



AUTHOR

Muna Fityani is an experienced strategic communications practitioner. She recently graduated from King's College London's Department of War Studies with a degree in Strategic Communications



The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Ministry of Defence or the British Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues. This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.
www.chacr.org.uk

BORDERLESS BROTHERHOOD:

STRATEGIC EMPATHY, FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND FUTURE INSURGENCY

"Between you and the path of righteousness – after Allah's guidance – is a cursor and the click of a button." – *Al-Naba*, issue 16, February 2016

THE Islamic State has used many means to attract foreign fighters and citizens to its cause, but this article focuses on just one of the weapons in its arsenal, exploring how the militant group managed to recruit people from around the world to fight in Iraq and Syria

through its weekly magazine, *Al-Naba*.

The patterns revealed from analysing the editorials of 27 issues of the Arabic magazine, published between October 2015 and April 2016, show a deliberate effort at strategic empathy and creating a transnational identity as cornerstones of attraction to the insurgent state. Strategic empathy carries within it a combative undertone, highlighting tensions between the persuasion and coercion of the

audience and bringing the reader to question the legitimacy and authority of the communicator.

At its core, strategic empathy can be the ability to think as the audience. It is the skill of leaving one's head and entering that of another to learn about what drives and limits them.

The editorials in *Al-Naba*, which were used to inform the analysis, usually cover jihadist narratives to respond to Muslim oppression in Arab and Western countries. Moreover, the ideological topics

they address revolve around sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the ummah (nation). The publication also includes commentaries on Islamic State-related current affairs, such as United Nations announcements, condemnations, and the Global Coalition Against Daesh. Now and then, it might feature investigations, opinion pieces, and even interviews with its leaders and recruits. And it usually closes with a theological infographic or written article as a parting thought for the reader. These components were designed carefully to attract Islamic State's audience of choice – positioning its multitude of strategic and military failures as part of a bigger plan, where it will emerge victorious and ever more powerful.

VIRTUAL CALIPHATE

2014 saw the announcement of the Islamic State, as publicised by then-Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, on social media platforms. The centrality of the digital world to Islamic State's information operations has since become a significant subject of study for both the academic and defence worlds. Available publications on Islamic State recruitment and strategic communications efforts have shown recurring themes. These themes highlight the group's nuanced approach to achieving its strategic objectives, with its primary reliance on digital engagement, at least in the early stages of the recruitment process. Recruitment may have lost traction, but *Al-Naba* still gets published weekly by the Caliphate's Central Information Bureau in print and digital formats, with the latter being uploaded onto the internet in PDF form. The tone in this magazine draws from Wahhabi/Salafist discourse and teachings, often antagonising 'other' Muslims just as vehemently as infidels or kuffar.

Although reliable empirical



Two foreign fighters embracing – a repetitive visual tactic that enforces Islamic State's notion of brothers in arms. *Al-Naba*, issue 21

العشرات من الاستشهاديين في ولاية صلاح الدين خرجوا للوقوف في وجه الحملة الرافضية الأخيرة

“THE VIRTUAL REALM OFFERED ISLAMIC STATE'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVES LONGEVITY, EASY ACCESS, AND DELAYED DETECTION, ALL OF WHICH SERVED ITS PURPOSE OF REACHING AUDIENCES WORLDWIDE IN SECONDS WITH LITTLE CENSORSHIP.”

evidence is limited and inconsistent, the number of foreign fighters flowing into Iraq and Syria in 2015 alone was [estimated at more than 35,000](#). Despite Islamic State's best efforts, however, [the number of recruits started waning in 2016](#), which gives strategic communications practitioners hope – audiences are a significant variable in this equation. One can count on them to change their minds because such is the marvel of human emotion. This places exceptionally high value on tapping into the audience's emotions as a key to the success of the strategic objective. Whatever the Islamic State objective was at the time, it could have been futile without the participation and emotion of its audience. Intelligence and defence reports helped academics and practitioners understand who the foreign fighters once were. Tapping into their grievances, Islamic State rallied them to its cause through relentless propaganda, to the point that joining its ranks was indeed as easy as indicated in the opening quote: it is only a click of a button away.

[Between July and August 2015](#), Islamic State created and

disseminated 1,146 separate propaganda units in multiple languages. This is a simple example of the volume of content that found its way to the internet at the time, just as digital content moderation gradually became a necessary tool for combatting extremism. The virtual realm offered Islamic State's strategic narratives longevity, easy access, and delayed detection, all of which served its purpose of reaching audiences worldwide in seconds with little censorship. In his book, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, Abdel Bari Atwan claims that Islamic State's establishment would have been unlikely without digital technology. Its ongoing calls for hijra (immigration) within the bounds of its online communications were crucial for recruiting large numbers of foreign fighters. And he was right.

In September 2015, the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper spoke directly to Islamic State member Abu Obaida, who worked closely on the group's media files at the time. The brief report, published in Arabic, quotes Obaida saying: [“\[Al-Naba\] is published to support Islamic State's ongoing war on mainstream media as a part of](#)

[a concerted effort that utilises visual and audio-visual media, alongside social media.”](#) He added that Islamic State's effort in exporting its ideology, doctrine, and military achievements via these publications successfully recruited foreign fighters from around the world, earning it considerable support through social media platforms. *Al-Naba* provided a close, first-hand look into communications published by the insurgent group. Furthermore, such proximity to the source allowed for investigating the machinations of Islamic State narrative architecture and seeing how it used strategic empathy for recruitment.

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

It is worth underscoring how Islamic State used the notion of ummah to foster a transnational identity among its recruits. The potential recruit is a glorified freedom fighter, with the romance that once surrounded figures like Che Guevara now surrounding him. In this context, transnationalism called for in the editorials attracted foreign fighters with little material promise. Instead, the glorification of belonging, of finding a cause to die for, made the foreign fighter feel more like an activist and a rebel. The language used was highly emotive, as the messaging was framed to make the reader feel responsible for the fate of oppressed Muslims. Underlying it all was an implicit call for hijra, encouraging the reader to consider a life under a just, pure, corruption-free rule that upholds [equality for its constituents](#), unlike the oppressive rulers of the Arab and Western worlds. This is an example of using strategic empathy by reminding the reader that there might be an accessible solution to their frustration. Of course, this is not to say mere words were enough to mobilise recruits from all around the world. Instead, the following cornerstones of

political communication did the trick: repeated exposure, relentless calls to action (jihad and joining the one Islamic ummah) and leveraging strategic empathy by tapping into the grievances of potential recruits. By putting itself in its target audience's shoes, Islamic State crafted a message that implies joining could give the reader's life – and death – meaning.

The most prominent themes that came to light during the analysis period were the following:

- *Calls for giving up the comfort and worldly gains of this life for the ultimate reward of paradise in the afterlife;*
- **Belonging to the collective will ensure the reader protection and a satisfying social life. Islamic State paves the way to paradise by living under Islamic rule;**
- *Most Muslims are oppressed, and they must be freed through jihad so that they can live in the just world of Islamic State, which*

is reminiscent of the time of Prophet Muhammad;

- Othering moderate Sunni Muslims and Muslims from other sects, Christians, apostates, and disbelievers. Islamic State is the only authentic voice and the only viable way for a real Muslim;
- **Without the brilliant minds, motivation, and strength of young Muslims everywhere, Islamic State cannot thrive.**

The general recruit's profile is fraught with frustration due to unemployment and general political dissatisfaction. The calls to arms appearing issue after issue in *Al-Naba*, in unison with the glorification of jihad and the ultimate reward of paradise, contribute to the foreign fighter's decision to leave the comfort of all they know for a chance at the glory they have been made to crave. The editorial in the ninth issue of *Al-Naba* describes the Islamic State man using highly emotive language. He is a high-achieving university student,

“AL-NABA DESCRIBES THE ISLAMIC STATE MAN USING HIGHLY EMOTIVE LANGUAGE. HE IS A HIGH-ACHIEVING UNIVERSITY STUDENT, LOVED BY HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS, BUT HE CHOSE TO LEAVE ALL OF THAT COMFORT AND THE PROSPECTS OF AN EXCELLENT FUTURE TO PURSUE JIHAD.”

loved by his family and friends, but he chose to leave all of that comfort and the prospects of an excellent future to pursue jihad under the rule of Islamic State. It was an open invitation to any young man, anywhere in the world, to give meaning to his life. Islamic State could reach individuals worldwide who had little faith in the political elite and do not see democracy as a realistic *modus vivendi*.

This is one of the most notable characteristics of Islamic State recruits, as it contradicts the stereotypical image of the radical Islamist one would fathom for a foreign fighter. The combination of state-level corruption, low gross domestic product, youth unemployment, and curtailed civil liberties increased the likelihood of seeing segments of the educated population join Islamic State. Considering those conditions and juxtaposing them with the fact that the highest numbers of foreign fighters came from [Russia](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and [Tunisia](#) is in and of itself quite telling. And just like that, Islamic State persuaded thousands of educated individuals to become violent jihadists. These recruits committed humanly inexcusable crimes when they passively accepted the authority of Islamic State, just as the group took them in without any prerequisite for being religious or radical, as evidenced by the weeks of Shari'a indoctrination that precede joining pseudo-military [training camps](#).

At a time when our world is rife with conflict, it must be noted that the Islamic State recruitment model is highly replicable. Islamic State waged an unholy ideological

war, penetrating the minds of audiences whose frustrations it weaponised. As the world becomes increasingly polarised, so will the grievances that drive populations to extremism. In strategic communications, especially in the geopolitical context, the objective is to influence and not coerce the target audience into supporting your cause. Islamic State took calculated steps and worked systematically to attract recruits and sympathisers. The repeated exposure to networks of identical messaging worded differently was a key pattern across *Al-Naba* issues. Repetition inspires faith by communicating consistency and certainty in the content and tone of voice. Both of these traits resonated well with the target audience. By appealing to the reader's frustration with uncertainty, and empathising with their struggles with oppression, Islamic State caught the attention of those who needed consistency from their leaders the most.

CONTAINING FUTURE INSURGENCIES

The successful attempts by Islamic State to recruit foreign fighters online cannot only be attributed to strategic objectives and tactical implementation. One must examine the passive role of foreign fighters' home countries that drove them into the arms of the group. For citizens who are indigenous to their countries, it is unemployment and corruption of the political elite. For immigrant citizens, it is disenfranchisement, discrimination, and lack of inclusion in the broader community. To curb future attempts at insurgent recruitment, governments can

A foreign fighter reads the Quran during his training. *Al-Naba*, issue 19



consider preventive measures to increase citizen belonging instead of fuelling citizen contempt. It is better to address a government's alienating practices than to deal with years of de-radicalisation and the threat of home-grown terrorism. And just like the ideological damage caused by Islamic State will need decades to be undone, planting seeds of an inclusive and moderate Islam within Muslim communities will need time to become a reality, with which Islamic radicalisation could well disappear. If there is a lesson to be learned from communications in *Al-Naba*, it would be the power of belonging.

The recruitment of British citizens serves as a strong example, as hundreds of Muslim Britons joined the ranks of the Islamic State between 2014 and 2016. Although British efforts to combat the group at home and abroad were considerable, this relatively high number of recruits begs to be examined. The proposed course of action



تَثَبَّتْ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَحْكَمَ وَتَنْقَل

Above: Foreign fighters bonding. Such photos are common across *Al-Naba* issues and are intended to instill that belonging to the one Islamic ummah is inclusive of all races and backgrounds. *Al-Naba*, issue 23

Below: An infographic highlighting 'misinformation'. *Al-Naba*, issue 14

below is not specific to the UK. It is highly replicable for countries looking for soft power solutions to hard-line radicalisation.

One major factor in the recruitment of British nationals was the sense of alienation and

marginalisation felt by many young Muslims in the UK. This alienation was exacerbated by negative stereotypes and discrimination, which made many think they did not belong in British society. Therefore, addressing the underlying issues of alienation and marginalisation is essential for promoting greater social integration and acceptance of diversity. A pivotal remedy to ideological extremism is education and awareness. Engaging the British Muslim population, community leaders, and organisations to counter extremist ideologies with moderate, government-aligned Muslim leaders could enforce the notion of inclusion and belonging. Governmental sponsorship of moderate Islam is a worthwhile pursuit with a valuable return on the community and the nation's security. Most importantly, it supports and guides young people at risk of radicalisation.

launched by the King of Jordan in 2015 to enhance the coordination and exchange of expertise and information among regional and international stakeholders and tech companies to counter terrorism and extremism. Jordan is a critical player in countering Islamic State, as sharing borders with Iraq and Syria give it good reason to work diligently on detecting and eliminating threats of home-grown terrorism. Partnerships with countries like Jordan would allow the UK to gain a nuanced insight into the gaps that led Muslim Britons to join the ranks of Islamic State, with the ultimate goal of addressing the core issues to prevent future resurgence.

The world is looking for economic, ideological, and cultural recovery in this post-pandemic phase. But as mentioned, political polarisation is on the rise everywhere, and the virtual world is only becoming more intertwined with the real one. Weaponising grievances and frustrations is more dangerous than access to actual weaponry. It is a direct threat to a country's stability. Today, hard power can't be dismissed – as evidenced by the conflict in Ukraine – but soft power is perilously potent. And while employing strategic empathy in national plans and strategies may take time to come to fruition, it is truly a valuable asset for maintaining long-term stability.

Finally, addressing and countering Islamic State's use of digital platforms to effectively target young individuals is another practical approach. Countering such efforts is crucial for developing effective strategies for combatting extremism online. Using counter-narratives and working with tech companies to address extremist content is an essential step. One initiative that pursued this track in recent years is the Aqaba Process Initiative,

رواية مستقلة يتم بثها وتداولها، دون ذكر المصدر أو ما يدل على صحتها، وسنّها قبل نقلها، وسنّها وزعمها، وتعرض حدّ الرواية كأنه فتاوى التحريف والتزييف.

الإشاعة

عن أبي هريرة قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: «كفى بالمرء كذباً أن يحدث بكل ما سمع» رواه مسلم

يتناقضها الجماعة من المسلمين

يصنعها العدو

يتناقضها المناهقون والفساق

خطر الإشاعة

- تشويه سمعة فرد أو جماعة من المسلمين
- تخدير المسلمين والإجفاف بهم في أوقات الشدائد
- تفريق صف المسلمين وإثارة النزاعات بينهم
- إختلال الموازين في تصديق وتكذيب الأخبار
- ذهاب الثقة بين الرعية والرعاي والجناد وأميرهم
- التسبب بخسائر كبيرة لفرد أو جماعة من المسلمين

1 التثبيت والتبين من الأخبار قبل نقلها

2 ترك الأمور العامة لأولي الأمر (الأمر وأهل العلم)

3 كيف

4 نكافح

5 الإشاعات

6 الاقتصار على نقل ما يفيد من الكلام

7 أن يترك المسلم ما لا يعنيه

8 إحسان الظن بالمسلمين

9 ما تظن أنه بشري وتتسرع في

(أد تثبوتهم بأنفسهم يتقونهم بأفواهكم ما ليس لكم به علم وتحسبونه هينا وهو عند الله عظيم) [البقرة: 175]

(وإذا جندهم أمر من الأمن أو الخوف أذاعوا به ولو نذوه إلى الرسول وإلى أُولي الأمر منهم لعلمهم الذين يستنبطونه منهم ولو لا خيل الله عليكم ورحمته لأنتقم من المشركين إلا قليلا) [النساء: 6]

(يأيتها الذين آمنوا إن جاءكم فاسق بنبأ فتبينوا أن تصيبوا قلوبا يجهلة فتصيبوا على ما فعلتم نادمين) [الحجرات: 6]

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: «من خسر إسلام المؤمن تركه ما لا يخفيه» سنن ابن ماجه

وإن بين النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم عقوبة نقل الإشاعة بحيث رواه البخاري عن سودة بن جندب رضي الله عنه، عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أنه قال: «قال إن أمتي الأمة أئمان، وإنما تمتعتم، وإنما فلا في النطق، وإني انحطقت معهم... فكنبا على رجل مستقل لنفسه، وإذا أخذ فشم عليه بكنه من حديد، وإذا هو بكى أحد فشم وجهه فيشترش شرفه إلى فمهم، ومنذرو إلى فمهم، وعينه إلى فمهم، ثم يتحول إلى الفتنة إذا خيلهم به مثل ما فعل بكوابل الأول، فما يترفع من تلك الفتنة حتى يجمع تلك الفتنة كما كان، ثم يعود عليه فتمسك بكل ما ضمن المرة الأولى، ثم بين النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم سبب هذه العقوبة فقال: