivers near real-time alerts to the spread of extremist digital content.

Ali Fisher specializes in delivering insight into complex information ecosystems through innovative approaches, network analysis and big data. During his career, Ali has worked across governmental and commercial sectors an adviser, strategist and author on methods of achieving influence. Across a diverse range of disciplines including strategic communication, counter-terrorism and child protection, Ali's work with big data has enabled organizations to identify, build or disrupt networks of influence.

Ali previously directed Mappa Mundi Consulting and the cultural relations think tank, Counterpoint. He worked as associate director of Digital Media Research at Intermedia and as lecturer in International Relations at Exeter University. Ali received his Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham in 2006.

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