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Research Brief

The Evolution of Daesh Recruitment Propaganda in Light of Territorial Loss

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Executive Summary

By the end of 2016, Daesh had lost 43% of its total territory, including key cities in Iraq (Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit) and Syria (Kobani, Tal Abyad, and Manbij).¹ Given recent advances by Iraqi security forces, it appears that the final ouster of Daesh forces from Mosul is also inevitable. Such significant territorial losses pose a test of adaptability to Daesh recruitment strategies.

In response to its territorial losses, Daesh has evolved its communication strategies in three important and interrelated ways: theologically, strategically, and tactically. The Carter Center (TCC) analysis concludes that Daesh's ideology will likely survive significant territorial loss; military intervention alone is incapable of eradicating violent extremism. Despite setbacks, Daesh will continue to draw recruits to its ideology and incite violence. Unless the root causes of violent extremism, including socio-political grievances, poor governance, lack of development, rapid urbanization, increasing competition for limited resources, and long-standing conflicts like that in Syria are adequately addressed, ideologies like Daesh's will continue to metastasize via social media and offline networks. The conclusions presented here are based on a thorough

¹ "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond," *United State Institute of Peace*, December 2016/January 2017.

analysis of Daesh’s primary sources, including videos, audio speeches, and online magazines *Dabiq*² and *Rumiyah*.

Theological Reinterpretation: Constructing the Sacred Canopy

Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on theological claims, including the misinterpretation of core Muslim religious texts, to both construct religious authority and morally justify terrorist violence in the service of a larger political project.³ Theological claims buoy Daesh’s narrative and reinforce its propaganda. However, theological interpretations of events by Daesh are not static; they evolve to frame the latest developments in ways that reinforce Daesh’s political and recruitment goals. In an audio speech released on 2 November 2016 by al-Furqan Media, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, addressed the theological understandings of *fitna* (trial), casting a sacred canopy over battlefield losses: “And if we are afflicted with killing, and our wounds become many, and the storms rage against us, and our adversities become great, then it would also be of no surprise. It is Allah’s promise to us. Rather, affliction is an inevitable decree.”⁴ Extensive theological re-framing to explain recent setbacks as a divinely-ordained antecedent to ultimate victory is also prevalent in recent articles in *Rumiyah*. Many cite historical anecdotes and Quranic verses that emphasize how initial defeat or unequal force is a sign that God will intervene and save His soldiers. The attempt to reinterpret its theological positions indicates the recognition of territorial loss and the evolution of Daesh communication strategy.

This shift is most evident in Daesh’s reinterpretation of its core prophecy regarding the apocalyptic battlefield of Dabiq. Daesh recognizes that its military loss in the region of Dabiq, which it celebrates as the site for its guaranteed victory over infidels, could have negative repercussions on its recruitment efforts. Hence, theological reinterpretation of the apocalyptic narrative of Dabiq, coupled with the reimagining of its strategic objectives, is vital for Daesh’s expansionist motives. This was achieved by making a shift from the *Dabiq* magazine to a newer publication—*Rumiyah*. While Daesh did not officially lose Dabiq to Turkish-backed Syrian forces until early October 2016, the discontinuation of *Dabiq* in July followed by the release of *Rumiyah* in September shows that the terror group preempted its impending decline, and worked accordingly to repurpose its mission. This becomes further apparent in the third issue of *Rumiyah*, which dedicates an essay addressing the loss of Dabiq. What seemed to be a core strategic and theological aim of Daesh—to hasten the apocalypse in Dabiq—has been redefined in light of territorial losses. Every issue of *Dabiq* opened with a quote by Abu Mus’ab az-

² Dabiq is both the name of a town in northern Syria where a final apocalyptic battle is prophesized to take place, and the name of Daesh’s long running online English-language e-zine. Henceforth, the town will be referred to as Dabiq and the Daesh propaganda publication as *Dabiq*.

³ It is important to emphasize that Daesh is primarily a political group, even if those aims are framed in terms of religious discourse and theological appeals.

⁴ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, *Al Furqan Media*, 2 November, 2016.

Zarqawi,⁵ pronouncing that the struggle of Jihad will continue “until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”⁶ *Rumiyah*, however, draws distinctions between minor battles in Dabiq and the final, apocalyptic battle. The “final hour” in Dabiq is imminent, but delayed. Military losses are reinterpreted as mere setbacks on the path to inevitable victory: “This war of attack and withdrawal occurring in Dabiq and its surrounding areas – the minor battle of Dabiq – will inevitably lead to the Major Malhamah of Dabiq, even if a withdrawal were to precede it by Allah’s decree.”⁷ Daesh provides theological cover for its losses while warning its enemies and reassuring its supporters.

The “Winner’s” Narrative: Strategic Communication in the Online Space

Theological innovation has allowed Daesh to provide religious cover for their battlefield losses and changing fortunes, but their day-to-day communication strategy has also evolved in an effort to compete on the media battlefield. Daesh understands that it is critical to its recruitment efforts to rationalize and justify its territorial decline for the psychological appeasement of its fighters, followers, and potential recruits.

Historically, Daesh video releases have included significant percentages of footage presenting life inside Daesh territory as utopia—children playing, the provision of social services and the imposition of law and order in areas that have been in a constant state of war for over a decade. Late-2016 video releases, particularly those out of Ninawa province (which includes Mosul) have shifted to an even greater emphasis on the glorification of military jihad, often showing Daesh soldiers on the offensive against Iraqi forces.

For example, a series of two videos produced in the region of Mosul in late October 2016, titled *The Ignition of War*, present the battle for Mosul in glorious terms, framing Daesh fighters as not just brave, but successful. Images show Daesh fighters destroying Abrams tanks and other Iraqi military equipment, as well as capturing scores of enemy munitions. Another video from Mosul, released in December 2016 and titled *Tank Hunters*, features the stories and tactics of Daesh fighters in their engagements with armored vehicles. Videos like these are replete with infographics⁸ that illustrate the number of enemy hardware destroyed.

Daesh’s heavy reliance on infographics in its online propaganda serves to frame even territorial losses in Mosul as a strategic success in a war of attrition that Daesh is theologically convinced only it can win. Similar images serve to humiliate and mock its enemies, particularly Western coalition partners. Deployment of warfare narratives in videos like those mentioned above emphasize the lack of resources available to Daesh compared to the wealth and power of its enemies, highlighting the masculinity, bravery and piety of Daesh fighters. While the appeal to

⁵ Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi founded al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 after pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda. Zarqawi’s statements are often referenced in Daesh propaganda for rhetorical and strategic purposes.

⁶ *Dabiq*, Issues 1-15

⁷ *Rumiyah*, Issue 3, pg. 26

⁸ Infographics are visually-sophisticated representations of information and data. Daesh relies heavily on infographics as a strategic tool to convey its messages, as they are simple to understand, easy to grab an audience’s attention, and have the potential to leave lasting psychological impact.

armed jihad was quite prevalent in *Dabiq*, its persistent invocation as a central theme in most articles in *Rumiyah* also indicates an overall intensification of the military narrative. This indicates that strategic communications from Daesh's provincial media centers and online magazines increasingly seek, especially in the aftermath of its recent military failure, to present a "winner's narrative" that both encourages supporters and mocks enemies.

Tactical Changes: Encouraging the Jihad at Home

Generally, Daesh has been consistent in its online recruitment propaganda that all supporters should perform *hijra*, or emigrate to Daesh controlled territory. Having a territory for wannabe *jihadis* to which to emigrate was an integral part of Daesh's appeal. Also, it differentiated Daesh from al-Qaeda, which discouraged mass emigration to Afghanistan, closely vetted its recruits, and encouraged attacks at home. Given the loss of territory, Daesh is now increasingly encouraging its followers in both video and print to remain in their home countries and engage in terrorism by any means necessary. This is evident in the rhetorical shift from *Dabiq*'s initial proclamation, "This jihad is not possible until you pack and move to Khilafah,"⁹ to *Rumiyah*'s, "mobilize from your dens to alleviate the pain afflicting the hearts of the Muslims by striking the *kuffar* in their homelands," because, "it is only from the *hikmah* of Allah that he has scattered you around the earth and in the various lands of the Crusaders to see which of you are best in deeds."¹⁰ In other words, making *hijra* to the "caliphate" is no longer a necessary precondition to jihad, nor is it a theological obligation. Instead, supporters are provoked to carry out lone wolf attacks in their native countries.

To facilitate home-based attacks in their name, Daesh has begun providing instructional how-to videos and articles for homegrown terrorists. A new section called *Just Terror Attacks*,¹¹ introduced in the 12th issue of *Dabiq* and now regularly appearing in *Rumiyah*, is exclusively dedicated to encouraging lone wolf attacks. It describes when and how a large-scale attack could be executed and what plausible weapons could be used. Articles such as *The Kafir's Blood is Halal for You, So Shed It*¹² and *Brutality and Severity towards the Kuffar*¹³ attempt to rationalize, normalize, and glorify violence, aiming to eliminate any potential discomfort that may deter Daesh supporters in foreign countries from undertaking lone acts of terror. Similarly, a video released in late November 2016, *Oh You Must Fight Them, Muwahiddun!*, provides a tutorial in French, Arabic, and English on knife attacks and the making of explosives. The viewer is presented with cognitive (narratives of victimhood and persecution), emotional (group solidarity based on religious identity), and behavioral (detailed instruction on method) appeals. This shows how Daesh's print and visual media are evolving to serve, in part, as its virtual training ground.¹⁴

⁹ *Dabiq*, Issue 3, *A Call to Hijra*, pg. 31

¹⁰ *Rumiyah*, Issue 1, pg. 17

¹¹ *Dabiq*, Issue 12, *Just Terror Attacks*.

¹² *Rumiyah*, Issue 1, pg. 34

¹³ *Rumiyah*, Issue 2, pg. 22

¹⁴ Data on the effectiveness of encouraging "homegrown" or "lone wolf" attacks for the period under consideration is not yet available, and the correlation between high-profile attacks in 2016, such as Orlando and Nice, and Daesh

The Importance of Offline Recruitment Networks

Despite the significant shifts in online communication strategies, perhaps the most important result of Daesh's recent territorial losses will be an increased reliance on offline recruitment networks. TCC field research in North Africa indicates that Salafi-*takfiri* recruitment networks that build on geographic ties and social media contacts continue to be active. With the possibility of travel to Daesh territory greatly reduced, local jihadist networks will grow in importance, perhaps even diverting potential foreign fighters to more proximate regions of conflict.¹⁵

Daesh recruitment strategies in marginalized communities focus on hyper-local appeals—a history of restiveness and weak local-central relations, lack of upward mobility, weak social services, and a heavy-handed security approach to religiously conservative communities. In an impoverished northern coastal city in Morocco, a lawyer who works on extremism recounted the story of a young man Cochito, later made famous in a graphic Daesh recruitment video in which Cochito displayed seven severed heads. Before emigrating to Syria to join Daesh, Cochito was the product of a weak and stilted educational system with no prospects for employment, higher education, marriage, or a job. Cochito became even more famous after his death, and the constant circulation of his image in several media platforms only elevated his fame, driving further recruitment from his neighborhood. In cases like this, contacts are maintained after recruitment via Facebook messenger and What's App, facilitating further recruitment from particular neighborhoods. A flawed public education system, lack of youth programs and limited opportunities create a situation described by one interlocutor as a “pressure cooker.” Even if Daesh disappears from Iraq and Syria, the conditions that inculcate violent extremism across the region are persistent and systemic.

Conclusions

Daesh's loss of territory is militarily and symbolically important. However, defeat in Dabiq, Mosul, or even in Raqqa, will not signal total defeat for Daesh. The extent of Daesh territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria and their rapid acquisition throughout 2014 will remain part of the mythology of Daesh, a fact which Baghdadi himself has emphasized in recent speeches to his followers. Daesh's core strength has resided in its ability to control narratives (about “us versus them,” war and peace, atrocities and blame) and to motivate individuals, from Paris to the Philippines, to pledge their lives to the “caliphate.” Daesh has pioneered the use of online media and evolved the use of offline recruitment networks in a way no other group has; one does not

propaganda is difficult to measure with certainty. However, data does show that “lone wolf” style attacks are more prevalent now than in the past. See the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's START program: <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

¹⁵ TCC staff conducted over 50 structured interviews on Daesh recruitment strategies and takfiri ideology with former foreign fighters, members of insular Salafi communities and families of alleged Daesh recruits. Initial interviews took place in October 2016 with follow-up interviews in December 2016.

need a territorial base to Tweet (or Telegram, or post on JustPaste.it). Military intervention alone is insufficient to preventing violent extremism. This is not to say that military defeat will not constitute a serious blow to Daesh’s claim of having established the prophesized “*khilafah*,” one that was supposed to be “*baqiyah*” (here to remain). However, it is unlikely to completely eradicate the organization’s rhetorical credibility and recruitment expertise.

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