EXPERT COMMENTARY

Why ISIS is So Successful

MARCH 9, 2016 | HARLEEN GAMBHIR

HARLEEN GAMBHIR
Counterterrorism Analyst
Institute for the Study of War

The rise of the Islamic State has been accompanied by the increasing presence of the terror group on social media. ISIS's message of a Muslim utopia is disseminated through various organizations and outlets, all coordinated through complex bureaucratic measures. Counterterrorism analyst for the Institute for the Study of War, Harleen Gambhir, discussed with The Cipher Brief why ISIS's message is so successful, what advantages they have in getting their message out, and how the U.S. can better compete in this war of narratives.

The Cipher Brief: In what ways has ISIS' messaging been successful? How would you assess the effectiveness of ISIS' messaging in relation to other terrorist organizations?

Harleen Gambhir: ISIS's messaging is incredibly effective, largely due to its strategic emphasis on hybridized digital warfare. The organization fully coordinates its military and messaging campaigns with the support of a robust media bureaucracy. ISIS's online content, including its videos, photos, speeches, and religious chants, all emphasize the organization's core claim: that it has created utopia for Muslims in the form of a caliphate that believers are obligated to defend. This claim to control terrain as a caliphate is ISIS's primary source of strength or its center of gravity. Depictions of bustling markets or the brutal execution of "apostates" all reiterate the immediacy and inevitable victory of ISIS's paradise.

ISIS's bureaucracy in Iraq and Syria supports efforts to broadcast this resonant message. The organization has established a central media foundation that sets messaging priorities and media campaigns in onsultation with ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his council. These centralized messages are then disseminated through multiple outlets, including ISIS's official media foundations, provincial reporting offices, unofficial media collectives, and online supporters. Each organization and medium reaches a different audience: some target local Syrians and Iraqis, others broadcast to ISIS's supporters in the Middle East, and others are oriented to Western audiences. This diffraction ensures that ISIS gains credibility amongst different populations even as its central message is repeated constantly.

ISIS's online operations have already inspired other terrorist groups and will likely continue to do so. Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN) released the first issue of its English-language magazine Risalah in July 2015, more than a year after ISIS pioneered its glossy, English-language magazine Dabiq. JN's magazine sought to discredit ISIS and included appeals to foreign fighters, demonstrating the emergence of a new digital front for the groups' ongoing rivalry. Taliban militants also began posting live updates on Twitter and Telegram during an attack on the Spanish Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan in December 2015, possibly adopting ISIS's practice of providing live battlefield reports. ISIS's media success may fuel a "terroristic Darwinism" phenomenon in which jihadist groups improve their propaganda capabilities in an effort to match ISIS.

TCB: What advantages and challenges does ISIS face in developing a messaging strategy?

HG: ISIS's primary advantage is its continued ability to claim that it controls territory as a caliphate across Iraq, Syria, and now Libya. ISIS will continue to enjoy global resonance so long as that military reality holds true. ISIS also benefits from its regional affiliate campaign across the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. ISIS-linked jihadist groups are also executing attacks in Bangladesh, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, among other locations, enabling ISIS to claim perpetual action and success even as it experiences military failures or internal hardship. ISIS's media apparatus is adept at drowning out territorial losses with media coverage of spectacular and graphic attacks. Finally, ISIS benefits from its ability to centrally control its messaging. ISIS's internal security ensures all media produced within ISIS's areas of control complies with mandated messaging guidelines.

ISIS is challenged by its own media success. The organization's propaganda perpetually raises the bar for shock and intimidation, and risks losing potency over time. ISIS also faces competition from other jihadist groups, as described above. These organizations are adopting elements of ISIS's messaging strategy while censuring ISIS for its brutality and authoritarianism. ISIS will be forced to innovate and adapt in order to maintain its edge, particularly as other groups criticize the legitimacy of ISIS's Caliphate.

TCB: What can we do better to counter ISIS's message, both offensively (communicate a better alternative to ISIS' message), and defensively (prevent their message from resonating)?

HG: Offensively, the U.S. must revise both the form and content of its anti-ISIS messaging effort. The U.S. and other members of the anti-ISIS coalition must agree upon a core narrative for the anti-ISIS fight, akin to ISIS's central message of having created a caliphate. This central message could focus on ISIS's failure to adequately govern and defend its people, for example, or on the coalition's support to Muslim communities. The anti-ISIS coalition should then create a body to formulate discrete, coalition-wide messaging campaigns that reflect this narrative and respond to real-world events, particularly battlefield developments. Each coalition member should provide direction and resources to local partners, such as religious and community organizations, to then disseminate anti-ISIS material in accordance with the centrally announced campaign. The U.S. and its allies must allow local partners to determine the optimal media and format for their audiences, whether online, in print, or on radio. Achieving this degree of coordination will be extremely difficult, but it is necessary in order to promote a viable alternative to ISIS's messaging.

Defensively, the U.S. and its allies should aim to reduce ISIS's resonance online. The U.S. should continue to work with social media platform owners to identify and eliminate pro-ISIS accounts and posts. It should also encourage efforts to "drown out" ISIS's content, for instance by flooding ISIS's Telegram chat rooms and Twitter hashtags with anti-ISIS content. Finally, the U.S. and its partners should continue to act against ISIS's physical media infrastructure, destroying communications nodes, and arresting individuals who support ISIS's online operations.

Media campaigns alone will not destroy ISIS, however. The U.S. and its allies must deprive the organization of terrain in the physical world, using effective messaging to hasten ISIS's destruction. The U.S. should thus embrace ISIS's example of hybridized warfare and unite military and digital operations into a cohesive strategic effort.

───────────

***Harleen Gambhir** is a Counterterrorism Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. She focuses on the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's global strategy and operations, as well as on the organization's propaganda and digital presence. Gambhir also manages several of ISW's technology partnerships. This article first appeared in* [*The Cipher Brief*](#).