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Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq

December 2015¹

Executive Summary

The successful recruitment strategies of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria² (Daesh) has become a serious challenge for the international community. Daesh employs a multifaceted online media strategy to recruit targeted demographics. The Carter Center (TCC) is working to counter Daesh's recruitment propaganda efforts by undertaking in-depth analysis of this group's print and social media publications. This will be followed by a series of workshops in partnership with religious and local community leaders. TCC has developed a detailed coding methodology allowing for structured study of each individual issue of Daesh's online magazine, *Dabiq*. All 15 issues of *Dabiq* have been examined, categorizing 31 separate variables broken down by text, context, imagery, and magazine evolution. This qualitative and quantitative methodological analysis enables the study of shifting themes, trends, and recruitment strategies. This report will discuss the significance of *Dabiq as a compliment to Daesh's social media campaign*, Daesh's successful re-appropriation of international media, and its clever repurposing of this material to enhance its own recruitment strategies.

¹ This report was updated in early 2017 to include data from the final three issues of *Dabiq*.

² The name 'ISIS' has a detailed development. Initially the title was the Islamic State of Iraq, then changed to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or more commonly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). 'Levant' refers to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. Today the group refers to itself as the 'Islamic State,' a "caliphate," based on its expansions to North Africa and Europe. 'Islamic State' is considered offensive to the majority Muslims by conflating terrorism and Islam.

The Beginnings of *Dabiq*:

Since the establishment of the *Khilafah* on June 29th, 2014, Daesh's al-Hayat Media Center has published an online magazine, entitled *Dabiq*. Producing an online magazine is not a novel approach to recruitment; Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) revolutionized English language messaging with its print media source. Daesh has learned from the media strategies of its predecessors and expanded upon them, more effectively using online social media - the retweets and postings of its supporters to spread its message.

Religious apocalyptic symbolism plays a prominent role in Daesh recruitment. *Dabiq* is the name of a village located in Northwest Syria, an intentional reference to Islamic religious symbolism. According to a *hadith*³, an apocalyptic battle will take place in Dabiq between Muslims and their enemies before the ultimate defeat of the Romans at Constantinople.⁴ As an important geographical site for Daesh, we can assume the group is goading the International Coalition toward this location for an apocalyptic battle.⁵ Each issue of *Dabiq*, begins with a quote from the group's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq." This statement aims to tie together Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Sunni insurgency movement against the United States in Iraq, with the anticipated expansion of the 'blessed *jihad*' from Iraq into Sham [Levant].

The Evolution of *Dabiq*

Dabiq has revolutionized recruitment tactics of foreign fighters through its use of crisp imagery, its thematic design, and innovative use of languages. Although *Dabiq* resembles AQAP's *Inspire*, Daesh has mastered the tactic of re-appropriating international media to benefit its recruitment narratives and propaganda. In its first issue, approximately 7 percent of its images were repurposed from previously published media. By its tenth issue, nearly 45 percent of its images were being re-appropriated from major Western media sources such as The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.⁶ The sensational violent imagery has shifted to depicting more balanced everyday life in the *caliphate*. *Dabiq* initially ran around 30 to 45 pages. As this group's notoriety has increased and international media sources feature Daesh propaganda, *Dabiq's* content had increased to 83 pages by issue 15, released in August of 2016. *Dabiq* was published according to the lunar calendar, and contains close to twice the number of articles as the first issue. The regularly appearing columns and the recently added sections provide insight into Daesh's shifting

³ Hadith refers to the collection of spoken reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Each spoken report can be verified by the chain of narrators that go back to a direct companion of Muhammad.

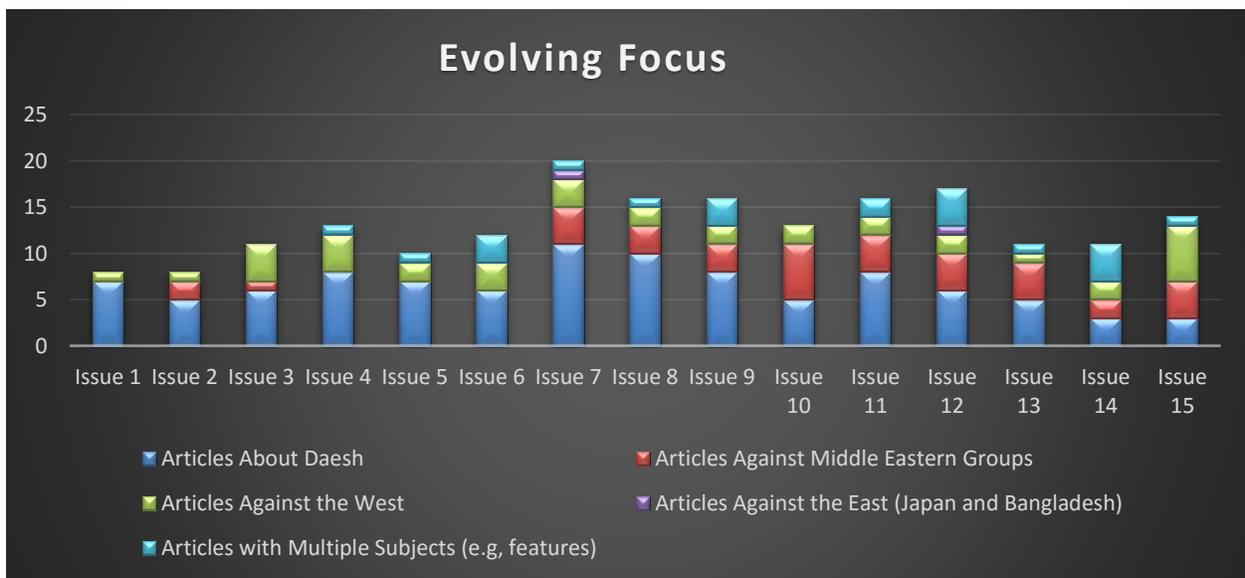
⁴ For further information on Dabiq, Syria prophecies, see *Why Islamic State chose town of Dabiq for propaganda*, BBC Middle East News, November 17, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303>

⁵ The International Coalition to fight Daesh was originally formed in September 2014

⁶ Completed Imagery Analysis by The Carter Center CRP – ME Program on Issues 1 – 10 of *Dabiq*.

recruitment tactics: *In the Words of the Enemy* and *John Cantlie*⁷ target western youth; *From Our Sisters/To Our Sisters* is written for the female reader; and *Report* recently featured a push for healthcare and infrastructure development target Muslim specialists such as doctors and engineers.

The topical trends of *Dabiq* have shifted over time. In the first five issues, *Dabiq* mostly focused inward with articles about Daesh (33), and most of its attacks are focused on the West (12). Only 3 articles in these first issues attacked groups in the Middle East. In Issues 6 – 12, although *Dabiq* still included pointed attacks on the West (covering executions, foreign attacks, and appropriating Western figureheads and media sources legitimizing Daesh), over time the issues turned their attention more towards the delegitimizing of other groups in the Middle East, focusing especially on the *Jawlani* front (Jabhat al Nusra) and the *Sahwah* coalition (Sunnis that fight against Daesh). Issues 13-15 continue this trend of de-legitimization, laying out a justification for waging all-out war on Shias, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Christians, respectively. In issues 5-13, while articles about Daesh were still featured heavily (54), there were more than twice as many articles attacking Middle Eastern groups (31) as articles attacking the West (14). This is reflected in the “In the Words of Our Enemy” section, which appropriates Western media sources and politicians in the first nine issues. In Issue 10, however, both Middle Eastern media sources (the Syria Observatory for Human Rights and Al-Jazeera) and Western media sources are reappropriated to delegitimize Al-Qaeda. The final two issues of *Dabiq*, however, reverse this trend, featuring six articles against the West as opposed to only one attacking groups in the Middle East. This is because Daesh uses its last two issues to capitalize on the carnage and shock of terrorist attacks in Europe, South Asia, North Africa, and other locations that Daesh did not necessarily directly oversee.



⁷ Cantlie was taken captive in November 2012 in Syria, and when Great Britain refused to negotiate with Daesh. Daesh began featuring Cantlie in the video series *Lend Me Your Ears*.

From its initial release, *Dabiq* has emphasized *hijrah* (migration), *jihād* (to strive and to struggle — more specifically to “fight”, according to Daesh) and the importance of the *Ummah* (community) to attract disenfranchised Muslim youth. According to Islamic tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers faced extreme persecution in *Makkah*, God commanded them in a revelation to perform *hijrah* to ensure the preservation of the faith. Daesh capitalizes on the symbolic importance of migration, that was integral to the founding of Islam, and coopts this concept drawing a parallel with its own caliphate project in recruitment materials. Using emotional appeals, Daesh alikens the brotherhood and unity of the *ummah* (*community*) in its territory to that of *Medina in the 6th century*. Daesh manipulates the meaning of *jihād* to justify its violent actions and build legitimacy within its cohort. *Dabiq’s* overarching narrative attempts to link Daesh’s caliphate with the founding of Islam and the progression of the early Islamic community – they are suffering the same hardships, must migrate, fight to defend themselves to create a just society based on Shari’ah.

Early *Dabiq* titles reflect these religious themes, *The Return of the Khilafah*, *The Flood*, and *A Call to Hijrah* (Issues 1, 2, and 4) are prime examples. In *The Return of Khilafah*, Daesh proclaims ‘Glad Tidings for the Muslim *Ummah*,’ claiming the *Khilifah* is “a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers” (Issue 1). Daesh uses the sacred *ummah* as a recruitment tactic promising men and women of all races and nationalities who migrate to join Daesh true fellowship and justice. Daesh views the world from a bipolar lens: “Muslims” and “non-believers”, feeding into the “us” versus “them” narrative.

Issue 15

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The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah’s permission – until it burns the Crusader armies in *Dabiq*.
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

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Later titles have evolved to focus on Daesh's goal to legitimize and justify its draconian interpretation of the law. This includes articles such as *Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa* and *From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions* (Issues 7 and 11).⁸ In *The Burning of the Murtadd Apostate Pilot*, Daesh justifies the cruel execution of Mu'adh al-Kasasibah with *hadith*, "Allah's Messenger said whoever harms an ally of Mine, then I have declared war against him" [*Hadith Sahih al-Bukhari*] (Issue 7). Daesh takes this *hadith out of context and misrepresents it as an Islamic legal justification* to the execution of the Jordanian pilot framing it as retribution for his participation in airstrikes on their territories. Over 100 leading Muslim scholars, signed an online letter in protest to Daesh's misrepresentation of Shari'ah (Islamic law) and stated that "the greater jihad" is not the eradication of infidels but seeking spiritual purity by controlling base human instincts of greed, lust and cruelty.⁹ Jordanian cleric Abu ash-Shalabi criticized al-Kasasibah's cruel execution, "The manner in which he was executed and the subsequent production of a video displaying his execution is a matter that opposes the teachings of *Jihad*, which made people enter the religion, not to run them away or distort its image." Daesh responded to this criticism directly in Issue 6 calling ash-Shalabi a masquerading supporter of *mujahideen* who continues to live under authority of murtadd puppets, and has no intention of making *hijrah* to the lands of Allah. Issue 14 continues this by condemning the Muslim Brotherhood organization, denouncing it as a group of apostates. Daesh also denounces the Muslim Brotherhood for participating in the political democratic process.

Daesh openly outlines its recruitment and expansion strategy. A "roadmap" in Issue 1 details this progression. Daesh states, "These phases consist of immigrating to a land with a weak central authority to use as a base where a *jama'ah* (group) can form, recruit members, and train them." *Dabiq's* role in depicting a more just framework of citizenship, social service, and community offered by the "caliphate" is meant to create a heightened sense of belonging to all Muslims provoking emotional appeals. In *From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, Daesh states "The Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices, they either apostatize and adopt the *kafir* [unbelievers] religion prorated by Bush, Obama, Blair, Cameron and Hollande in the name of Islam... or they perform *hijrah* [migration] to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens" (Issue 7).

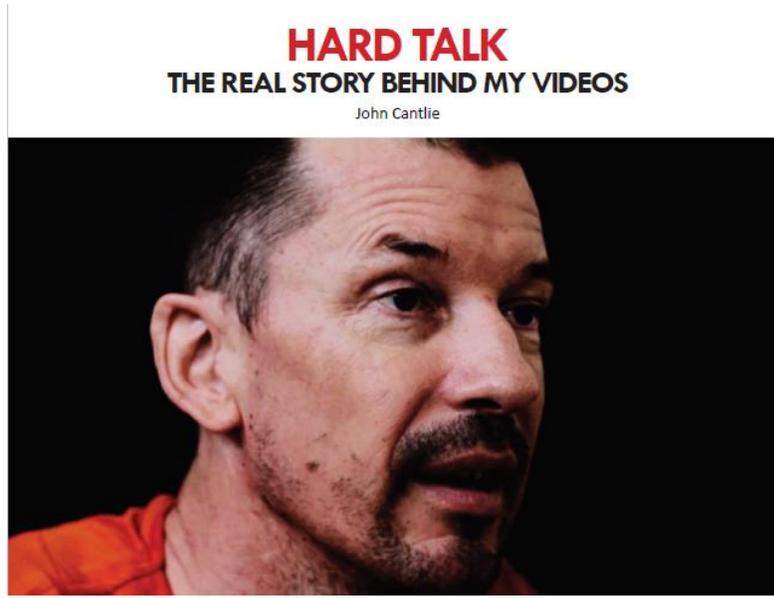
International Propaganda Benefits

⁸ The Gray Zone is commonly defined as an area of uncertainty. According to the United States Army, a "Gray Zone Approach" is an ability to adequately navigate conflicts falling outside the traditional peace-or-war construct. See *House Armed Services Subcommittee Report* (March 2015), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20150318/103157/HMTG-114-AS26-Wstate-VotelUSAJ-20150318.pdf> ; *Dabiq* uses the term 'Gray Zone' as both the title of Issue 7, as well as the theme of the issue itself, which discusses ISIS' continued efforts to force Western coalitions towards conflict.

⁹ To view full letter to al-Baghdadi, see *You have misinterpreted Islam*, <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

At the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), September 24th, 2014, United States President Obama declared Daesh a “terrorist organization.” Since this declaration, individual countries and key international actors have been divided on how to contain and defeat Daesh. In nearly every issue of *Dabiq*, both John Cantlie and the column *From Our Enemies* celebrate this international confusion and lack of a unified strategy. In Issue 8 the following quote from former U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is reappropriated to Daesh's ends, “We've never seen an organization like ISIL that is so well-organized, so well-trained, so well-funded, so strategic, so brutal, so completely ruthless. You blend all that together, that is an incredibly powerful new threat” (Issue 8). John Cantlie adds, “For the former defense secretary to be using such relatively complimentary language when discussing an adversary is a clear sign that Washington isn't so sure they're up against a mere ‘organization’ at all.”

Great Britain, John Cantlie's country of origin, has been an active member of the international military coalition against Daesh. This country's counter-terrorism strategy, specifically the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (CTA), feature policies such as “Temporary Exclusion” and “Post-Obligations” for returnees that unintentionally benefit Daesh recruitment. British Prime Minister David Cameron published an update to the strategy in October 2015 that includes an examination of the *Shari'ah* law in Britain, the promotion of “British values”, and a Community Engagement Forum (CEF). Daesh uses these laws to their advantage: recognizing the alienating effects these laws have on Muslims, and then capitalizing on these feelings of anger and disenfranchisement for recruitment purposes and as a driver for radicalization. In *From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, Cantlie addresses Cameron and his notion of “British Values”, stating “politicians claim how Islam is great, how they really like Muslims, but only “Muslims” who conform to the United Kingdom's definition of what a ‘Muslim’ should be, who fits neatly into the definition of a working democracy, and whoever does not conform to this new definition of ‘Muslim’ will be persecuted” (Issue 8). Cantlie claims they need to obey and conform to a British concept of “Muslim” has created “The Anger Factory” emotions that Daesh strategically exploits to recruit Muslims to Syria and Iraq.



John Cantlie, Featured in Issue 4 of Dabiq

John Cantlie's role in Daesh propaganda deserves a close investigation. He is seen in both online propaganda videos and is first featured in *Dabiq Issue 4* as the author of a print column originally titled *Hard Talk*. Over the course of his captivity Cantlie's appearance and demeanor have changed; in early videos he appears in an orange jumpsuit, alluding to Guantanamo, handcuffed to a desk. However, in later videos, he is in citizen clothes walking the streets of Daesh-controlled cities discussing everyday life. A recent column, *Paradigm Shift II*, focuses on the progression of Daesh from an organization to a functioning state, praising the territory's vibrant economy, establishment of law and order, and provision of social services (issue 12). The remainder of his column re-appropriates international media for purposes of "state legitimization," quoting Brigadier General Ronald Magnum from the Georgia Caucasus Strategic Studies Institute [on May 29th, 2015] saying "The Islamic State meets all requirements to be recognized as a state. It has a governing structure, controls territory – and provides governmental services such as health care to its population" (Issue 12). Noteworthy, John Cantlie's name is the only author name *Dabiq* includes on its content page, all other authors' only have bylines. Daesh understands the value of a British spokesperson, denouncing his democratic government while lauding the brotherhood and services Daesh provides for those living in its territory.

Another example of Daesh utilizing propaganda and social media to its benefit is found in the multi-page in-depth interview in *Al-Qaidah of Waziristan* with Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, that was published immediately after his execution was broadcast on December 24, 2014 (Issue 6). Preceding al-Kasasbeh's death, two hashtags on Twitter (#SuggestAWayToKillTheJordanianPilotPig, #WeAllWantToSlaughterMoaz) were re-tweeted a combined 16,000 times. Individual users, media outlets, and even Queen Rania and Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah II of Jordan sought a way to "show support" for al-Kasasbeh by

countering the tweets of Daesh supporters with opposing hashtags (#JordanianPilot, #WeAreAllMoaz). This opposing Twitter campaign saw over 200,000 tweets prior to the execution of al-Kasasbeh. It is not clear if Daesh leadership initiated the Twitter campaign, or if the group ultimately chose an execution style based on follower suggestions. What is clear in the direct exchange of the rival social media campaigns is that a Middle Eastern prince responded to a terrorist organization indirectly giving it legitimacy.

Perhaps the most significant feature of *Dabiq* is the section *In the Words of the Enemy*. Since its first issue, this crowded column has served home to words from Presidents, Prime Ministers, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, and Directors of the CIA, among many other leaders. World leaders, the international media, and think tanks provide Daesh with ample material to re-appropriate for its cause. In *The Return of Khilafah*, Daesh quotes Douglas Ollivant and Brian Fishman's work, *The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*, to demonstrate its legitimacy as a state. "The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is no longer a state in name only. It is a physical, if extra-legal, reality on the ground. Unacknowledged by the world community, ISIS has carved a de facto state in the borderlands – ISIS has created a multi-ethnic army, provides limited services, and flies its own flag" (Issue 1).

**IN THE WORDS OF
THE ENEMY**

Over the last month, a number of crusaders voiced their concerns over the power and drive of the Islamic State, its revival of Islam and the caliphate, and its eventual expansion into Europe and the rest of the world.

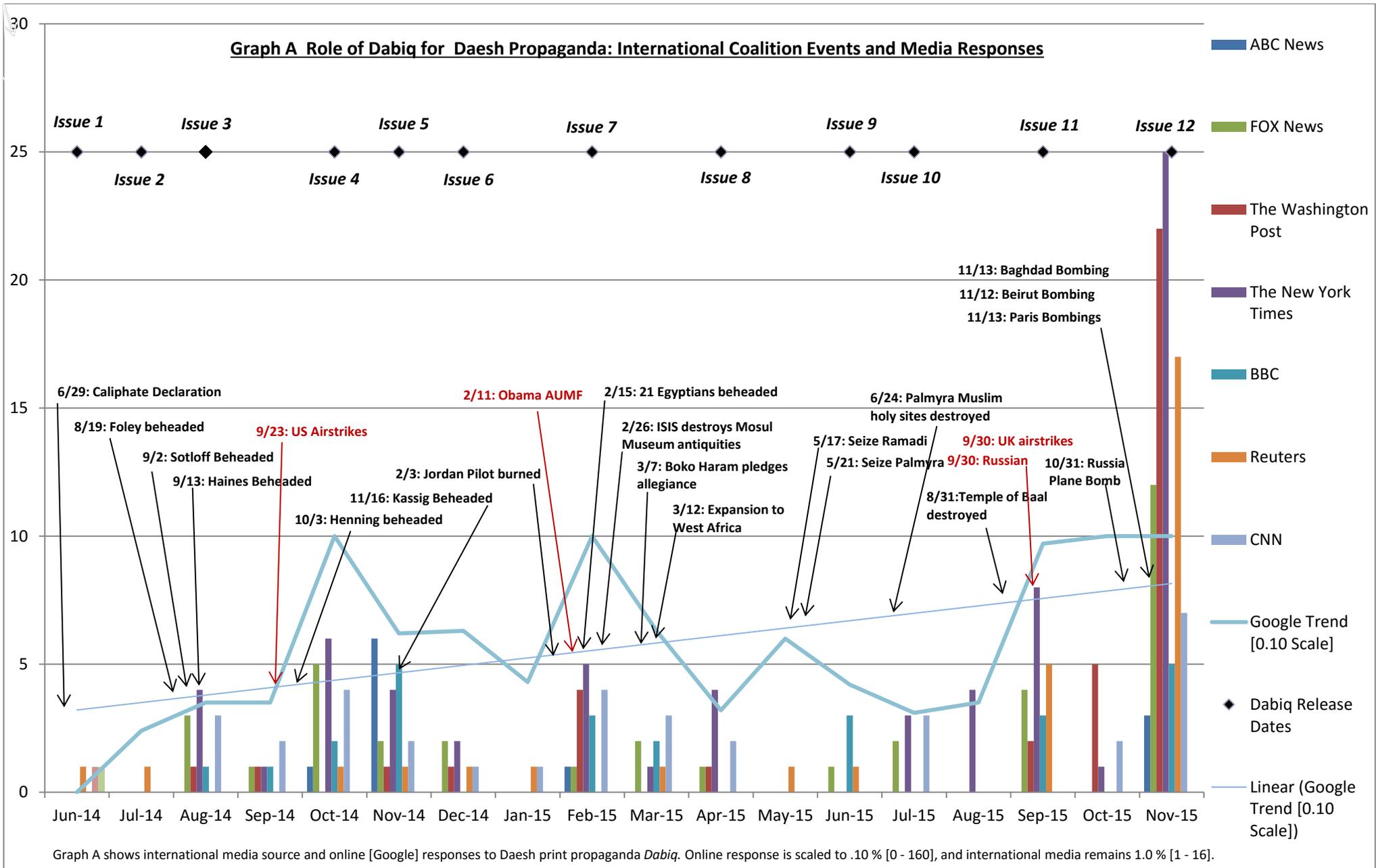
The Catholic crusader and American politician Rick Santorum had the following to say:

"This is a caliphate that has been established and that means they are calling people from all over the world to come and fight this battle. As long as they hold ground and continue to expand that ground, more and more will come. The fact that we are delaying means that the Caliphate continues to exist. They are not losing ground. They are not being discredited in the eyes of the Muslim world. They will get stronger. ... This is really important to understand. The reason the West had a thousand year war with Islam is that Islam was ever expanding. When Islam began to contract, it collapsed, and the caliphate was eliminated. Now they have established a caliphate. They are dead serious about expanding it. Unless we begin to take back that ground and make this caliphate just irrelevant in the eyes of the radical Muslim world, we are going to have a bigger and bigger problem."

The Catholic Crusader
RICK SANTORUM

In the Words of the Enemy, Dabiq Issue 8

Looking at *Dabiq*'s evolution through quantitative analysis, Graph A provides a clear association between Daesh-created media events, international coalition efforts, media coverage, and the titles of the *Dabiq* magazine. Daesh effectively creates geographically varying events to provoke international condemnations as well as gain exposure, and then re-appropriates this coverage in its magazine as proof of its political and military ascension. Following each *Dabiq* release, major international media coverage increases between 1 – 8 full-page articles per source. In addition, individual Google online searches increase between 1 – 160 times per day. This requires the use of a percentage scale, to show the depth of both media and citizen attention. An applicable example is: 1) American Journalist James Foley Beheaded; 2) U.S. Airstrikes in Raqqa, Syria; and, 3) Daesh release of *The Failed Crusade* [Issue 4]. Another association is: 1) Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh burned; 2) U.S. authorization of military force (AUMF); and, 3) Daesh release of *From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Gray Zone* [Issue 7]. A final association is: 1) 21 Christian Egyptians beheaded; 2) Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to ISIS; and, 3) Daesh release of *Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa* [Issue 8]. This chain of events has become a cyclical trend, confirming Daesh rapid media response capabilities, and providing insight to Daesh leadership about how to pique or elicit western interests.



Feeding into the Daesh Narrative

The unequal coverage of Muslim deaths in the international media plays directly into Daesh's online recruitment strategies. In retaliation for the November 13th Paris attacks claimed by Daesh, French President Francois Holland approved airstrikes on the city of al-Raqqah, de-facto capital of Daesh. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported these airstrikes hit the National Hospital, al-Nour mosque, and resulted in civilian casualties. While the commencement of the French offensive was given ample air time, the deaths of Syrians as a result of these airstrikes was under reported. With the exception of NewsWeek in the U.S., few major international media outlets reported on the immense fires in a refugee camp located near Calais. The fire left over 300 homeless and resulted in 100 deaths. In the days following, French police fired tear gas at and arrested refugees who were demanding justice. This lack of news coverage or concern for the lives of Muslims and refugees feeds into the Daesh narrative that sets believers against infidels or Muslims against crusaders. Soon after, eleven U.S governors and all Republican U.S presidential candidates made public statements refusing to accept Syrian refugees. Some changed their statements to allow only Christian refugees. Reactionary violence and fear mongering statements provide fuel to Daesh and its "us vs. them" narrative.¹⁰

Following the November 13th Paris attacks, news headlines read as follows: Italian Libero's *Bastardi Islamici* (Islamic Bastards), CNN's *The Paris Attacks: Understanding Islam*, and FOX News' *We're not Islamophobic, Mr. Obama, we just don't want to get blown up*. Muslim imams, scholars, and citizens swiftly responded, stating the Paris attacks were an affront on Islam in efforts to contain violent anti-Muslim reactions. The Irish Council of *Imams* publicly affirmed "Murder is strictly forbidden in Islam – the murder of one is as evil as killing all people".¹¹ Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain Dr. Shuja Shafi stated, "There is nothing Islamic about such people and their actions are evil, and outside the boundaries set by our faith".¹² According to the Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), after November 13,th 27 reported incidents violent attacks, threats, and assaults against Muslims occurred in the United States in a period of just ten days. Of those 27 incidents, ten armed attacks occurred at local mosques, four assaults were on students on university property, five assaults or violent threats were made towards women

¹⁰ Upon election, US President Donald Trump immediately followed through on his promises to try to enact a 'Muslim ban' via an executive order prohibiting travel from seven Muslim-majority countries. While courts struck down the order, Trump has stated he will issue a new order to the same effect. *Trump is set to introduce a new 'Muslim ban.' This one is nonsense, too*. Washington Post, February 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/02/21/trump-is-set-to-introduce-a-new-muslim-ban-this-one-is-nonsense-too/?utm_term=.a30e2e3f090c

¹¹ *Killers do not represent Islam, Irish Muslim leaders stress* by Joe Humphreys, The Irish Times, November 14, 2015, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/killers-do-not-represent-islam-irish-muslim-leaders-stress-1.2430626>

¹² For full statement by Dr. Shuja Shafi, see *Horrific Attacks in Paris: Muslim Council of Britain Responds*, The Muslim Council of Britain, November 13, 2015, <http://www.mcb.org.uk/horrific-attacks-in-paris-muslim-council-of-britain-responds/>

and children.¹³ The Southern Poverty Law Reports an increase in the number of hate groups in the U.S. for the second year in a row; the most dramatic growth was in anti-Muslim hate groups, which grew from just 35 in 2015 to 101 in 2016.¹⁴ This anti-Muslim fervor, like military and policy responses, has fed directly into Daesh propaganda. In the words of Abul-Harith Ath-Thaghri, “After living under the persecution of the crusaders, one could live an Islamic life with safety and security [in Daesh territory]” (issue 12).

Conclusion

The best strategy to address the Daesh threat cannot be limited to the military front alone, it must address root causes, as well as ideological and media strategies. Daesh's media strategy and recruitment continue to spread to all corners of the world in conjunction with the rise of Islamophobia. By understanding *Dabiq*'s role and Daesh's strategic use of local and western media to its advantage, getting a step ahead of this violent organization becomes possible. In September 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama acknowledged Daesh was successfully attracting recruits not just from MENA states but worldwide through online, social, and print media. At the time, Obama stated that Daesh's ideology must be defeated, and that this must be done by ideas, not guns, and by presenting a more attractive vision. This recognition was a step forward. However, the Trump administration has taken a hard turn from this approach, attempting to bar travel from certain Muslim-majority countries, and vowing to eradicate “radical Islamic terrorism.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, this plays directly into the hands of Daesh, perpetuating the narrative of Islam vs. the West and legitimizing Daesh by calling it ‘Islamic.’ Attempts to weaken Daesh by military might alone will not stop new iterations of it unless the war of words, rhetoric, and ideology is seriously confronted as well. We hope this article will provoke discussion in academic and religious circles, eventually impacting policy on how to counter Daesh.

¹³ For full detailed list of incidents, see *27 Examples of The 'Unprecedented' Spike In Islamophobic Incidents in the US* by Jack Jenkins, ThinkProgress, December 1, 2015,

<http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/12/01/3726648/islamophobia-since-paris/>

¹⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Annual Census of Hate Groups*, 2016:

<https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>

¹⁵ *New Trump Deportation Rules Allow Far More Expulsions*. Washington Post, February 21, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/us/politics/dhs-immigration-trump.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>

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