The Use of Narratives by Terrorists and How to Prevent Their Resonance: Hedging, Legacy-Nostalgia and Its Counterstrategy Implications

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The deployment of propaganda by violent non-state political actors is not a new phenomenon. The use of narratives by terrorists to shape target audience perceptions and polarise support offers a relatively simple and cost-effective means by which such actors can seek to compete against typically stronger opponents. While states that confront terrorist organisations and insurgent movements often enjoy significant technological, resource and personnel advantages, it is in the "information theatre" that their adversaries have often had the advantage. The group known as Daesh (Islamic State) has earned a reputation for being particularly adept at deploying propaganda effectively and efficiently towards tactical, operational and strategic ends. Indeed, the group is likely to have a profound impact on how other violent non-state political actors of all ideological motivations construct and deploy narratives now and into the future. This chapter draws on two propaganda strategies deployed by Daesh—hedging and legacy-nostalgia—to argue that a nuanced understanding of terrorist narrative strategies can inform strategic communications efforts, whether from government, private or civil society actors, that are more targeted and impactful. This study begins by examining Daesh's use of hedging and legacy-nostalgia and its counterstrategy implications before drawing out three overarching lessons for practitioners responsible for preventing the resonance of terrorist propaganda.

Hedging, Legacy-Nostalgia and Its Counterstrategy Implications

The research field has been flooded with studies of Daesh's propaganda campaign[1] especially its use of social media and the Internet.[2] It is important, however, that the almost endless mix of ways, means and ends that may characterise Daesh's propaganda effort across time does not overshadow the overarching strategic logic at the heart of its campaign.[3] Put another way, it is essential that practitioners do not become blind to the forest for the trees. Daesh, like perhaps most modern terrorist groups and insurgent movements, deploys messaging to persuade target audiences—friends, foes and the undecided—to see the world through Daesh's "competitive system of meaning". Driven by this rationale, Daesh propaganda is designed to amplify the impact of its actions and credibility as a politico-military actor while seeking to lessen the impact and credibility of its opponents. As Daesh's propaganda doctrine *Media Operative, You are also a Mujahid* declares:

> "The media operative brothers—may Allah the Almighty protect them—are charged with shielding the ummah from the mightiest onslaught ever known in the history of the Crusader *and* Safavid wars! They are the security valve for the *sharia* of the Merciful. They are warding off an invasion, the danger of which exceeds even the danger of the military invasion. It is an intellectual invasion that is faced by the Muslims in both their minds and their hearts, corrupting the identity of many of them, distorting their ideas, inverting their concepts, substituting their traditions, drying the headwaters of their faith and deadening their zeal."[4]

For Daesh, propagandists are as important to their struggle as combatants: "The media is a jihad in the way of Allah. You, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid in the way of Allah (provided your intention

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[1] For example see J. M. Berger and J. Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*. New York: Ecco (2015); D. Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's media efforts*. West Point (NY): Combating Terrorism Center (2016); D. Mahlouly and C. Winter, "A take of two caliphates: comparing the Islamic State's internal and external messaging priorities", *VOXPOL* (2018).

[2] For example see A. Meleagrou-Hitchens and N. Kaderbhai, "Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A literature review, 2006-2016", *VOXPOL* (2017).

[3] H. Ingram, "The strategic logic of Islamic State information operations", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69/6 (2015): 729-752.

[4] Al-Himma Library, *Media Operative, You are also a mujahid* (Al Himma Library, 2017), 26.

is sound). The media *jihad* against the enemy is no less important than the material fight against it. Moreover, your media efforts are considered as parts of many great forms of the rite of *jihad*."[5] While Daesh deploys a variety of strategies as part of its "media jihad", this study focuses specifically on hedging and legacy-nostalgia. These strategies were selected for the different insights each offers into the logic of Daesh propaganda and to demonstrate the necessity of an evidence-based, methodical and persuasive approach to developing counterstrategies.

Hedging: Syncing Message and Action Through Boom and Bust

Throughout its history, Daesh's fortunes have been characterised by a boom-bust dynamic. From its inception in the late-1990s, periods of success (e.g., as an insurgency during the second Gulf War and again through 2014-15 across Iraq and Syria) have been followed by periods of crippling failure (e.g., near decimation at the hands of Awakening and US forces then defeats at the hands of coalition forces through 2016-18). By 2018, Daesh had lost almost all its territorial gains across Syria and Iraq; however, unlike in the aftermath of the Sunni Awakening almost a decade earlier, it had gained a global network of formal and aspiring affiliates across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Analysing Daesh narratives across this tumultuous history suggests that the group deploys a "hedging" strategy in which certain themes are given greater priority during periods of bust versus boom. During periods of success, such as from mid-2014 through 2015,[6] Daesh messaging tended to be dominated by themes such as statehood, building the ranks, calls for foreign fighters, stories of its conventional politico-military prowess and rational-choice appeals (i.e., messaging dominated by cost-benefit argumentation). The imagery of bustling markets and seemingly unstoppable military operations in the pages of Daesh's multilingual magazines and its slick videos through 2014-15 would immediately come to mind. In contrast, Daesh messaging during periods of decline[7] has tended

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[5] Ibid., 6.

[6] A. Zelin, "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has a consumer protection office", *The Atlantic* 13 June, 2014.

[7] C. Clarke and C. Winter, "The Islamic State may be failing, but its strategic communications legacy is here to stay", *War on the Rocks* 17 August 2017.

to emphasise themes of struggle and sacrifice, purification of its ranks, the need for "just terror", its prowess in unconventional politico-military activities and identity-choice appeals (i.e., messaging dominated by identity-based argumentation). This trend highlights the close relationship between Daesh's messaging and its politico-military activities. Put simply, messaging does not exist in a vacuum but rather it must shape and reflect reality to some extent. What is important to note with Daesh's deployment of hedging is that so-called bust themes do not completely disappear during periods of boom or vice versa. Hedging gives Daesh propaganda the thematic flexibility to adapt with changing fortunes in the field and, in doing so, imbues its messaging with a sense of consistency over time and despite fluctuating fortunes in the field.

Understanding Daesh's deployment of hedging as part of its propaganda effort has two significant implications for those seeking to prevent the resonance of such narratives. First, if practitioners can recognise hedging trends then they are better positioned to either respond with effective counter-messaging or, preferably, pre-emptively deploy messaging designed to force Daesh propagandists to respond with counternarratives. After all, highlighting the predictability of Daesh messaging can be a powerful way to undermine the allure of its narratives. Second, trends in the themes prioritised by Daesh propagandists are often indicative of where the group is strategically positioned in terms of its phased politico-military campaign and where it intends to transition next.[8] This underscores the importance of strategic communications practitioners monitoring both the messaging *and* actions of violent extremist groups to devise better campaign and message designs. The next propaganda strategy is one typically deployed by Daesh during periods of decline.

Legacy-Nostalgia: Daesh's History War

Given that Daesh is currently in a state of decline, it is useful to consider its legacy-nostalgia propaganda strategy. Daesh has a history of reemerging in cities and communities where it has previously enjoyed successes and there are often very practical reasons for this trend. One of the most

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[8]   For more on Daesh's phased politico-military strategy see C. Whiteside, "New masters of revolutionary warfare: The Islamic State movement (2002-2016)", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10/4 (2016). http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523/1036.

significant factors is the existence and persistence of Daesh-friendly net-works in those areas. After all, the longer Daesh has been in a location, the deeper its roots tend to embed in that society especially if its networks are forged in marriage, friendship, family or tribal ties. This trend is also a product of experience and knowledge as well as a natural inclination to re-turn to places that are known rather than unknown especially during times of vulnerability. Those friendly networks then act as "decisive minorities" for Daesh within the population by acting as the lifeblood of intelligence and resources. Another important factor in Daesh's tendency to emerge in communities of previous success is that the group often deploys a "legacy" strategy in such areas through "influence operations", especially propa-ganda messaging, designed to "re-write" the history of its previous efforts and play upon nostalgia to win back supporters, attract new supporters and, in doing so, lay the foundations for resurgence. Daesh-friendly net-works—whether in places where the group has held territory or even in communities from which individuals travelled to become foreign fight-ers—are key targets of this legacy-nostalgia strategy to keep those "true believers" inspired and mobilised. After all, it is these networks that will act as the chief advocates of that legacy strategy *within* target communities.

Given that Daesh's legacy-nostalgia strategy is deployed during periods of decline, its messaging tends to be dominated by bust themes (see above) that are augmented by two types of nostalgia appeals. The first is "*caliphal nostalgia*" which are narratives that venerate past politico-military successes especially those resulting in the capture of cities and the implementation of Daesh's system of governance. The second is "*manhaj nostalgia*" which are narratives that highlight how commitment to Daesh's methodology brought historical successes and promise future suc-cesses. These two types of nostalgia appeals create a self-reinforcing cycle whereby previous successes are presented as realistic goals that can only be achieved, according to Daesh, by adherence to its *manhaj*. In turn, ad-herence to Daesh's *manhaj* is presented as a guarantee of either collective success in the form of a caliphate or personal success in the form of mar-tyrdom. Such messaging will look to *synchronise with actions* in the field. For example, as Daesh was laying the foundations for re-capturing cities in Iraq prior to its capture of Mosul in 2014 its charismatic spokesman, Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, released speeches such as "They shall by no means

harm you except with a slight evil"[9] and "This is not our methodology nor will it ever be"[10], largely rewriting the history of its previous engagement with those populations. For more recent examples, Al Hayat's *Inside the Caliphate* series (2017-18) contained a mix of nostalgia appeals[11] and its *Rumiyah* magazine frequently featured the words of previous Daesh leaders advocating the benefits of remaining committed to the group's *manhaj* especially during times of hardship.[12]

Given the devastation Daesh has caused in every community that it has controlled, it may be difficult to understand why populations who had previously thrown out the group would, in a relatively short period of time, offer varying degrees of support to it. However, the fields of psychology and neuroscience offer important insights into how and why this may occur. For instance, research into the psychology of memory construction suggests that memory is shaped in the process of retrieval.[13] Consequently, if new information is added during the process of retrieval the memory itself may change over time. Additionally, extreme levels of stress and uncertainty tends to characterise the psychosocial conditions in communities previously controlled by Daesh and so there already exists a greater susceptibility to adopting simple explanatory narratives through which to understand the world and justify certain actions over others. This suggests that such populations may have great vulnerabilities to legacy-nostalgia messaging.

Several factors may impact the potential efficacy of Daesh's legacy-nostalgia strategy. First, time is a crucial factor because the more time that has passed the greater the opportunities for memory reconstruction. Second, whether the lives of affected communities have improved since Daesh's period of control is going to impact whether nostalgia appeals will resonate. Third, the activism of anti-Daesh elements in the community and, fourth, whether Daesh's legacy-nostalgia strategy is being contested

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9   A. Al-Adnani, "They shall by no means harm you but with a slight evil", *Fursan al-Balagh Media Translation Section* (2013).

10   A. Al-Adnani, "This is not our methodology nor will it ever be", *Al-Furqan Media* (2014).

11   C. Whiteside and H. Ingram, "In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction", *War on the Rocks* 27 September 2017.

12   H. Ingram, "Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-17: Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*—The Hague 8/15 (2018).

13   For example see D. Bridge and K. Paller, "Neural correlates of reactivation and retrieval-induced distortion", *Journal of Neuroscience* 32/35 (2012): 12144-12151.

are particularly significant determinants. These factors offer some useful guiding principles for designing counterstrategies against Daesh's legacy-nostalgia efforts.

Ultimately, messaging means little if it does not reflect realities on the ground. Pining for the past resonates when the divide between hope and reality in the present is acute. Delivering real world improvements in terms of stability, livelihood and security in the lives of those previously under Daesh control will be essential. Messaging will also be important for amplifying the impact of these actions on the ground. A clear weakness in Daesh's legacy-nostalgia strategy that should be exploited is the fact that Daesh is using nostalgia as a propaganda strategy due to its own failures to sustainably deliver on its previous promises. Using messaging to expose the say-do gaps inherent to Daesh's use of a legacy-nostalgia strategy is an essential means to undermine its resonance. The research into memory construction cited earlier suggests that counterstrategy efforts cannot afford to be ad hoc or periodic in its rollout. Rather, messaging efforts to counter legacy-nostalgia narratives need to synchronise regular short and long-form messages disseminated with persuasive intent and designed to solidify memories of the Daesh reality and not the fantasies the group may seek to portray. The strategic communications guidelines outlined here will be crucial to preventing Daesh from laying the foundations for its survival and future revival.

Conclusion: Overarching Lessons for Practitioners

This chapter used the examples of Daesh's hedging and legacy-nostalgia strategies to explore how an evidence-based approach to understanding terrorist narratives can inform more nuanced approaches to strategic communications campaign and message design. For practitioners responsible for preventing the resonance of terrorist narratives several overarching lessons emerge from this analysis.

First is the need for both state and non-state practitioners to adopt a methodical, evidence-based and persuasive approach to strategic communications.[14] The need for creative thinking around campaign and message

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[14]   For more on counterterrorism strategic communications see K. Braddock and J. Dillard, "Meta-analytical evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on belief, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors", *Communication Monographs* 83/4 (2016): 446-467.

design is not an excuse for free-flowing and intuitive over evidence-based and methodical approaches. At the most basic level, using a combination of surveys, focus groups and interviews to establish a "baseline" picture of attitudinal and behavioural trends in a target audience *prior to* rolling out a messaging campaign then repeating those measures regularly is crucial for gauging reach and impact over time. A methodical approach to campaign and message design, augmented by frequent evaluations and feedback loops, makes it easier to identify why certain approaches succeeded and failed as well as where improvements could be made.

Second, a comprehensive approach to prevention requires engagement by the full spectrum of government, private and civil society actors, all of whom must recognise that each may be better equipped and more credible than others to fulfil certain roles. It is the responsibility of each actor then to not encroach into the "space" of others. Of course, governments have an important role to play in counterterrorism messaging but this needs to be appropriately constrained. For example, liberal democratic governments should not engage in counter-proselytising messaging; instead leaving that to civil society groups, especially the religious clerics themselves. Private companies have flexibility where many democratic governments do not. For instance, social media companies can remove users and content from their platform which may normally be protected by free speech laws.

Finally, local community-based efforts are perhaps the most important in undermining the resonance of terrorist narratives. However, these typically small-scale efforts are often poorly resourced and supported. This is due to factors including the preference of governments to fund larger scale projects, the field's obsession with tech- and social media-centric counterstrategies that results in grassroots efforts being overlooked and the risks and difficulties associated with working in frontline communities, especially those in conflict and post-conflict zones. These disadvantages are magnified when one considers the support that local affiliates of groups such as Daesh and Al Qaeda may receive. At the very least, affiliates of these groups have a broader regional and global perspective (e.g., "lessons learned" from central) that local civil society groups may not have at their disposal. The true frontlines of the struggle to undermine the resonance of terrorist narratives occurs street by street and block by

block within communities and a full spectrum approach demands that grassroots actors receive adequate support.[15]

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[15] The Strategic Communications Capacity Building (SCCB) Project provides training and support to civil society groups across Southeast Asia in areas heavily impacted by violent extremists. Most civil society groups supported by the SCCB Project live and operate in conflict and post-conflict zones. The aim of the SCCB Project is to provide strategic and technical training and support to ensure that local grassroots actors have the knowledge and tools to confront violent extremist "influence operations" in their local areas. To learn more please contact the author.

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