

# ***ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media***

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The extremists who have seized large parts of [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#) have riveted the world's attention with their **military prowess and unrestrained brutality**. But Western intelligence services are also worried about their **extraordinary command of seemingly less lethal weapons: state-of-the-art videos, ground images shot from drones and multilingual Twitter messages**.

**ISIS**, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, is **using every contemporary mode of messaging to recruit fighters, intimidate enemies and promote its claim to have established a caliphate, a unified Muslim state run according to a strict interpretation of Islamic law**. If its bigotry and beheadings seem to come from a distant century, its **use of media is up to the moment**.

A review of its prodigious output in print and online reveals a number of surprises. ISIS propaganda, for instance, has **strikingly few calls for attacks on the West**, even though its most notorious video, among Americans, released 12 days ago, showed the beheading of the American journalist James Foley, threatened another American hostage, and said that American attacks on ISIS "would result in the bloodshed" of Americans. This diverged from nearly all of **ISIS's varied output, which promotes its paramount goal: to secure and expand the Islamic state**. Experts say that could change overnight, but for now it sharply distinguishes ISIS from [Al Qaeda](#), which has long made attacks on the West its top priority.

And while ISIS may be built on bloodshed, it seems intent on **demonstrating the bureaucratic acumen of the state that it claims to be building**. Its two **annual reports** so far are replete with a sort of jihadist-style bookkeeping, tracking statistics on everything from "cities taken over" and "knife murders" committed by ISIS forces to "checkpoints set up" and even "apostates repented."

**ISIS media frames its campaign in epochal terms, mounting a frontal assault on the national divisions and boundaries in the Middle East drawn by Western powers after World War I**. These "Crusader partitions" and their modern Arab leaders, ISIS argues in [its English-language magazine](#), **were a divide-and-conquer strategy intended to prevent Muslims from unifying "under one imam carrying the banner of truth."**

That sense of historical grievance is an old theme for Al Qaeda and more moderate Islamist groups. The difference is that **by capturing expansive territory and heavy weaponry, and flush with wealth from kidnappings, oil piracy, bank**

**robbery and extortion, ISIS claims to have taken a major first step toward righting what it sees as this ancient wrong, creating a unified Muslim state that will subsume existing nations.**

ISIS carefully tailors its recruiting pitch, sending starkly different messages to Muslims in the West and to those closer to home. But the **image of unstoppable, implacable power animates all of its messaging.**

**The pitch is effective.** The militant rebellion in Syria and Iraq has drawn as many as 2,000 Westerners, including perhaps 100 Americans, and many thousands more from the Middle East and elsewhere, though some have returned home. Experts believe most of those remaining today are fighting with ISIS.

“The overriding point is that **success breeds success,**” said Emile Nakhleh, a former C.I.A. analyst. “The perception of quick victories and territory and weapons and bases means they don’t need to try hard to recruit.”

For two decades, Mr. Nakhleh said, Osama bin Laden talked about re-establishing the caliphate, but he never claimed to have done it. **“Young people look at ISIS and say, ‘By gosh, they’re doing it!’ They see the videos with fighters riding on big tanks. They see that ISIS has money,”** he said.

Before ISIS captured the Iraqi city of Mosul in June, other factions fighting in Syria were attracting European recruits, said Thomas Schmidinger, a political scientist from Vienna University. “But since the fall of Mosul, nearly everyone is going to” ISIS, he said.

In the evolution of modern jihadist propaganda, Bin Laden, addressing a single static camera with long-winded rhetoric in highly formal Arabic, represented the first generation. (His videos had to be smuggled to Al Jazeera or another television network to be aired.) The most prominent figure of the second generation was the YouTube star Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born cleric killed in a drone strike in Yemen in 2011, who addressed Westerners in colloquial English, had a blog and Facebook page and helped produce a full-color, English-language magazine called Inspire.

**ISIS is online jihad 3.0. Dozens of Twitter accounts** spread its message, and it has posted some major speeches in **seven languages.** Its videos borrow from Madison Avenue and Hollywood, from combat video games and cable television dramas, and its sensational dispatches are echoed and **amplified on social media.** When its accounts are blocked, new ones appear immediately. It also uses services like [JustPaste](#) to publish battle summaries, [SoundCloud](#) to release audio reports, Instagram to share images and WhatsApp to spread graphics and videos.

**“They are very adept at targeting a young audience,”** said John G. Horgan, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell who has long studied terrorism. “There’s an urgency: **‘Be part of something that’s bigger than yourself and be part of it now.’**” Fawaz A. Gerges, a professor at the London School of Economics and the author of “The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global,” said ISIS had

so far consistently focused on what militants call “the near enemy” — leaders of Muslim countries like Bashar al-Assad of Syria — and not “the far enemy” of the United States and Europe.

**“The struggle against the Americans and the Israelis is distant, not a priority,”** he said. **“It has to await liberation at home.”**

Al Qaeda has often stressed the advantage to the terrorist network of supporters who hold Western passports and can attack in their countries. But **a common public rite of passage for new recruits to ISIS is tearing up or burning their passports, signifying a no-going-back commitment to the Islamic state.**

One [polished ISIS video features a Canadian recruit](#) named Andre Poulin urging North American Muslims to follow him — and even to bring their families. “You’d be very well taken care of here,” [he said in the video](#). “Your families would live here in safety, just like how it is back home. You know we have expanses of territory here in Syria.” *[See this video on the NYT link to this article]*

In [another English-language video pitch](#), a British fighter identified as Brother Abu Bara al-Hindi poses the call to jihad as a test for comfortable Westerners. **“Are you willing to sacrifice the fat job you’ve got, the big car, the family?” he asks. Despite such luxuries, he says, “Living in the West, I know how you feel — in the heart you feel depressed.” The Prophet Muhammad, he declares, said, “The cure for depression is jihad.”**

Such appeals provoke curiosity, and British fighters have answered hundreds of questions about joining ISIS on Ask.fm, a website, including what type of shoes to bring and whether toothbrushes are available. When asked what to do upon arriving in Turkey or Syria, the fighters often casually reply, “Kik me,” referring to the instant messenger for smartphones, and continue the discussion in private.

**The English-language videos do not soft-pedal the dangers of the fight; the video of Mr. Poulin, for instance, shows and celebrates his death in battle.** But the message to English speakers is nonetheless far softer than the Arabic-language videos, which linger on enemy corpses and show handcuffed prisoners casually machine-gunned.

The message, said Mr. Gerges, is blunt: “Get out of the way or you will be crushed; join our caravan and make history.”

**Instead of emphasizing jihad as a means of personal fulfillment, the Arabic media production** portrays it as **duty for all Muslims**. It flaunts violence toward its foes, especially Shiites and the Iraqi and Syrian security services, while portraying the killing as just vengeance.

A recent hour-long ISIS documentary opens with video shot from a drone over Falluja in Iraq and then over a convoy of ISIS gun trucks heading off to battle. A voice-over says that the Islamic state is expanding and that Jerusalem’s Aqsa mosque is “only a stone’s throw away.”

In a later scene, a fighter holding a rifle and his passport mocks his home country, Bahrain, for threatening to withdraw citizenship from those who fight jihad abroad.

**“Don’t you know that you, your citizenship, your laws, your constitutions and your threats are under our feet?” the fighter says. “Don’t you know that we are the soldiers of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and that our state will expand until it removes the thrones that you sold your religion for?”**

Nowhere in the hourlong production — full of threats, drive-by shootings, explosions and gunfights — does an ISIS fighter mention the United States or directly mention or threaten Israel, apart from the allusion to the Aqsa mosque.

Hassan Hassan, a Syrian analyst with the Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi, said that **ISIS portrays itself as restoring idealized eras of earlier Islamic history in a way that resonates with many of the region’s Muslims.**

“ISIS tries to reflect an image of being the continuation of the system of the caliphate,” he said. “In people’s minds, the **caliphate is about victory and dignity of Muslims. A caliph is a defender of Muslims against the enemies from within and without.**”

ISIS’ emphasis on **strict implementation of Islamic law also draws support**, he said, as does its portrayal of its battle in staunchly sectarian terms.

Many of the region’s Sunnis have deep sympathy for any force that can challenge the Iraqi or Syrian governments, which they feel have oppressed Sunnis.

ISIS “is the group that is capable of hitting these governments’ security forces and loyalists,” and that has “massive appeal,” Mr. Hassan said.

The State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications has stepped up its efforts to counter ISIS propaganda, publishing a steady stream of ISIS horror tales on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), using the hashtag #ThinkAgainTurnAway.

For now, it seems an uphill climb. Last week, an ISIS fighter calling himself Abu Turaab wrote on Twitter, “For those who want to come but are facing obstacles, be patient and keep the desire for Jihad alive within you always.”

The State Department account replied, “ISIS recruits’ 2 choices: commit atrocities & die as criminals, get nabbed and waste lives in prison.” As of Friday, [Abu Turaab’s comment had been named as a “favorite” 32 times](#). The count for the [State Department’s response](#): Zero.

Scott Shane reported from Baltimore, and Ben Hubbard from Baghdad. Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura contributed reporting from London, and Melissa Eddy from Berlin.