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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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**IMES CAPSTONE PAPER SERIES**

**Overcoming Failure:  
How Extremist Organizations Leverage  
Setbacks with Powerful Propaganda**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>2. Methodology</b> .....	4
2.1 Defining Extremism .....	4
2.2 Defining Operational and Military Failures .....	5
2.3 Research Methods .....	7
2.4 Limitations .....	7
<b>3. Literature Review</b> .....	8
3.1 Violent Extremism versus Terrorism .....	8
3.2 Theories of Violent Extremism .....	10
3.3 Extremist Organizations and Propaganda .....	12
3.4 Contribution to the Literature .....	15
<b>4. A Historical Framework: Hamas and Hezbollah as Case Studies</b> .....	15
4.1 Hamas: History and Propaganda Tactics .....	15
4.2 Hamas in the Gaza Strip.....	17
4.3 Hezbollah: History and Propaganda Tactics .....	19
4.4 Hezbollah and the 2006 War .....	21
<b>5. The “Caliphate”</b> .....	23
5.1 Origins of the Islamic State .....	23
5.2 Historical Use of Propaganda .....	25
<b>6. Propaganda Analysis</b> .....	27
6.1 Territorial Losses .....	27
6.2 Operational Failures and Dismantled Cells .....	36
6.3 Trends .....	41
6.4 Implications .....	46
<b>7. Conclusion</b> .....	47
<b>8. Appendices</b> .....	49
8.1 Chronological Timeline of Notable ISIS Failures .....	49
8.2 Islamic State Graphic Depicting Mosul Successes .....	52
8.3 Islamic State Nightly News, April 13 .....	53
<b>9. Bibliography</b> .....	54

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Extremist and terrorist organizations such as ISIS, Hamas, and Hezbollah have maintained a strong presence in and throughout the Middle East and North Africa region over the course of the last few decades. Political victories and military conquests help these groups sustain their presence in Arab society; however, each group's ability to both recruit and maintain societal support through its publication and circulation of propaganda also have an impressionable impact as well. Although propaganda and recruitment tactics of extremist organizations have been widely researched and analyzed, very little exists on groups response to failures. In an attempt to fill this gap, we analyze the social and print media of three prominent regional extremist organizations to examine how these groups respond to operational and military failures and when they respond.

We chose a research question to incisively focus on the response to military and operational failures. We have chosen to examine and compare the responses of three organizations: ISIS, Hamas, and Hezbollah's military wing.<sup>1</sup> The selection of these three organizations was a strategic decision, as we believe the examination of each will not only give us adequate propaganda and media materials to analyze, but will also allow us to discern whether or not a trend exists within these organizations. Because of ISIS' robust online media presence, we will primarily address this group and its responses to failures. To identify trends in extremist response to failures, we will briefly examine Hamas and Hezbollah's historical use of propaganda in response to failures in order to establish a comparative base for analysis and from which to develop a trend.

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<sup>1</sup> Hezbollah's political arm is recognized and not considered an extremist organization, however its military wing is recognized as one. Therefore, we will focus solely on the military branch.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Defining Extremism

The term “extremism” has generally been difficult to define, as there are not only varying types of extremism (e.g. violent, political, religious, etc.), but also varying perspectives on how specific and inclusive the definition should be. Numerous governments and international bodies have struggled to legally define a useable definition of extremism.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there is not a single, overarching or internationally accepted definition of the term extremism. For the purpose of our research, we used the United Kingdom’s<sup>3</sup> definition of extremism, defining it as “the vocal or active opposition to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, for the purpose of our study, we will also be focusing on groups we consider to be violent extremists. Therefore, it is necessary to specifically define “violent extremism”. Violent extremism (VE) consists of “activities (beliefs, attitudes, actions, strategies) of people who support or use violence for political, religious or other identity-driven beliefs. This includes terrorism and other forms of identity-motivated violence from hate crime to genocide.”<sup>5</sup>

Terrorism is defined as

criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.<sup>6</sup>

This definition is in accordance with UN Security Resolution 1566.

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<sup>2</sup> “Ministers ‘struggle to define extremism.’” *BBC News*. July 22, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The United States has yet to officially define extremism.

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism. “Tackling extremism in the UK.” December 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, Kate. “Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies.” *Reflections* 27 (2016): 28.

<sup>6</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1566. *Terrorism*. S/Res/1566. October 8 2004.

We should note that some governments and organizations choose to use “Islamic extremism” or “radical Islamic extremism” to convey the same set of ideas and principles outlined in our working definitions of extremism and violent extremism.<sup>7</sup> We chose to use extremism and VE as opposed to these other terms, as we believe the use of “Islamic extremism” or “radical Islamic extremism” would limit the scope and applicability of our work. While our study focuses solely on extremist organizations that identify as Islamic, we believe using a more broad, encompassing definition of extremism will allow our research to be more widely applicable and transferrable in future use.

## *2.2 Defining Operational and Military Failures*

In order to define operational and military failures, we felt an exploration of the literature was necessary. However, most of the literature that discusses operational and military failures does not actually provide a framework for identifying either one. Operational failure is often discussed in an industry setting and associated or tied to financial and liability risks.<sup>8</sup> The literature on military failures is different, in that it varies based on the context. Much analysis has been done on military failures at the operational and mechanical levels, as well as military failures in relation to disaster and crises responses. However, frameworks for defining events as a military failure are often lacking. Therefore, we have decided to employ the framework that is often used to determine whether a terrorist undertaking is considered a success or a failure.

According to the RAND Corporation, there are two distinct ways to view success and failure in the context of terrorist activities. The first views success and failure in a “binary

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<sup>7</sup> The U.S. government is reportedly discussing changing its Countering Violent Extremism program to Countering Islamic Extremism or Countering Radical Islamic Extremism.

<sup>8</sup> Adler-Milstein, Julia, Sara J. Singer, and Michael W. Toffel. "Operational failures and problem solving: an empirical study of incident reporting." (2009).

fashion”, determining if it was successful based on occurrence rather than the specific outcome.<sup>9</sup> The second view is more complex, in that an operation is deemed successful if the operation was “logistically complete”.<sup>10</sup> Other factors can be included as well. For example, if all the participating operatives escaped and the attack was logistically complete then it would be deemed successful.<sup>11</sup>

For the purpose of our study we will be using this more complex framework to identify operational and military failures. An operation that is logistically incomplete, meaning the previously stated desired outcome was not fully achieved will be classified a failure. We chose to define military failure in relation to territory loss, as well as overt losses in battles or wars. Operational failures are considered disruptions or malfunctions in equipment, attacks, or the group; essentially anything that occurs within an operational setting that can impair the group’s capacity and campaign capabilities. We will also include major operational and military losses for the organization in our classification.

While we believe this is the best framework for determining operational and military failures, there are some potential complications. First, it is sometimes difficult to discern an extremist organization's' original goals and intentions behind its operational and military operations. Second, groups often attempt to revise their originally planned outcome after they see what occurred during their operations.<sup>12</sup> This is to either make their operation seem more

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<sup>9</sup> Pedahzur, Ami, Arie Perliger, and Leonard Weinberg, “Altruism and Fatalism: The Characteristics of Palestinian Suicide Terrorists,” *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 24, 2003, pp. 405-423; Jackson, Brian A. and David R. Frelinger. *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009

<sup>10</sup> Sharif, Idris, *The Success of Political Terrorist Events: An Analysis of Terrorist Tactics and Victim Characteristics, 1968-1977*, Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1996.; Jackson, Brian A. and David R. Frelinger. *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, Brian A. and David R. Frelinger. *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009

successful in the public eye or simply to counter criticism.<sup>13</sup> In the case that either of these complications arise, we will both note the occurrence and individually determine, based off previously stated criteria, if the incident was indeed a failure.

### *2.3 Research Methods*

Our methodology was primarily broken into three parts: primary data collection and analysis, secondary data collection and analysis, and archival news research. We began by shaping the framework of this research study by conducting a thorough literature review of the historical relationship between extremism and propaganda. We also reviewed general responses to operational failures in the past in order to better inform our research question.

In order to complete this paper, we collected over three months of social media primary data through stream processing using the George Washington University's "Social Feed Manager" data collection system through the Gelman Library. Through this process, we collected data from Twitter using pre-determined extremist-linked Twitter accounts. We also collected extremist's publications (i.e. newsletters and magazines). We then analysed our primary data and secondary data, comparing tweets and publications issued to specific periods of time around failed attacks. This allowed us to identify and develop a trend in the responses to operational and military failures through their propaganda and social media materials.

### *2.4 Limitations*

While this paper seeks to add to existing literature on extremist organizations and its use of propaganda, there are some limitations to our study that need to be recognized. First, there is a severe lack of pre-existing literature on extremist organizations and responses to failures in general. Although some scholars have discussed and provided frameworks for why terrorist

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<sup>13</sup> Jackson, Brian A. and David R. Frelinger. *Understanding Why Terrorist Operations Succeed or Fail*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009



operations succeed or fail, very little has been written on how organizations generally respond to these failures. Second, our data collection from Twitter was more limited in scope than anticipated due to both difficulty finding active members and frequent disabling of accounts. However, = our review of other disseminated materials is sufficient enough for our analysis.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review will serve to explore the history of extremism as a whole in terms of its conceptual emergence and the theories behind VE, followed by the relationship between extremist organizations and propaganda. The literature included will encompass a broader scale review of extremism, strategies, and messaging. The information provides an understanding of changes that can be viewed in extremist organization propaganda in light of a political or military failure. These changes will be explored and analyzed in Section 5.

#### *3.1 Violent Extremism versus Terrorism*

One of the most challenging issues that has consistently plagued the international community over the last two decades is understanding extreme behavior and predicting violent acts. The complex phenomenon and very nature of extremism has provoked much research into both the causes of extremism and the psychology behind those who identify with extremist ideologies. While this extremism phenomenon is not new, the concept of violent extremism only recently emerged in the public arena.<sup>14</sup>

After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the international community focused on terrorism, with the United States even going so far as to declare a Global War on Terror (GWOT). The emergence of extremism and the shift in focus from terrorism to violent

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<sup>14</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

extremism did not occur until late 2005 with the United States announcing the end of GWOT and the start of SAVE or the Struggle Against Violent Extremism.<sup>15</sup> The subsequent London bombings in July of 2005 allowed the concept of VE to really take hold and flourish. However, the attempt to distance violent extremism from terrorism was not as successful as it was originally intended. The terms violent extremism, terrorism and even political violence were all still used and even still continue to be used interchangeably both the international political and academic arenas.<sup>16</sup>

Even though the terms often get interchanged freely and quite frequently, there is actually a significant difference between the two concepts. First, as discussed in the previous section, there is a substantial difference in the definitions. Second, “the purpose of violent extremism is to provoke the target into a disproportionate response, radicalise moderates and build support for its objectives in the long term, while terrorism is to endogenise the capability of both the terrorist and the target.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, Mroz argues that terrorism can be countered while violent extremism cannot, since most forms of VE are carried out as ‘lone wolf attacks’.<sup>18</sup> Despite these differences, both extremist and terrorist threats remain highly prevalent in today’s society. What makes these threats more prominent is “the accessibility of destructive tools of terror, the instantaneous global media coverage, and the means of communication available” to extremists.<sup>19</sup> How does one reach the radicalization point though?

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<sup>15</sup> Fox, Robert. "Gwot is history. Now for save: After the global war on terror comes the struggle against violent extremism." *New Statesman* (2005).; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Lake, David A. "Rational extremism: Understanding terrorism in the twenty-first century." *Dialogue IO* 1, no. 01 (2002): 15-29.; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Mroz, J. "Lone wolf attacks and the difference between violent extremism and terrorism." (2009).; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>19</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

### 3.2 Theories of Violent Extremism

There are a number of theories put forth by scholars in an attempt to explain the phenomenon associated with radicalization, terrorism, and violent extremism. These theories include rational choice theory, structural or societal theory, relative deprivation theory, and social movement theory or collective action approach. Rational choice theory is essentially a cost benefit analysis, where the benefits of participation are weighed against the costs of participation.<sup>20</sup> If the benefits are greater, the individual will participate. This theory relies on a number of assumptions about human behavior<sup>21</sup>, and many criticisms have emerged in response to rational choice theory.

The next framework is structural theory, also known as societal theory. It is a newer theory that is a variation of rational choice theory. However, instead of focusing on the individual, societal theory focuses on the behavior of groups. Structural theory states that “violent political groups choose political violence as a strategic method and that the group possesses collective preferences or values and selects terrorism as a course of action from a range of perceived alternatives.”<sup>22</sup> Like rational choice theory, structural theorists believe that individuals have a rational choice, however the examination of the group dynamics the reasons why the individual ultimately decides to participate is where the two theories differ.

Similar to rational choice theory, relative deprivation theory focuses on the individual rather than a group. This framework is constructed on individuals believing that they are

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<sup>20</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Eager, Paige Whaley. *From freedom fighters to terrorists: women and political violence*. Routledge, 2016.; Crenshaw, Martha. "Questions to be answered, research to be done, knowledge to be applied." *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind* (1990): 247-260.; Gurr, Ted Robert. "Economic factors." *The Roots of Terrorism* (2013): 85-101.; Sinai, Joshua. "New trends in terrorism studies: strengths and weaknesses." *Mapping terrorism research: State of the art, gaps and future direction* (2007): 31-50.; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

deprived of something - economically, politically, or socially - when they compare themselves to others.<sup>23</sup> It is primarily rooted in the belief that poor socioeconomic performance (e.g. poverty, unemployment, etc.) leads to frustration, making them more susceptible to radicalization.<sup>24</sup> The link between political or socioeconomic indicators and extremism has been heavily researched and has become one of the main drivers of countering violent extremism (CVE) programs. Many researchers and policymakers believe the development of good governance, societies, and economies can help combat radicalization and curb the rates of extremism in countries with poor political and socio-economic performances.

The next theory, social movement theory or collective action approach, is quite similar to relative deprivation theory, as they both believe the underlying trigger for radicalization is frustration.<sup>25</sup> However, unlike relative deprivation theory, social movement theory focuses on the psychology of frustration, rather than the reasons behind the frustration. The collective action approach is based in the frustration-aggression model, which says that human frustration results in “aggressive means to negotiate the frustration.”<sup>26</sup> Social movement theory usually refers to form of social movements seeking to ignite change in peaceful and grass root level ways.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, according to this theory, for an individual to become a violent extremist, a radical manifestation must take place for VE organizations to begin engaging in radical forms of

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<sup>23</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Al-Lami, Mina. "Studies of Radicalisation: State of the Field Report." *Politics and International Relations Working Paper* 11, no. 7 (2009); Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Rinehart, Christine Sixta. "Volatile breeding grounds: The radicalization of the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 11 (2009): 953-988.; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

collective action.<sup>28</sup> One main criticism of this theory is that not all social movements become radicalized and endorse VE or terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Only small amounts of social movements reach the point of extremism, as most do not engage in VE activities.

### *3.3 Extremist Organizations and Propaganda*

Extremist organizations have historically made significant use of propaganda in order to promote ideologies, counter enemy messaging, and recruit newcomers. Propaganda may also serve to address<sup>30</sup> an organization's operational or military failures, leading to a shift in messaging frequency, intensity, or category. Historically, extremist organizations primarily "distributed [propaganda] mostly in hard-copy format for internal use among Muslim sympathizers"<sup>31</sup>. Information about a group's ideology, intentions, and appeal was spread within a specific circle of easily accessible individuals.

In today's interconnected world, extremist organizations have been quick to adopt the newest and most effective methods of reaching the largest audience base. Propaganda has experienced natural evolution in terms of audience reach in the era of globalization, in which broad-scale communication is free and difficult to regulate or censor. There has been a dramatic increase in extremist propaganda through the Internet in the last three decades.<sup>32</sup> Al-Qaeda leadership has made Internet propaganda a principle objective under the belief that social media

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<sup>28</sup> Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>29</sup>Eager, Paige Whaley. *From freedom fighters to terrorists: women and political violence*. Routledge, 2016.; Nasser-Eddine, M., B. Garnham, K. Agostino, and G. Caluya. "Countering Violent Extremism Literature Review." (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, propaganda in response to failures may strategically fail to address lack of success in favor of refocusing the lens to group appeal and overall triumph.

<sup>31</sup> Soriano, Manuel R. Torres, Javier Jordan, and Nicola Horsburgh. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 3 (2006): 399-421.

<sup>32</sup> In the 1990s, terrorist online activity related to propaganda was very low with only twelve recorded incidents found in an Israeli University professor's research. In 2005, he found nearly 5,000 incidents of online propaganda within a month (Soriano et al. 2006).

communication presents the easiest and most effective method of ideology messaging.<sup>33</sup>

The Internet has addressed and provided the appeal of reaching a larger audience<sup>34</sup> to increase a group's support system. Before the proliferation of social media, extremist organization's still made use of global communication by creating websites and publishing propaganda and similar content in order to promote their ideologies. This was especially useful for groups who were creating hard media content (e.g. video messages, magazines, etc.) and wanted to publicize these in order to more effectively reach target audiences.<sup>35</sup> Extremist organizations' shift to creating powerful internet presences illustrates how "the rise of cyberspace has transformed both the meaning and opportunity for propaganda."<sup>36</sup>

Extremist groups have leveraged social media in particular in order to supplement a common messaging goal: creating a sense of community and a revolving support system that reinforces radicalization. Upon discovering the value of social media in relation to these objectives, many groups sought to enhance their extremist propaganda through use of social media. Because many groups target youth populations, social media provides a free, easy access way of reaching this intended audience.<sup>37</sup>

The target audience lends extremists the ability to achieve recruitment objectives through disseminated propaganda. Recruitment is often a key goal of extremist propaganda. Because extremist organizations thrive of us continued influx of both national and foreign fighters for

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<sup>33</sup> Rudner, Martin. "Electronic Jihad: The Internet as al-Qaeda's Catalyst for Global Terror." In *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet 2016*, edited by Anne Aly, Stuart Macdonald, Lee Jervis, and Thomas Chen, 8-24. New York: Routledge, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that organization's actively seek to disseminate propaganda information to the mainstream public. The idea of "narrowcasting" (targeting a specific audience within the mass public) has become popular in recruitment, as it yields a higher success rate in terms of number of individuals radicalized (Weimann 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Soriano, Manuel R. Torres, Javier Jordan, and Nicola Horsburgh. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 3 (2006): 399-421.

<sup>36</sup> Baines, Paul R. and Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy. "Political Marketing and Propaganda: Uses, Abuses, Misuses." *Journal of Political Marketing* 13, no. 1-2 (February 2014): 1-18.

<sup>37</sup> Weimann, Gabriel. "Why Do Terrorists Migrate to Social Media?" In *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet 2016*, edited by Anne Aly, Stuart Macdonald, Lee Jervis, and Thomas Chen, 45-64. New York: Routledge, 2016.

success and growth, they regularly make use of broadcasting venues to use messaging to entice newcomers. There are a variety of recruitment messaging tactics, but most fit into one of two strategic aims: positive reinforcement of the validity of a group's extremism or negative reinforcement against a common Western enemy.

Recruitment propaganda often features an exploitative narrative, such as producing a psychological appeal that elicits emotional response. For example, the use of women and children in military propaganda has existed since World War I, but is continually used by extremist organizations (ISIS in particular) to appeal to masculinity and equate this to fighting for an extremist ideology.<sup>38</sup> Other organizations featuring conservative religious adherence and values may seek to unite potential recruits under the idea that the Western world seeks to dismantle their core values, thus creating a mass threat to the ideology.<sup>39</sup> Extremist groups also seek to build a base of sympathizers, which requires building up the organization's validity and necessity in order to attract the right people for radicalization. The overall message of propaganda in many extremist organizations is to create a common enemy through establishing a sense of community and appealing to a susceptible audience base.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, different extremist groups orchestrate propaganda in a variety of ways. Propaganda typically appeals to the intended consumer's emotions in some manner, be it through positive or negative inputs. Groups often attempt to unite potential recruits by establishing a complex social network with well-established ideology. We are presently seeing extremist organizations becoming more entrenched in Internet and social media usage in order to

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<sup>38</sup> Beutel, Alejandro and Krystina Perez. 2016. "From WWI to ISIS, Using Shame and Masculinity in Recruitment Narratives." START (June 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Frischlich, Lena L., Diana Rieger, Maia Hein, and Gary Bente. "Dying the Right-way? Interest in and Perceived Persuasiveness of Parochial Extremist Propaganda Increases After Mortality Salience." *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (August 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Baines, Paul R. and Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy. "Political Marketing and Propaganda: Uses, Abuses, Misuses." *Journal of Political Marketing* 13, no. 1-2 (February 2014): 1-18.

perpetuate their messages. This shift in propaganda outlets has generated great success in terms of outreach and recruitment. As such, extremist propaganda is reaching a broader audience and therefore poses a national security threat that CVE experts strive to tackle.

### *3.4 Contribution to the Literature*

Over the last two decades, countering violent extremism has emerged as a major policy factor internationally. Therefore, there has been an abundance of research and discussion of the methods that extremist groups use to communicate, much of which focuses more specifically on the steps to radicalization and propaganda's role in this. We intend to add a new element of specificity to this area through an exploration of the ways in which extremist organizations respond to operational and military failures through the use of propaganda. This research will serve to address the literature gap concerning observed changes in both frequency and type of propaganda as a result of failings and/or lack of success.

## **4. A HISTORIC FRAMEWORK: HAMAS AND HEZBOLLAH AS CASE STUDIES**

Groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are very reliant on eliciting emotional responses by displacing blame regarding failures (i.e. battle losses or failed attempts at creating change within their respective regions). In this section, we will explore each group's history, provide a general background on their typical propaganda tactics, and analyze one of their major failures to assess their response.

### *4.1 Hamas: History and Propaganda Tactics*

The origins of Hamas can be traced back to the Muslim Brotherhood. Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, was originally founded in 1987 by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin as the Brotherhood's political arm in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in



response to the outbreak of the first intifada.<sup>41</sup> According to its charter, the purpose of the organization was “the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic society in historic Palestine.”<sup>42</sup> The group also formally rejects all agreements made between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, most notably the Oslo Accords, an agreement signed by both parties in 1993 that gave Israel the PLO’s formal recognition.

Five months prior to the agreement, Hamas’ active resistance against Israel turned violent; it carried out its first suicide bombing.<sup>43</sup> This tactic grew to become a staple within the Islamic Resistance Movement, and as a result the United States designated Hamas a foreign terrorist organization in 1997. In addition to suicide bombings, Hamas also conducted small-arms and rocket attacks, as well as using improvised roadside explosive devices, targeting Israeli civilians.<sup>44</sup> The majority of attacks were carried out by the military wing of Hamas, Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

In 2006, Hamas gained political legitimacy and the chance to moderate after winning legislative elections in the Palestinian territories. The election of Hamas both ended the secular Fatah party’s hold over the Palestinian Authority and challenged its leadership of the Palestinian nationalist movement.<sup>45</sup> However, obtaining power and legitimacy did not deter Hamas, as it continued to refuse to recognize and renounce its violent resistance against Israel. The group has since maintained power and consolidated power in the Gaza Strip for the last ten years, ruling during times of peace and conflict with both the Fatah party and Israel.

Following the election victory in 2006, Hamas began to increase its media presence to create a network of venues for the group’s propaganda and messaging. The organization began

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<sup>41</sup> Laub, Zachary. “Hamas.” *Council on Foreign Relations* (August 2014). <http://www.cfr.org/israel/hamas/p8968>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Counterterrorism Guide. “Hamas.” Last modified January, 2014. <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/hamas.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

by launching its television network, al-Aqsa TV. The television station broadcasts numerous programs, including “ideologically tinged children's shows, strident news talk, and religiously inspired entertainment.”<sup>46</sup> The network later expanded to radio, and propaganda produced perpetuated Islamist ideologies and anti-Israeli sentiments.

Hamas primarily utilizes al-Aqsa to create a uniform mindset. Despite setbacks and defeats, the organization was able to use the television network to broadcast a positive view of themselves while maintaining the construction of Israel as the key enemy. Additionally, Hamas developed a children’s magazine available on the web called al-Fateh. Its content is highly controversial, as it aims to reach younger audiences earlier to inspire extremist ideologies, including the glorification of war and suicide missions.<sup>47</sup>

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hamas heavily uses emotional propaganda in the face of the ongoing struggle with Israel. In response to failures, Hamas has been known to use graphic images illustrating the destruction that Israel causes regularly in Gaza. This propaganda tactic serves as a method to produce fear and elicit support for the group, who parades itself as a viable solution against Israel’s violence. Hamas ramps up its propaganda in the face of failure in order to enrage Palestinians into pledging their support based on the notion of a common enemy in Israel.<sup>48</sup> We examine Hamas’ response to devastating losses in the 2008-2009 Gaza War below.

#### *4.2 Hamas in the Gaza Strip*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has had a major and continued effect on Hamas, especially with regard to the war over the Gaza Strip. Following Hamas’ initial takeover of the area from Israel in 2007, the extremist organization began to experience loss of popular support

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<sup>46</sup> Westervelt, Eric. “Hamas Launches Television Network.” *National Public Radio*. February 3, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Goldman, Dudi. “Hamas Website: Kids, Die for Allah.” *Y Net News*. August 3, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Hyunjin Seo, “Visual Propaganda in the Age of Social Media: An Empirical Analysis of Twitter Images During the 2012 Israeli-Hamas Conflict,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 21 no. 3 (September 2014): 150-161.

and international aid. Previous allies to Palestine withdrew support at Hamas' rise to power, and in December 2008, Israel began military operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.<sup>49</sup>

The events in Gaza starting in 2008 have shaped up as numerous failures for the extremist organization. Israel's operation earlier on caused severe casualties to Palestinians, while only a handful of Israelis were wounded during attacks.<sup>50</sup> While Hamas had expended a great deal of military power--launching 558 rockets into Israel with low success rates--the war in Gaza is perceived as a major failure. With high death and injury tolls and a lack of sufficient pushback on the part of Hamas, Gaza suffered tremendously under their leadership. This led to further aid reduction and concerned allies, specifically Iran and Syria, which had backed Hamas' position and operations in Gaza.<sup>51</sup>

Hamas' initial response to the failures in Gaza was to address them from a political angle and attempt to amend its military strategy and doctrine in order to achieve better results in future conflicts with Israel. Hamas entered negotiations in their doctrine to "enable it to achieve its ambition of rivaling Hezbollah in its abilities".<sup>52</sup> Essentially, they used the failure as a way to reevaluate their strategies as well as to leverage the political climate in their favor. Propaganda resulting from this chain of events featured explanation and redirection of attention to feature Israeli atrocities and to paint a negative picture of the perceived enemy.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Zanutti, Jim, Carol Migdalovitz, Jeremy M. Sharp, Casey L. Addis, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Rhoda Margesson. 2009. *Israel And Hamas: Conflict In Gaza (2008-2009)*. Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40101.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Spyer, Jonathan. "Terrorism: Hamas Seeks New Doctrine After Gaza War Failures." *The Jerusalem Post*, September 10, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Zahriyeh, Ehab. "Citing past failures, Hamas demands an enforceable cease-fire." *Al Jazeera America*, July 16, 2014.

### 4.3 Hezbollah: History and Propaganda Tactics

Hezbollah, also known as Party of God, emerged in the midst of Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war, primarily in response to the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation in 1982. "In its infancy, the movement obtained critical financial support and training from Iran's Revolutionary Guards."<sup>54</sup> The early Iranian support had a significant impact on the group, as Hezbollah vowed loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in its manifesto in 1985.<sup>55</sup> The manifesto also called for the group to establish an Islamic regime, expel the United States, France and Israel from Lebanese territory, and also the destruction of the Israeli state.

Hezbollah is designated a foreign terrorist organization by the United States. Similar to Hamas, it has both political and military roots within Lebanon. However, unlike Hamas, Hezbollah is a Shia based political party and militant group. It formally began participating in the Lebanese government in 1992, and its role has only continued to grow over the years. The continued support from Syria and Iran has allowed Hezbollah to maintain "an extensive security apparatus, political organization, and social services network in Lebanon", leading the group to often being described as "a state within the state".<sup>56</sup>

The Party of God has a long history of violence, as the group has been involved in numerous anti-US terrorist attacks dating back to the 1980s, as well as violence against Israel.<sup>57</sup> In 2004, the UN passed a Security Council Resolution that called for the disarmament of all armed militias in Lebanon. Hezbollah, however, has retained their arms, justifying the move by casting itself as the defender of the state against Israeli aggression.<sup>58</sup> The group has since become

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<sup>54</sup> Masters, Jonathan and Zachary Laub. "Hezbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)." *Council on Foreign Relations* (January 2014).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Masters, Jonathan and Zachary Laub. "Hezbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)." *Council on Foreign Relations* (January 2014).

<sup>57</sup> Counterterrorism Guide. "Hizballah." N.d. <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/hizballah.html>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

embroiled within the Syrian conflict, and actively continues to employ its violent and extremist tactics.

Many analysts believed Hezbollah's involvement in Syria on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's regime would damage the group's position at home; however, Hezbollah has maintained its status within Lebanon, mostly due to its extensive media and propaganda network.<sup>59</sup> Hezbollah has had an extremely centralized approach to communication since its inception. In 1984 it launched *al-Ahd*, a weekly newspaper, which was used as a tool of control, demarcation and mobilization for its Shia supporters.<sup>60</sup> From the outset,

Hezbollah gave strategic importance to its own media apparatus, and devoted the necessary human and material resources to this, it also encouraged and sustained numerous media outlets that were not completely under its control, when these were considered to emanate from Islamist circles that supported Hezbollah's activities.<sup>61</sup>

The radio station 'Voice of Islam-Mustadh'afin' was a prime example of this, as it was an Iranian proxy based in Hezbollah territory in northern Lebanon.<sup>62</sup> Hezbollah has continued to use traditional media outlets today, expanding their mechanisms to include television channels, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses.<sup>63</sup>

Hezbollah's Al-Manar satellite channel has been a particularly important establishment for the group. Not only has it allowed the Party of God to more effectively target the Shia voting population, it has also exposed others to its platform, even beyond its immediate area of influence. Al-Manar was carried by numerous satellite providers all around the world in the early 2000s, including parts of North America, Europe, South America, and Australia. While some

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<sup>59</sup> Huffman, Zachary. "How the Party of God Uses Media and Resources to Succeed in the 21st Century." *Journal of Georgetown University-Qatar*, January 13, 2014. <http://www.qscience.com/doi/pdfplus/10.5339/messa.2014.3>

<sup>60</sup> Lamloom, Olfa. "Hezbollah's Media: Political History in outline." *Global Media and Communication*, 5, no. 3 (2009): 353-367.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Huffman, Zachary. "How the Party of God Uses Media and Resources to Succeed in the 21st Century." *Journal of Georgetown University-Qatar*, January 13, 2014. <http://www.qscience.com/doi/pdfplus/10.5339/messa.2014.3>

countries have banned the channel<sup>64</sup> and deemed it a terrorist entity,<sup>65</sup> Hezbollah's propaganda is still spread beyond Lebanon and the group's immediate operating area of influence. The centralized media structure has only made this extensive network more successful, as the party has complete control over what the outlets disseminate about the organization under it, making it a key target for rivals.<sup>66</sup> For example, during Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, the IDF made it a priority to target Al-Manar and other communications.<sup>67</sup> Although initially successful in its attack, Hezbollah's network was so extensive that Al-Manar's broadcast was only down for two minutes, marking one of the only real achievements for the group during the war.<sup>68</sup>

Hezbollah's propaganda is extensive, especially in terms of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. The organization has turned a battleground from the 2006 Lebanon War with Israel into a museum to highlight Israeli destruction and the positive work that Hezbollah performed during this battle. While the war proved to be a Hezbollah victory in terms of its propaganda, as it was able to leverage itself through a major step in its branding, in actuality it was an utter defeat on the ground. We examine the failures of the war and how Hezbollah responded below.

#### *4.4. Hezbollah and the 2006 War*

While most analysts consider the 2006 Lebanon War a victory for Hezbollah, as the group saw an increase in propaganda power, brand and overall community support, we identify it as a major military and operational failure for the group. Not only were the original goals not realized within the outcome, but the group suffered widespread defeat in both operational and military arenas. Hezbollah suffered approximately \$4 billion damage to its institutions and

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<sup>64</sup> The United States, as well as France, Spain, and Germany have banned Al-Manar. (Lamloum, 2009)

<sup>65</sup> The United States designated Al-Manar a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity" and banned it on December 17, 2004. (Lamloum, 2009)

<sup>66</sup> Huffman, Zachary. "How the Party of God Uses Media and Resources to Succeed in the 21st Century." *Journal of Georgetown University-Qatar*, January 13, 2014. <http://www.qscience.com/doi/pdfplus/10.5339/messa.2014.3>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

enterprises, with Lebanon suffering almost five times more.<sup>69</sup> Its military power was also severely impacted. First, Israeli forces destroyed Hezbollah's stockpile of strategic missiles, primarily given from Iran, during the first moments of the Israeli campaign in Lebanon.<sup>70</sup> Second, the group lost about one third of its "elite fighting force".<sup>71</sup> Third, Israeli soldiers defeated Hezbollah in every single face-to-face battle.<sup>72</sup>

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, responded to these military failures in a variety of ways. First, he attempted to conceal the significant losses from the Lebanese people, as well as Iran, primarily through false reports.<sup>73</sup> Hezbollah produced inaccurate propaganda that detailed the organization's successes and victories over Israel for both Iranian and Lebanese consumption in order to hide defeats.<sup>74</sup> Issuing false reports was Hezbollah's short term propaganda strategy to cover the group's unforeseen losses and maintain local, as well as Iranian, support. This was not successful, as Tehran and the local Shi'a community inevitably became aware of Hezbollah's devastation and destruction.

Nasrallah's distraction and manipulation of the mainstream media, however, was heavy with propaganda implications and proved very effective in the long run. Whenever possible, Hezbollah attempted to shift reporters' attentions to the Lebanese civilian deaths rather than the group's losses, starting a narrative within the media about disproportionality.<sup>75</sup> This narrative largely continued throughout the war and well after, and proved to be very successful for the group. Although Hezbollah did not win the war on-the-ground against Israel, "in the war of

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<sup>69</sup> Zisser, Eyal. "Nasrallah's Defeat in the 2006 War: Assessing Hezbollah's Influence." *The Middle East Quarterly* 16 no. 1 (Winter 2009): N.p.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Zisser, Eyal. "Nasrallah's Defeat in the 2006 War: Assessing Hezbollah's Influence." *The Middle East Quarterly* 16 no. 1 (Winter 2009): N.p.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Kalb, Marvin, and Carol Saivetz. "The Israeli—Hezbollah war of 2006: The media as a weapon in asymmetrical conflict." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 43-66.

information, news and propaganda, the battlefield central to Hezbollah's strategy, Israel lost this war."<sup>76</sup>

Thus, we begin to see the various, and often unrealistic, ways that extremist organizations respond to failure. Whether this is through denial and distraction or ignoring the set back and displacing the blame. Often times these methods have a significant impact on a group's propaganda and outreach strategies. While these propaganda tactics have historically been employed by extremist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, they have since been adapted, utilized, and altered by newer extremist organizations, like the Islamic State. In the following section, we will explore the way that ISIS has handled failures through a discussion of the group's origin and its historical use of propaganda. In Section 6, we will examine key military and territorial losses and the Islamic State's responses in order to develop a trend and highlight the ways in which ISIS has expanded upon Hamas and Hezbollah's classic strategies.

## **5. THE "CALIPHATE"**

### *5.1 Origins of the Islamic State*

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) presents a complex origin story, as the group's history is deeply tied to other extremist factions and organizations, most notably al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The formation of AQI can be traced back to the establishment of Jam'at al-Tawhid w'al Jihad in Iraq, or JTI, by Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. JTI was formed in response to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the group quickly became one of the key players in the Iraqi insurgency. By 2004, the success and momentum of JTI drew the attention of Osama bin

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<sup>76</sup> Kalb, Marvin, and Carol Saivetz. "The Israeli—Hezbollah war of 2006: The media as a weapon in asymmetrical conflict." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 43-66.



Laden, and it was at this time that JTI became one of his affiliates, rebranding itself al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>77</sup>

Following the death of al-Zarqawi in 2006, the group's influence and presence began to decline and deteriorate. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was born from its ashes. ISI's formation represented founder Abu Ayyub al-Masri's desire to differentiate himself and the group from bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Al-Masri also made it clear that ISI was no longer just seeking the liberation of Iraq, but wanted to go further and create a concrete Islamic caliphate.<sup>78</sup> Over the next few years, the first Islamic-state expenditure proved to be a failure, as the militants "did not have the resources or personnel to rule over territory or people".<sup>79</sup> By the end of 2008, Iraq was on the path to stability and ISI was thought to be defeated.<sup>80</sup>

ISI reemerged in 2010 under the new rule of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Four factors contributed to the reemergence of ISI between 2010 and 2013: (1) "organizational restructuring" and "rebuilding of its military and administrative capacities"; (2) the weak nature of the Iraqi state and growing Sunni discontent; (3) the decline of al-Qaeda under Ayman al-Zawahiri; and (4) "the outbreak of the Syrian civil war".<sup>81</sup> The Syrian conflict was one of the most important developments in regards to ISI's reemergence, as it allowed the insurgent group to exploit the political power vacuum in the country, furthering its regional influence.

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<sup>77</sup> Ghosh, Bobby. "ISIS: A Short History." *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2014.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/isis-a-short-history/376030/>; Hashim, Ahmed S. "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate." *Middle East Policy Council*, 21 (2014) 69-83. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/islamic-state-al-qaeda-affiliate-caliphate>

<sup>78</sup> Hashim, Ahmed S. "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate." *Middle East Policy Council*, 21 (2014) 69-83. <http://www.mepc.org/journal/islamic-state-al-qaeda-affiliate-caliphate>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

## 5.2 Historical Use of Propaganda

ISIS gained prominence relatively quickly in the region due to their rapid territorial acquisitions. While the group recognized the significance of holding territory and resources, they also grasped the importance of the media early on. Thus, as the organization ascended to power, it developed a strong media strategy in order to handle its successes and continued growth.<sup>82</sup> ISIS embraced the “propaganda of the deed” tactic, a tactic which other terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, have long employed as well.<sup>83</sup> The propaganda of the deed strategy is defined as

a terrorist act of political violence aimed against state targets, sometimes populations, with the objective of creating a media event capable of energising population to bring about state revolution or social transformation. Today’s revolutionary uses the weight of the media against media.<sup>84</sup>

Essentially, operations are planned and executed purely for their propaganda appeal.<sup>85</sup> It doesn’t matter whether the coverage is negative or positive, “they simply want the coverage of their brand and need to sustain it.”<sup>86</sup>

The cyber world represents a new front for ISIS, one that can sustain the organization’s image and promote its ideology well into the future. “The media is the arena within which the war of ideas is waged, where the group’s relevance-and, ultimately, its ideational longevity- can best be preserved and perhaps enhanced, even as it experiences territorial losses.” Videos were the original and primary vehicles for disseminating its messages and propaganda. However, films

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<sup>82</sup> Cockburn, Patrick. *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*. OR Books, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Winter, Charlie. “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>

<sup>84</sup> Bolt, Neville. *The Violent Image*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Winter, Charlie. “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>

<sup>86</sup> Logue, Jason. “Propaganda of the Deed: How Insurgents are Seizing the Initiative in the Information Environment.” *The Bridge*, September 2, 2015. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2016/1/3/propaganda-of-the-deed>

lost the ability to “seize the global agenda” and attention, as consumers became “desensitized”.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, as technology and social media progressed, so too did the Islamic State, its strategy, and savviness.

While video and audio statements still represent key parts of ISIS’ media strategy, the heart of its propaganda now comes from tweets, messaging apps, magazines, newsletters, and even its own news agencies. The age of Twitter has allowed Islamic State attacks to resonate beyond their initial occurrence. “ISIS terrorism doesn’t end when a bomb detonates. It continues for hours, days, and weeks after”.<sup>88</sup> Social media has also had a significant impact on ISIS’ response time. Attacks and operations that used to take the group days to respond to now only takes them mere hours, and response times have only improved as ISIS continues to improve their media strategy execution. For example, it took ISIS fifteen hours to claim and release information after the 2015 Paris bombings.<sup>89</sup> After the Brussels attack-- which occurred only months later-- it took half that time.<sup>90</sup>

The evolution of the Islamic State’s propaganda strategy and technical savviness has allowed the group to become a more dynamic threat. First, it has prompted the group to develop The Afaaq Electronic Foundation (AEF), a branch of ISIS specifically designated for “raising security and technical awareness” amongst its supporters and other jihadists.<sup>91</sup> Essentially, AEF is providing tools and guidance on how to communicate safely and avoid Western intelligence monitoring. “We recommend using encrypted and safe applications and open-source to maintain privacy” one AEF member wrote in a message on Telegram, in which he recommended

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<sup>87</sup>Winter, Charlie. “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Paganini, Pierluigi. “ISIS’s Afaaq Electronic Foundation (AEF) spreads awareness on anti-surveillance tools.” *Security Affairs*, February 4, 2016. <http://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/44214/intelligence/isis-afaaq-electronic-foundation-aef.html>

encrypted messaging apps like Telegram, Signal, and Chatsecure.<sup>92</sup> The use of encrypted apps allows extremists to operate outside the reach of intelligence agencies, or “go dark”, making it more difficult to monitor developing plans.<sup>93</sup>

Second, they also serve as vehicles for instant communication and dissemination. Thanks to apps like Twitter and Telegram, ISIS now has more influence over the narratives surrounding attacks and operations, as they can publish their theories and sequence of events early on. “In the avalanche of uncertainty that follow[s] attacks, the ISIS propagandists [are] able to dictate their story--literally word for word-- to an international, and specifically Western, audience.”<sup>94</sup> The use of these new platforms has allowed them to evolve their propaganda strategy while simultaneously making it easier to manipulate opponents, sympathizers, and even mainstream media outlets.

It is clear that the Islamic State has become one of the more dominant and tech-savvy extremist groups. Their extensive media and communications networks have allowed them to flourish, regardless of whether or not an operation is successful. Successful attacks illustrate the validity of their organization and encourage further support. Responding to failed operations and attacks however, requires a more intricate strategy and approach.

## 6. PROPAGANDA ANALYSIS

### 6.1 Territorial Losses

Notable failures for this group traditionally regard territory loss within the so-called established caliphate. ISIS has been consistently losing territory since its fast rise in 2014. In

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<sup>92</sup> O’Neill, Patrick H. “ISIS recommends list of secure-messaging apps amid heated U.S. encryption debate.” *The Daily Dot*, April 13, 2016. <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/isis-telegram-encryption-messenger-recommendations/>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Winter, Charlie. “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>

2015, ISIS reportedly lost roughly 14% of its territory and in the first six months of 2016, had already lost another 12%.<sup>95</sup> This illustrates the exponential increase in loss of territory over time, a failure ISIS responds to by changing its military tactics and messaging, particularly in the realm of propaganda. In May 2016, a U.S.-based analysis firm, IHS, reported that the Islamic State increased attacks in Iraq, Syria, and Libya as response to their substantial territorial losses.<sup>96</sup> In regards to its messaging, as of August 2016, the group's propaganda publication had plummeted as a result of increasing military conflicts with the coalition against ISIS.<sup>97</sup> The following timeline illustrates major territorial losses ISIS sustained between March 2015 and February 2017. Following this, we will delve into eight of the territorial losses with statistically significant responses.

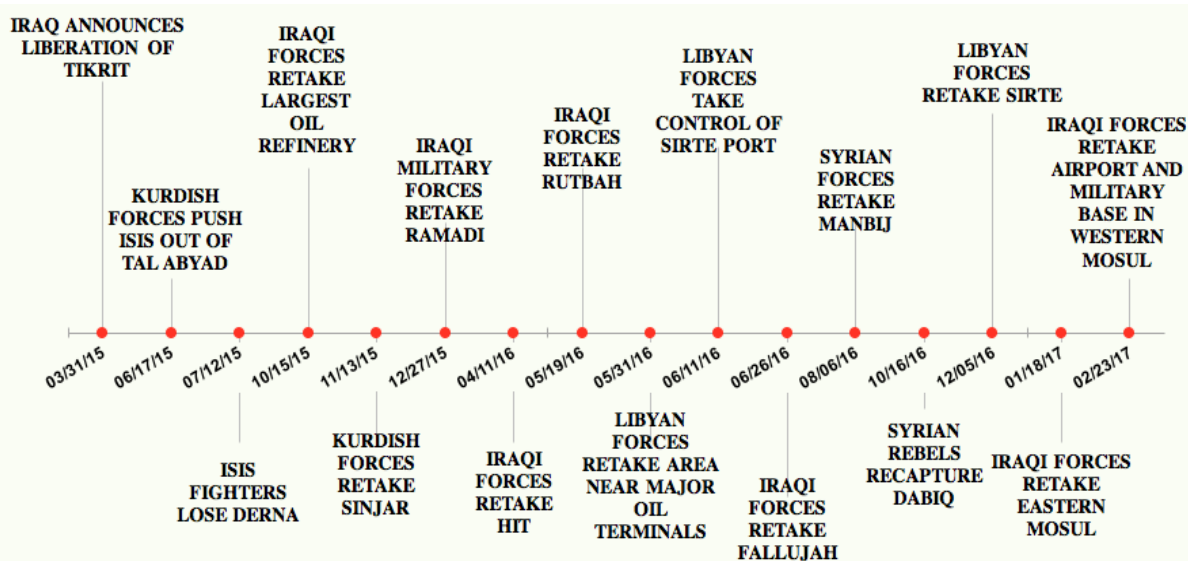


Figure 1: Major ISIS Territory Loss<sup>98</sup>

<sup>95</sup> "Islamic State Caliphate Shrinks a Further 12 Percent in 2016, IHS Says." *IHS Markit*, July 10, 2016. <http://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-caliphate-shrinks-further-12-percent-2016-ihs>.

<sup>96</sup> Kalin, Stephen. "Islamic State boosts attacks in response to territorial losses: IHS." *Reuters*, May 1, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-attacks-idUSKCN0XS1LQ>

<sup>97</sup> Shane, Scott. "ISIS Media Output Drops as Military Pressure Rises, Report Says." *The New York Times*, October 10, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/world/middleeast/islamic-state-media-propaganda-isis.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20\(ISIS\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/world/middleeast/islamic-state-media-propaganda-isis.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20(ISIS)).

<sup>98</sup> See Section 8.1

**Tikrit, Iraq.** On March 2, 2015, Iraqi forces began an operation to retake the city of Tikrit from ISIS forces. ISIS had seized the city mid-2014 during a period of major conquests in the country. After three weeks of clashes, the Iraqi government requested reinforcements from the U.S., who proceeded to conduct airstrikes. On March 31, Tikrit was officially retaken and Iraq declared victory over ISIS in the territory.<sup>99</sup>

ISIS' response to this significant loss - a loss considered "the biggest win so far for Baghdad's Shiite-led government"<sup>100</sup> - was minimal. The organization's leadership and military wing almost entirely overlooked the battle that caused them to lose Tikrit. The ninth issue of *Dabiq* magazine made the following statement regarding the battle of Tikrit, illustrating their intentions to redirect attention from losses in favor of global successes:

The West and its allies have, once again, been caught completely by surprise as they now find themselves fighting not just one enemy in Iraq and Shām, but now an international army of mujāhidīn numbering hundreds of thousands in different countries, whole continents apart. It's taken the coalition the best part of a year to put together a campaign against the Islamic State that is only now seeing a Shia mob supported by coalition aircraft make moves against Tikrit, but that's old news before it's even begun. **Why focus on Tikrit when the Middle East, Africa, and Asia are now on fire?**<sup>101</sup>

In addition to publishing little official response other than this post-battle, ISIS demonstrated its strategic abilities through strong internal coordination during the battle for Tikrit. As ISIS forces sustained damage and were gradually being pushed out of their strongholds, the group ramped up its violent conquest activity elsewhere. Experts suggest that this coordination of activity in the face of potential loss "may have been directed or encouraged by ISIS's leadership specifically to counteract a perception of weakness during the battle for

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<sup>99</sup> "Iraq claims 'magnificent victory' over ISIS." *CBS News*, April 1, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-to-reclaim-tikrit-from-isis-within-the-coming-hours/>.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Dabiq* #9, published May 2015. <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-9e280b3.pdf>.

Tikrit.”<sup>102</sup> Increasing attacks in Ramadi, an Iraqi government stronghold at the time, diverted Iraqi resources and attention away from Tikrit, an attempt to not only buy time, but to exercise continued strength in power.<sup>103</sup>

**Derna, Libya.** On July 12, 2015, Libyan forces took back the city of Derna. ISIS had been slowly invading the city since November 2014, eventually setting up an established stronghold. However, the Shura Council, an Al Qaeda affiliate and enemy of ISIS, continuously fought to keep ISIS out of the region. The Shura Council declared war against ISIS in June 2015 after ISIS assassinated the group’s leader. This declaration led to increased violent conflict and ISIS eventually being expelled from the city.<sup>104</sup>

Unlike the territory loss of Tikrit three months prior, ISIS directly acknowledged this loss of control. The group posted a video on July 11 confirming their loss in the city, but not without a promise to retaliate in order to avenge the militants who fought.<sup>105</sup> ISIS sustained incredible loss in forces during the battle, which may have prompted the direct acknowledgment. Rather than glossing over the event, ISIS chose to face it as a loss, although the leveraged it as an opportunity to increase propaganda, as instability in Libya is a continued positive breeding ground for terrorism.

Within the next two months ISIS sympathizers dramatically increased calls to join the organization to “capitalize on the security vacuum in Libya and join the terror group.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Gambhir, Harleen. “ISIS Global Intelligence Summary.” *Institute for the Study of War*, 2015. [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20INTSUM\\_Final.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20INTSUM_Final.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Moore, Jack. “Facing Defeat in Tikrit, ISIS Escalates Attacks Closer to Baghdad.” *Newsweek*, March 11, 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-escalate-ramadi-attacks-iraqi-forces-induce-tikrit-losses-312945>.

<sup>104</sup> Schachtel, Jordan. “Islamic State Vows Revenge After Losing Key Stronghold City in Libya.” *Breitbart*, July 13, 2015. <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/07/13/islamic-state-vows-revenge-after-losing-key-stronghold-city-in-libya/>.

<sup>105</sup> “ISIS Admits Losing Derna.” *The Daily Star*, July 13, 2015. [https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/story/ISIS\\_admits\\_losing\\_Derna-DS13072015\\_dsart-306367/](https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/story/ISIS_admits_losing_Derna-DS13072015_dsart-306367/).

<sup>106</sup> Moore, Jack. “‘Libya Needs You Too’: ISIS Social Media Drive Encourages Jihadis to Travel to North African Base.” *Newsweek*, September 28, 2015. <http://europe.newsweek.com/libya-needs-you-too-isis-social-media-drive->

Propaganda encouraged western jihadis to travel to Libya to support ISIS fighters. This was in conjunction with the organization's efforts to increase their power base in the North Africa region.<sup>107</sup> As an overall response, ISIS' admission of failure served to elicit a higher influx of foreign fighters.

**Ramadi, Iraq.** On December 29, 2015, Iraqi forces pushed ISIS out of Ramadi, a city the organization had captured in May 2015. Iraqi forces began closing in on the city center to retake the area a week prior, and officially raised the Iraqi flag on the recaptured government compound the following Tuesday. This was a major victory against ISIS, as the city presented prosperous routes to both Jordan and Syria.<sup>108</sup>

ISIS' response to this loss was more neutral; the thirteenth issue of the organization's magazine entirely overlooks the defeat and territorial loss. Instead, Ramadi is only mentioned in a section on notable military operations. Events in Ramadi recorded are only those that were deemed successful, such as the capture of barracks on the outskirts of the city and inflicting major casualties to Iraqi forces.<sup>109</sup>

ISIS did not entirely overlook the failure in Ramadi, however. Organization leader Baghdadi made a somewhat negative speech that was released on ISIS social media accounts. The statement was released prior to official defeat in Ramadi, but referenced pressure on the group during the battle. Baghdadi blames infidels in general for the continued pressure on ISIS regarding the three other major losses sustained that year. The leader calls for more foreign fighters in an attempt to increase recruiting in the face of loss, a move that appears to be

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encourages-jihadis-travel-north-african-base-333740?rx=us

<sup>107</sup> Moore, Jack. "Libya Needs You Too': ISIS Social Media Drive Encourages Jihadis to Travel to North African Base." *Newsweek*, September 28, 2015. <http://europe.newsweek.com/libya-needs-you-too-isis-social-media-drive-encourages-jihadis-travel-north-african-base-333740?rx=us>

<sup>108</sup> Fantaz, Ashley and Hamdi Alkhshali. "Ramadi Has Been Taken Back From ISIS, Iraqis Say." *CNN*, December 29, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/28/middleeast/iraq-military-retakes-ramadi/>.

<sup>109</sup> *Dabiq* #13, published January 2016. <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/the-islamic-state-e2809cdacc84biq-magazine-13e280b3.pdf>.



becoming a trend.<sup>110</sup>

**Fallujah, Iraq.** On June 26, 2016, Iraq declared the liberation of Fallujah, a city that ISIS had captured very early on in January 2014. ISIS' loss in Fallujah was speculated to have been relatively significant, as the organization had held the territory for quite some time and appeared to have some preference for it. Many ISIS militants simply abandoned the fight, potentially not wanting to do excessive damage to it. The government offensive to retake the city began on May 23 and lasted five weeks.<sup>111</sup>

ISIS had been framing losses as Shiite atrocities against Sunnis for some time. When the offensive in Fallujah began against the organization, the organization continued to blame Shiites, declaring in their newsletter that this was “part of a larger scale sectarian conflict being waged across the region.”<sup>112</sup> ISIS sympathizers also weighed in, leading to an overall group deflection of probable loss as an issue with the group's longstanding sectarian opposition. An Iraqi specialist notes that “ISIS has capitalized on this and will continue to project itself as the least worst option in an environment where the state is too weak to offer anything.”<sup>113</sup>

Following the official declaration of loss, ISIS did not specifically mention Fallujah. However, the group's public messaging increased, and statements acknowledged an increase in failures, alluding to the possibility that they will continue on the trend of territory loss. Yet, “at the same time, the group is vowing to press on with its recent campaign of violence, even if the

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<sup>110</sup> Hassan, Falih and Kareem Fahim, “ISIS, Facing Losses, Releases Recording Said to Be of Leader.” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/27/world/middleeast/isis-facing-losses-releases-recording-said-to-be-of-leader.html>.

<sup>111</sup> “Iraqi Army Claims Liberation of Fallujah from ISIL.” *Al Jazeera*, June 26, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/iraqi-army-claims-isis-held-fallujah-liberation-160626093706576.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Luck, Taylor. “Why a Loss in Fallujah May Be a Win for ISIS.” *CS Monitor*, June 2, 2016. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0602/Why-a-loss-in-Fallujah-may-be-a-win-for-ISIS-video>.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

terrorists themselves are driven underground.”<sup>114</sup> This follows the trend beginning to form as previously discussed.

**Dabiq, Syria.** On October, 16, 2016, Syrian rebel forces backed by Turkish forces recaptured Dabiq from ISIS. The operation began ten days prior on October 6. Dabiq was especially significant for ISIS, as it is the core and central part of the group’s apocalyptic prophecy message.<sup>115</sup>

This was a more difficult loss for ISIS to craft a coherent response to. Rather than spinning it to focus on smaller victories elsewhere or ignoring it, the loss of Dabiq could have warranted major defensive response. Experts speculated that they might choose to change the narrative to point out that they had succeeded in bringing forces in at all.<sup>116</sup> In a similar trend, however, ISIS chose not to formally acknowledge the loss.

ISIS did not acknowledge the fall of Dabiq, but the loss of a town in which the group placed so much symbolic and theological value cannot help but weaken the group’s image. ISIS attempted to draw attention away from the loss of Dabiq with propaganda focused on things like providing access to potable water within its territories. Pro-ISIS chats on Telegram, an encrypted messaging application and website, contained posts telling ISIS supporters to “remain steadfast” and “put your trust in [God].”<sup>117</sup>

ISIS sympathizers maintained that the reason for the loss was that the U.S. was working against ISIS in a compressed and unrealistic timeline. Thus, the battle for Dabiq in October had nothing to do with the final apocalyptic battle prophecy. Yet ISIS sustained major losses in this historically significant defeat. ISIS had used Dabiq in its messaging since 2014, naming their

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<sup>114</sup> Warrick, Joby and Souad Mekhennet. “Inside ISIS: Quietly Preparing for the Loss of the ‘Caliphate’.” *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-isis-quietly-preparing-for-the-loss-of-the-caliphate/2016/07/12/9a1a8a02-454b-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.cdc750788989](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-isis-quietly-preparing-for-the-loss-of-the-caliphate/2016/07/12/9a1a8a02-454b-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d_story.html?utm_term=.cdc750788989).

<sup>115</sup> Mooney, Tara. “Losing Dabiq: Potholes on the Road to the Apocalypse.” *Counter Extremism Project*, October 25, 2016. <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/losing-dabiq-potholes-road-apocalypse>.

<sup>116</sup> Luck, Taylor. “ISIS Suffers Major Symbolic Defeat With Loss of Dabiq,” *The CS Monitor*, October 16, 2016. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1016/ISIS-suffers-major-symbolic-defeat-with-loss-of-Dabiq>.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

magazine after the city and using its prophecy story as a strong recruitment narrative.<sup>118</sup> This loss was a turning point for ISIS amidst increasing failures.

**Sirte, Libya.** On December 5, 2016, ISIS lost control of Sirte, a Libyan city they had taken over in early 2015. A Libyan campaign backed by U.S. airstrikes began on May 12 and took six months to completed drive out ISIS militants. This stronghold was considered an important base, as it was one of the few outside of the group’s traditional territory gains in Syria and Iraq. The recapture of Sirte laid the groundwork for operations in Mosul, a fact that did not bode well for ISIS.<sup>119</sup>

ISIS acknowledged their defeat in Sirte in its established news outlets. *Al-Naba’*, a previously annual newsletter turned weekly newspaper, reported on the battle in Sirte, acknowledging losses incurred and explaining that ISIS militants fought hard against massive opposition, but were ultimately defeated.<sup>120</sup> A key loss sustained was the destruction of communications centers. Aside from news source acknowledgements, the only other notable change as a result of the loss was the massive decrease in propaganda.<sup>121</sup> ISIS appeared crestfallen regarding this loss and, unlike their usual responses, did not use it as a way to recruit.

**Mosul, Iraq.** The city of Mosul is still in the midst of conflict between the Iraqi government and ISIS. However, on January 18, 2017, Iraqi government forces announced the recapture of eastern Mosul after a three month operation. ISIS has held Mosul since 2014. The advance was and continues to be backed by U.S. airstrikes and is the “biggest military operation

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<sup>118</sup> Luck, Taylor. “ISIS Suffers Major Symbolic Defeat With Loss of Dabiq,” *The CS Monitor*, October 16, 2016. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1016/ISIS-suffers-major-symbolic-defeat-with-loss-of-Dabiq>.

<sup>119</sup> Withnall, Adam. “ISIS ‘loses Control of Sirte’ as Libyan Pro-government Forces Say Battle is Over.” *Independent*, December 5, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/isis-sirte-libya-pro-government-forces-say-battle-for-city-is-over-a7456481.html>.

<sup>120</sup> “الثلة الصابرة المؤمنة في سرت,” *Al-Naba’*, Issue 58, December 15, 2016. [https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-5822.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84_-newsletter-5822.pdf).

<sup>121</sup> Hatita, Abdul Sattar. “ISIS’ Internet Communication Lessens After Sirte Battle.” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 20, 2016. <http://english.aawsat.com/abdul-sattar-hatita/features/isis-internet-communication-lessens-sirte-battle>.

in the years since the United States ended its occupation of the country in 2011.”<sup>122</sup> Mosul is a major territory for ISIS, as it is a central capital of the so-called caliphate.<sup>123</sup>

As in the past, ISIS did not officially acknowledge the defeat. Al-Naba’ newspaper continues to report on current events weekly, but reports remain positive and focus on areas of success, including the supposed restoration of several locations in eastern Mosul.<sup>124</sup> The newspaper’s regular publications allude to the group’s continued positivity, but Baghdadi gave a speech with a much different tone on February 28. Speaking to ISIS preachers and clerics, he delivered a “farewell speech” in which he acknowledged overall defeat in Iraq. He urged militants and supporters to hide, flee, or complete suicide missions with the promise of 72 women in heaven. ISIS office regulating fighters was closed.<sup>125</sup>

ISIS’ leadership and presence in Iraq has nearly diminished, with many major players fleeing to strongholds in Syria. As of April 11, ISIS now controls less than seven percent of Iraq; its peak, the organization held nearly 40 percent.<sup>126</sup> This in mind, ISIS’ acknowledgement of general defeat in Iraq is major. However, we have seen a definitive trend in responses. Through this and the previous major territorial losses, we see ISIS’ tendency to overlook failures in favor of refocusing to instead hail the group’s strengths and successes through propaganda. This redirection is a relatively common trend among prominent extremist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Hezbollah in particular tends to use propaganda as a response to failure in

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<sup>122</sup> Gladstone, Rick. “Iraqi Forces Take Eastern Mosul from Islamic State.” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-isis.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20\(ISIS\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-isis.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20(ISIS)).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> “واستعادة عدة مواقع في الجانب اليميني من الموصل”, *Al-Naba’*, Issue 75, April 6, 2017. [https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-al-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-75.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-al-nabacc84_-newsletter-75.pdf).

<sup>125</sup> “ISIS Leader Al-Baghdadi Acknowledges Defeat in Iraq.” *Al Arabiya*, March 1, 2017. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/03/01/ISIS-leader-Al-Baghdadi-acknowledges-defeat-in-Iraq.html>.

<sup>126</sup> “ISIL Now Controls ‘Less Than Seven Percent of Iraq.’” *Al Jazeera*, April 11, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/isil-controls-percent-iraq-170411162419697.html>.

terms of blaming the enemy for sustained losses.

## 6.2 ISIS Operational Failures and Dismantled Cells

In addition to major territorial loss, the Islamic State has carried out a number of unsuccessful operations and attacks. As the group continues to lose ground within its established caliphate and regional strongholds, it tends to promote more lone-wolf or smaller affiliate attacks, which are not always successful. Furthermore, states have become more and more aggressive in terms of carrying out raids against ISIS militants and dismantling local cells within regional countries, as well as abroad. For example, Tunisia's Interior Ministry announced that security forces had dismantled approximately 160 jihadist cells, the majority of which were ISIS affiliates, in the first 10 months of 2016.<sup>127</sup> This was a 45% increase from the previous year.<sup>128</sup>

The following timeline illustrates notable operational failures, as well as reported dismantled cells and foiled attacks.

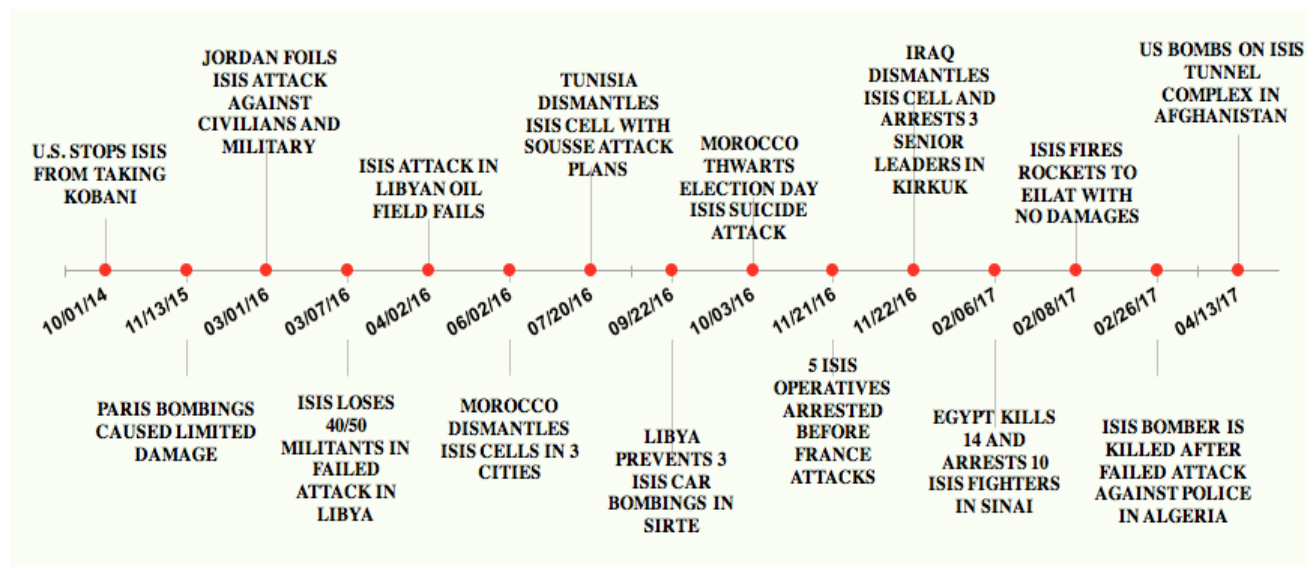


Figure 2: Major ISIS Operational Failures and Dismantled Cells<sup>129</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Amara, Tarek. "Tunisia breaks up 160 militant cells in first 10 months of 2016: ministry." *Reuters*, December 2, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-security-idUSKBN13R25F>

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> See Section 8.1

**Kobani, Syria.** One of the earliest, as well as largest, operational failures for ISIS came at the end of 2014 and continued into the early months of 2015. ISIS began an offensive in northern Syria, in the area of Kobani, around mid-September, capturing more than 300 Kurdish villages and parts of the town.<sup>130</sup> At the offensive's height, ISIS fighters controlled almost half of the town; however, they were never able to fully capture Kobani. The Kurdish YPG, assisted by U.S. airstrikes, laid siege to Kobani, forcing ISIS to begin retreating and give up their offensive in early January 2015. Although the Islamic State did capture and lose territory, it was prevented from fully carrying out and realizing its initial goal, therefore we have categorized it as an operational failure.

Following the retreat, the Islamic State admitted defeat, acknowledging for the first time that U.S.-led airstrikes forced the fighters to flee from the town. Two ISIS fighters attributed the withdrawal to the aerial attacks from the U.S. and some other Arab countries in a video statement, saying "The warplanes were bombarding us night and day. They bombarded everything, even motorcycles."<sup>131</sup> The other said, "[the warplanes] destroyed everything, so we had to withdraw and the rats advanced".<sup>132</sup> They promised a defeat of a defeat of the Syrian Kurdish YPG forces and to return and attack Kobani again.

**Paris Attacks.** On November 13, 2015 gunmen and suicide bombers attacked various locations in Paris, France almost simultaneously. The attackers, who acted on behalf of the Islamic State, hit a concert hall, a major stadium, restaurants and bars. It resulted in 130 casualties and hundreds of injuries.<sup>133</sup> While many would consider this a successful attack, many

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<sup>130</sup> "Isis finally admits defeat in Kobani after air strikes force its fighters to retreat." *The Guardian*, January 31, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/31/isis-kobani-islamic-state-syria>

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> "Paris attacks: What happened on the night." *BBC News*, December 9, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994>

experts view the Paris bombings as a failure for the Islamic State. This is primarily due to the fact that the attack was carried out by a higher-up in the group, and apparently did not do as much damage as intended.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, according to our previously discussed framework for determining unsuccessful operations, the Paris bombings would be considered a failed attack.

Following the Paris attacks, ISIS released a statement, originally written in French, claiming responsibility.<sup>135</sup> The Islamic State also released a new issue of their magazine, *Dabiq*, just five days after Paris, referencing the attacks in three different areas of the publication. Both the issue's cover and the Foreword are completely dedicated to Paris. The following excerpt highlights some of the the reasons cited by the Islamic State for the attacks:

A year earlier, on “19 September 2014,” France haughtily began executing airstrikes against the Khilafah. Like Russia, it was blinded by hubris, thinking that its geographical distance from the lands of the Khilāfah would protect it from the justice of the mujāhidīn. It also did not grasp that its mockery of the Messenger would not be left unavenged. Thus, the Islamic State dispatched its brave knights to wage war in the homelands of the wicked crusaders, leaving Paris and its residents “shocked and awed.” The eight knights brought Paris down on its knees, after years of French conceit in the face of Islam. A nationwide state of emergency was declared as a result of the actions of eight men armed only with assault rifles and explosive belts.<sup>136</sup>

This same message was reiterated in the group's video, released the day after the Paris bombings. In it, a member threatened further attacks if France continued to bomb and target the Islamic State, stating “As long as you keep bombing you will not live in peace. You will even fear traveling to the market.”<sup>137</sup>

The Paris operation is also included in “A Selection of Military Operations” by the

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<sup>134</sup> Lichfield, John. “Brussels attacks: ISIS Propaganda Message has been Muddled since Paris Attacks.” *Independent UK*, March 24, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/brussels-attacks-isis-propaganda-message-paris-belgium-bombings-terrorism-a6951021.html>

<sup>135</sup> Walt, Vivienne. “ISIS Claims Responsibility for Paris Attacks as Arrests Are Made.” *TIME*, November 14, 2015. <http://time.com/4112884/paris-attacks-isis-isil-france-francois-hollande/>

<sup>136</sup> *Dabiq* #12 published November 2015. <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-12e280b3.pdf>

<sup>137</sup> Walt, Vivienne. “ISIS Claims Responsibility for Paris Attacks as Arrests Are Made.” *TIME*, November 14, 2015. <http://time.com/4112884/paris-attacks-isis-isil-france-francois-hollande/>

Islamic State. This section is used for soldiers to “take a glimpse” at operations that have “succeeded in expanding the territory of the Khilafah or terrorizing, massacring, and humiliating the enemies of Allah.”<sup>138</sup> The Islamic State describes the “successful” attack in the following entry:

**France** – On Friday, the 1st of Safar, 8 soldiers of the Khilāfah carried out an operation in the heart of French crusader territory. The operation involved multiple simultaneous attacks with explosive belts and assault rifles on various targets including the Stade de France stadium, where the crusader president Francois Hollande was attending a soccer match, and the Bataclan theatre for exhibitions, where hundreds of French mushrikīn had gathered for a music concert. The attacks, which included other targets around Paris and succeeded in killing hundreds of crusaders and wounding even more, shook the world and reminded the nations of kufr that the Islamic State will continue to stand firm in the face of their transgressions and retaliate with fire and bloodshed in revenge for the honor of the Prophet and the multitudes killed and injured in crusader airstrikes in the lands of the Muslims.<sup>139</sup>

It is obvious from the space devoted to the Paris attacks, its inclusion under “successful” military operations, as well as its statement “succeeded in the killing”, that the Islamic State does not view the bombings and assaults as a failure. At least in public. However, ISIS propaganda underwent a period of decline following this event, highlighting analysts conclusions that the operation did not inflict as much damage as originally intended.

**Sinai Peninsula.** On February 8, 2017 an Egyptian Islamic State-affiliate fired rockets towards Israel’s Red Sea resort of Eilat from the Sinai Peninsula. Israel’s military said that the majority of the rockets were intercepted by its Iron Dome anti-missile system.<sup>140</sup> However, one did land in open area, but was described as “harmless”.<sup>141</sup> The attacks did not cause any damage or casualties.

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<sup>138</sup> *Dabiq* #12 published November 2015. <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-12e280b3.pdf>

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Al-Mughrabi, Nidal, Maayan Lubell and Omar Fahmy. “Islamic State-linked group claims rocket attack on Israeli resort.” *Reuters*, February 9, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-idUSKBN1500GF>

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.



ISIS stated in the 68th issue of its weekly al-Naba' newsletter that soldiers of the Islamic State targeted Jewish gatherings with rockets. The Sinai State, as the affiliate is referred to, issued a statement through its media office that was also included in the newsletter. In it, they said, the Mujahideen shelled Jewish communities in the city of Um al-Rashash (Eilat) with several Grad rockets.<sup>142</sup> The group also added, via Telegram, "what is coming is graver and more bitter."<sup>143</sup> However, the operation was not explicitly deemed a success or a failure, as the response and reference to the operation within al-Naba' stopped there. The only information given was what occurred and who was targeted, it did not mention the result. Following the two sentences devoted to the failed attack, the newsletter continued on to discuss other, more successful, operations that had also occurred within Sinai, in an apparent attempt to shift the focus away from an virtually useless attack.

**Constantine, Algeria.** On February 26 of this year, an Islamic State militant attempted to attack a police station in Constantine, a city in eastern Algeria. However, the attacker was shot and killed before he entered. An officer who was in front of the police headquarters saw the man approaching, warned him, opened fire, killing and ultimately triggering the explosive belt the attack was wearing.<sup>144</sup> Although two officers were injured in the blasts, no casualties occurred. The operation was ultimately unsuccessful.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the botched attack via its AMAQ news agency the following day. "An operation of martyrdom using an explosive in a bag by an Islamic State fighter yesterday targeted an Algerian police station in the Constantine city centre," AMAQ

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<sup>142</sup> "قصف تجمعات اليهود بالغراد وتدمير وإعطاب 3 أليات للجيش المصري المرتد"، *Al Naba'*, Issue 68, February 16, 2017.

[https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-6822.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84_-newsletter-6822.pdf)

<sup>143</sup> Al-Mughrabi, Nidal, Maayan Lubell and Omar Fahmy. "Islamic State-linked group claims rocket attack on Israeli resort." *Reuters*, February 9, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-idUSKBN1500GF>

<sup>144</sup> FRANCE 24. "IS group claims foiled suicide attack in Algeria." *FRANCE 24*, February 27, 2017. <http://www.france24.com/en/20170227-police-foil-attempted-suicide-attack-algeria>

reported. The failed operation was also acknowledged in the 70th issue of the group's weekly al-Naba' newsletter. Al-Naba', however, portrayed the operation as more successful than it was. The article claimed that the martyr detonated the explosive bag among the apostates, leading to the death and wounding a number of them.<sup>145</sup> The newsletter also claimed that the Algerian government tried to underestimate the importance of the attack and obscured the results.<sup>146</sup>

Despite the obvious failure to inflict more damage and casualties on the police headquarters, which sits underneath a building that is home to dozens of families,<sup>147</sup> ISIS tried to focus on the importance of the attack and what it represents. Towards the end of the article, the Islamic State called it a blessed operation that represented a serious security blow to the Algerian apostate government, which claimed on more than one occasion to eliminate the presence and soldiers of the Islamic State in Algeria.<sup>148</sup> They ended their response by referencing a more successful operation, which was carried out days later.

### 6.3 Trends

The general trend in ISIS' responses to operational and military failures as explored above is multi-faceted. It appears that as the group loses more ground more rapidly, they continue to point audiences to their successes in a more neutral style of denial, redirection, and subtle acknowledgement of losses and failures.

Typically, when the Islamic State has lost territory, it has refrained from mentioning it, focusing instead on its "victories." For instance, the loss of the strategically important Syrian city of Manbij has barely been mentioned in Islamic State propaganda, while attacks in Iraq and Bangladesh have taken precedence.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>145</sup> "هجوم استشهادي يضرب مخفراً للشرطة الجزائرية المرتدة في قسنطينة", *Al-Naba'*, Issue 70, March 2, 2017. [https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-22al-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-d9a7d9a022.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-22al-nabacc84_-newsletter-d9a7d9a022.pdf)

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> FRANCE 24. "IS group claims foiled suicide attack in Algeria." *FRANCE 24*, February 27, 2017. <http://www.france24.com/en/20170227-police-foil-attempted-suicide-attack-algeria>

<sup>148</sup> "هجوم استشهادي يضرب مخفراً للشرطة الجزائرية المرتدة في قسنطينة", *Al-Naba'*, Issue 70, March 2, 2017. [https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-22al-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-d9a7d9a022.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-22al-nabacc84_-newsletter-d9a7d9a022.pdf)

<sup>149</sup> Luck, Taylor. "ISIS Suffers Major Symbolic Defeat With Loss of Dabiq." *The CS Monitor*, October 16, 2016. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1016/ISIS-suffers-major-symbolic-defeat-with-loss-of-Dabiq>.

However, the overarching trend is an increase in public messaging calling for foreign fighters and sympathizers, addressing failures as a whole while blaming infidels and pressuring potential recruits to take more drastic action.

This sentiment has been reiterated time and again within the organization. For example, in an audio statement by the Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, an official spokesman for the Islamic State, the group called out America while simultaneously and subtly acknowledging failures and setbacks. He said, "Do you reckon, America, that victory will come by killing one or more leaders?" "Do you reckon, America, that defeat is the loss of a city or the loss of territory?" He responded by saying killing ISIS leaders will not defeat the greater "adversary", the group itself, and that taking its territory would not end its "will to fight".<sup>150</sup>

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi employed the same strategy in a message on November 3, 2016, his first statement in almost a year, which came after the loss of Dabiq in Syria, and when ISIS was on the defensive in Sirte and Mosul. In the statement, al-Baghdadi tried to project confidence, in an attempt to rally ISIS fighters and sympathizers. "This total war and great jihad that the Islamic State is fighting today only increases ... our conviction that all of this is a prelude to victory."<sup>151</sup> However, his focus on "soldiers of the Islamic State" beyond Iraq and Syria<sup>152</sup>, referring to them as "pillars of the caliphate", both underlined the Islamic State's recent decline and emphasized how essential smaller affiliates and lonewolves are for the Islamic State's survival.<sup>153</sup> The idea obviously resonated with followers, as a longtime operative stated in

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<sup>150</sup> Bunzel, Cole. "The Islamic State of Decline: Anticipating the Paper Caliphate." *Jihadica*, June 15, 2016. <http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-decline/>

<sup>151</sup> Bazzi, Mohamad. "Commentary: Beyond the bluster, Baghdadi signals Islamic State's next move." *Reuters*, November 7, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bazzi-baghdadi-commentary-idUSKBN12Z2FZ>

<sup>152</sup> Al-Baghdadi specifically named: Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Yemen, the Philippines, Somalia, and West Africa. (Bazzi, 2016)

<sup>153</sup> Bazzi, Mohamad. "Commentary: Beyond the bluster, Baghdadi signals Islamic State's next move." *Reuters*, November 7, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bazzi-baghdadi-commentary-idUSKBN12Z2FZ>

an interview over an Internet-audio service: We do have, every day, people reaching out and telling us they want to come to the caliphate. But we tell them to stay in their countries and rather wait to do something there.<sup>154</sup>

As the group sustained continued territory losses, propaganda narratives began to reflect it. The tone of propaganda shifted to more determined focus on organizational successes, often minimizing the strategic losses as trivial in the grand scheme of things.<sup>155</sup> Messaging and publications reported only victories and began to try to change the overall narrative that territory was a major interest to the caliphate. Sympathizers ramped up commentary through social media inputs by displacing blame, making excuses, and attempting to incite increased interest in joining the organization.

This trend was highlighted following the United States' use of the "Mother of All Bombs"<sup>156</sup> against the Islamic State in Afghanistan on April 13th. Following the strike, ISIS members and supporters took to Twitter to shift attention away from the attack by focusing on successes of the group. Numerous users tweeted an image<sup>157</sup> with info recapping victories (i.e. soldiers killed, attacks carried out, and army vehicles and weapons destroyed) by the Islamic State in Mosul over the last six months.<sup>158</sup> Others tweeted out about the killing of PKK members by the Islamic State in Raqqa and other minor victories in Iraq and Syria, filling up their feeds

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<sup>154</sup> Warrick, Joby and Souad Mekhennet. "Inside ISIS: Quietly Preparing for the Loss of the 'Caliphate'." *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-isis-quietly-preparing-for-the-loss-of-the-caliphate/2016/07/12/9a1a8a02-454b-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.cdc750788989](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-isis-quietly-preparing-for-the-loss-of-the-caliphate/2016/07/12/9a1a8a02-454b-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d_story.html?utm_term=.cdc750788989).

<sup>155</sup> Mooney, Tara. "Losing Dabiq: Potholes on the Road to the Apocalypse." *Counter Extremism Project*, October 25, 2016. <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/losing-dabiq-potholes-road-apocalypse>.

<sup>156</sup> The GBU-43/B, the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used in combat. The U.S. conducted the strike on an ISIS tunnel complex in Achin district, Nangarhar province. In a statement, General John W. Nicholson, Commander of U.S. Forces - Afghanistan, said "As ISIS-K's losses have mounted, they are using IEDs, bunkers and tunnels to thicken their defense. This is the right munition to reduce these obstacles and maintain the momentum of our offensive against ISIS-K." The strike resulted in the death of at least 36 militants. (U.S. Central Command)

<sup>157</sup> See Section 8.2

<sup>158</sup> الدولابية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:45PM EST. Suspended.; Bianco Nero. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:59PM EST. Suspended.; الكرار. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:02PM EST. Suspended.

with images and propaganda issued by the Islamic State that had documented the victory.<sup>159</sup> Most also took the opportunity to disseminate anti-US and anti-Western propaganda in an attempt to paint themselves as the martyrs, the U.S. as evil and the attack as unprompted.<sup>160</sup> The majority used language that called the United States and President Trump infidels, saying they were waging a war not against the Islamic State, but against all Muslims, invoking past bombings and military campaigns, like the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>161</sup> Some attempted to invoke sympathy by asking questions about the numbers of innocent women and children killed in the bombings.<sup>162</sup> One user even went so far as to pin an anti-U.S. propaganda video to the top of his feed with a tweet about holding steadfast and hashtagging Afghanistan.<sup>163</sup>

Every single Twitter account that we were able to track following the strike, that is, until it was suspended, had one thing in common, and that was a tweet of a graphic issued by the Islamic State with the nightly news. This graphic contained a quick break down of all the events from April 13, however it did not acknowledge the bombing in Afghanistan.<sup>164</sup> This was quite surprising, as the Islamic State had acknowledged major attacks, losses, and failures that we had tracked until this point in time. Thus, originally the official Islamic State media response was a deviation in our trend analysis. However, the following week, the MOAB bombing was officially

<sup>159</sup> كان صادق. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:03PM EST. Suspended.; جبير. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:13PM EST. Suspended.; الكرار. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:03PM EST. Suspended.; الكرار. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:03PM EST. Suspended.; الكرار. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:03PM EST. Suspended.; الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:38PM EST. Suspended.; الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:39PM EST. Suspended.; الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:41PM EST. Suspended.; الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:41PM EST. Suspended.; الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:55PM EST. Suspended.; نسلثم. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 5:27PM EST. Suspended.

<sup>160</sup> ذو الفقار. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:26PM EST. Suspended.; محمد اليمني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:47PM EST. Suspended.; جبير. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:23PM EST. Suspended.; الباروني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 3:40PM EST. Suspended.; الباروني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 3:40PM EST. Suspended.; الباروني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:44PM EST. Suspended.; حفيدة الزرقاوي. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:23PM EST. Suspended.

<sup>161</sup> الباروني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 2:43PM EST. Suspended.; عبد الله الصالح. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 1:56PM EST. Suspended.

<sup>162</sup> الباروني. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:34PM EST. Suspended.

<sup>163</sup> الدولوية. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017. 4:28PM EST. Suspended.

<sup>164</sup> See Section 8.3

recognized and acknowledged in the al-Naba' newsletter. Published April 20th, exactly one week after the bombing, the article was featured right in the beginning of the newsletter and was titled Khorassan Provenance: The American Bomb Did Not Hit the Mujahideen with Any Harm.<sup>165</sup> The article takes up one vertical half of the page, and refutes the U.S. claims that any injuries or death occurred within the Islamic State ranks. They go on to claim that the area that was targeted by the “crusader U.S. forces” was actually a clash zone and a point for meeting Afghan army recruits, thus it was empty at the time of the attack.<sup>166</sup> The article continues on to reinforce the denial of U.S. claims, while switching attention to other successful areas of operation within Afghanistan for the Islamic State. Thus, the publishing of the newsletter and acknowledgement of the MOAB bombing reinforced our trend analysis and made up for the surprising discrepancy the previous week.

The denial factor is a definitive characteristic of numerous extremist organizations in the face of failure. We saw the same thing among our framework organizations. For example, Hamas originally denied losing more than 50 militants during the Gaza war and Operation Cast Lead in 2008, which were ultimately unsuccessful for the Islamic Resistance Movement, despite Israel putting the figure around 700.<sup>167</sup> This denial continued for over two years. Hezbollah, now deeply entrenched in the conflict in Syria, has endured major operational failures and military losses. However, the group refuses to disclose or acknowledge losses<sup>168</sup>, as seen throughout the 2006 war with Israel, further supporting the trend of increased denial, redirection, or neutrality in the face of failure.

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<sup>165</sup> "مصدر من خراسان: قنبلة الأمريكيين لم تصب المجاهدين بأي أذى", *Al-Naba'*, Issue 77, April 20, 2017. [https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-al-nabacc84\\_-newsletter-77.pdf](https://khilafatimes.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/the-islamic-state-al-nabacc84_-newsletter-77.pdf)

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Haaretz Service. "Hamas Admits 600-700 of Its Men Were Killed in Cast Lead." *Haaretz*, November 9, 2010. <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/hamas-admits-600-700-of-its-men-were-killed-in-cast-lead-1.323776>

<sup>168</sup> De Luce, Dan. "Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah." *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah/>.

We are seeing a trend of neutral to negative responses to failure that seems to worsen when losses are on the rise. When organizations acknowledge failures, they do so only to redirect attention to success, to call for more members, or to brush over the significance of the loss in order to inspire continued positive morale. This idea has been highlighted in the Islamic State's response to both the Sinai and Constantine failures, as well as a number of their major territorial losses. With this trend in mind, we offer the following forecast to illustrate the implications of the current direction of responses to political and military failures.

#### *6.4 Implications*

Things are looking bleak for ISIS in terms of territory strongholds. The physical, on-the-ground landscape is not in their favor if we take into account the amount of territories they have lost and operational failures they have demonstrated. Thus, we assert that ISIS will likely be pushed out as a strong physical presence and as a "caliphate", but that the organization will continue to operate with great power and danger underground despite this.

ISIS has a robust network of messaging products despite damages to communication centers. Al-Naba' newspaper has yet to miss a week of publication despite pressure on the group on the ground. Sympathizers work daily to promote the organization, and frequent propaganda through social media allows the group to stay very much alive and at the forefront of at-risk minds. Social media in the hands of this highly popular and well-established organization will continue to benefit them in the longer term. In other words, ISIS will not go out without a fight.

Additionally, the group's impressive online presence has the power to continue to inspire lone-wolves. There have been numerous lone-wolf attacks throughout the world, who, upon arrest, profess allegiance to the Islamic State and its ideology--and the attacks are starting to occur more frequently. As the Islamic State's physical influence on-the-ground continues to

decline, the group only becomes more dangerous, at least in a global sense. Essentially, in order to counter military and operational failures and ensure the group's survival, the Islamic State will need to produce more propaganda that inspires attacks abroad. This sets up a perfect scenario for ISIS to continue to operate with soft power behind the scenes while remaining a highly relevant threat globally.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The Islamic State is one of the most tech and media-savvy extremist organizations in existence today. Although Hamas and Hezbollah have long employed successful media strategies, and still do today, ISIS has gone above and beyond in a shorter time frame. Their ability to continue to recruit and inspire attacks across the globe and all in the midst of territorial losses, high-ranking deaths, frequent arrests, and operational failures speaks to the group's strength in adaptability and strategy. While the group often employs the "denial in the face of failure" method that both Hamas and Hezbollah have historically used, the key difference is in their ability to subtly acknowledge failures, while simultaneously distancing themselves from them.

Furthermore, the group's embrace of messaging apps and persistence on social media websites like Twitter make the group that much more of a dynamic threat. Even though Hamas has engaged in Twitter, Hezbollah has been limited; and both groups refrain from issuing heavy propaganda materials and videos that members of the Islamic State disseminate in order to keep their accounts active. This variance in strategy has not seemed to hinder the Islamic State's online presence in the slightest. The Islamic State has truly adapted to overcome technology and social media shifts in order to stay at the forefront of the propaganda battle, allowing their sphere



of influence to reach virtually anywhere. Essentially, the expansive propaganda network that ISIS has facilitated allows it to twist the Western “narrative of decline” into one of “ascendancy”.<sup>169</sup> Negative or positive, any press is good press for the Islamic State.<sup>170</sup>

For other extremist organizations--those that are current threats and those that are emerging--this trend is important to consider. If organizations continue to respond negatively to failures through denial and redirecting attention, they will continue to stay a relevant threat, especially in a world where propaganda has such high rates of success on such a large scale. One of the key threats of ISIS’ propaganda strategy, especially in the aftermath of failure, is the possibility of other groups adopting and modeling its approaches after the Islamic State. Essentially, it has the potential to change the approach of other organizations to how they respond to failures.

Experts should pay close attention to this trend in messaging; it may prove to predict a group’s future decisions and its rates of recruitment. Responses cannot be ignored in the continuous war against extremism. Even though the situation is changing and evolving every day, we believe this trend is important, as it not only provides more information into the way extremist organization work in the face of setbacks, but also has the potential to help predict their actions in regards to social and print media publications, which can help in the field of counter messaging in the future.

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<sup>169</sup> Winter, Charlie. “ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself.” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Chronological Timeline of Notable ISIS Failures

- October 2014: U.S. stops ISIS from taking Kobani in Syria<sup>171</sup>
- March 31, 2015: Iraq announces liberation of Tikrit<sup>172</sup>
- June 17, 2015: Kurdish forces push ISIS out of Tal Abyad<sup>173</sup>
- July 12, 2015: ISIS fighters lose east Libyan city Derna<sup>174</sup>
- October 15, 2015: Iraqi forces retake the largest oil refinery in the country from ISIS<sup>175</sup>
- November 13, 2015: Kurdish forces retake Sinjar from ISIS<sup>176</sup>  
Paris bombings fail to cause as much damage as intended.
- December 27, 2015: Iraqi military forces retake Ramadi<sup>177</sup>
- March 1, 2016: Jordanian security forces foil an ISIS plot to attack both military and civilian targets, capturing 13 and killing 7.<sup>178</sup>
- March 7, 2016: 50 ISIS militants attack police and army posts in Tunisia along Libyan border in an attempt to control the town and expand their territory. 40 of the 50 militants were killed in the failed attempt.<sup>179</sup>
- April 2, 2016: ISIS attempts an attack on east Libyan oil field<sup>180</sup>
- April 11, 2016: Iraqi forces retake Hit from ISIS<sup>181</sup>
- May 19, 2016: Iraqi forces retake Rutbah from ISIS<sup>182</sup>
- May 31, 2016: Libyan security forces capture town near major oil terminals from ISIS pushing the group back toward its last Libyan stronghold in Sirte<sup>183</sup>
- June 2, 2016: Moroccan authorities dismantle ISIS cells operating in Tetouan, Martil, and Casablanca.
- June 11, 2016: Libyan forces take control over the port of Sirte<sup>184</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Thompson, Mark. “What the Failure of ISIS to Take Kobani Means.” *TIME*, October 26, 2014. <http://time.com/3540401/kobani-isis-islamic-state-pentagon/>.

<sup>172</sup> Agence France-Presse. “A timeline of the Islamic State’s gains and losses in Iraq and Syria.” *PRI*, February 19, 2017. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-02-19/timeline-islamic-states-gains-and-losses-iraq-and-syria>

<sup>173</sup> Glenn, Cameron. “Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State,” *The Wilson Center*, July 5, 2016. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>.

<sup>174</sup> “ISIS loses control of Libyan stronghold.” *Al Arabiya English*, July 12, 2015. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/07/12/ISIS-loses-control-of-Libyan-stronghold.html>

<sup>175</sup> Glenn, Cameron. “Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State,” *The Wilson Center*, July 5, 2016. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> “War on ISIS triggers blowback in Tunisia, Jordan.” *The Arab Weekly*, March 11, 2016.

<http://www.thearabweekly.com/North-Africa/4189/War-on-ISIS-triggers-blowback-in-Tunisia,-Jordan>

<sup>179</sup> Amara, Tarek. “Tunisia say Islamic State attacks border control.” *Reuters*, March 8, 2016.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-security-idUSKCN0WA1IR>

<sup>180</sup> Lewis, Aidan. “Guards killed in attack on Libyan oil field by suspected ISIS militants: spokesman.” *Reuters*, April 2, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-energy-idUSKCN0WZ0R3>

<sup>181</sup> Glenn, Cameron. “Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State,” *The Wilson Center*, July 5, 2016. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Al-Warfalli, Ayman. “Libyan security forces pushing Islamic State back from vicinity of oil terminals.” *Reuters*, May 31, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0YL1V0>

<sup>184</sup> Lewis, Aidan. “Libyan forces claim port in Islamic State stronghold of Sirte.” *Reuters*, June 11, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0YW2GS>

- June 26, 2016: The battle for Fallujah is settled as Iraqi forces retake the city from ISIS<sup>185</sup>
- July 20, 2016: Tunisia security forces dismantle an ISIS cell that had planned attacks in Sousse.<sup>186</sup>
- August 6, 2016: The Syrian Democratic Forces coalition of Arab and Kurdish fighters retake northern town of Manbij with help from US air strikes<sup>187</sup>
- September 22, 2016: Libyan forces prevent three attempted car bombings by Islamic State in Sirte.<sup>188</sup>
- October 3, 2016: Moroccan authorities foil an election day suicide attack planned by Islamic State militant women.
- Mid-October 2016: Syrian rebels recapture town of Dabiq, where Islamic State militants had promised an apocalyptic battle<sup>189</sup>
- November 21, 2016: Five ISIS operatives arrested before they were able to conduct planned December 1 attacks in France<sup>190</sup>
- November 22, 2016: Iraqi forces dismantle Islamic State cell, arresting three of its senior leaders, in Kirkuk.<sup>191</sup>
- December 6, 2016: Libyan forces declare victory in the battle to retake Sirte from ISIS<sup>192</sup>
- January 18, 2017: Iraqi forces retake eastern Mosul<sup>193</sup>
- February 6, 2017: Egyptian soldiers raid an Islamic State cell, killing 14 and arresting 10 others in central Sinai.<sup>194</sup>
- February 8, 2017: An Islamic State branch in Egypt fires rockets from Sinai Peninsula toward the Israeli city of Eilat causing no damage or casualties.<sup>195</sup>
- February 23, 2017: Iraqi forces retake airport and military base in western Mosul<sup>196</sup>

<sup>185</sup> “ISIS Fast Facts,” *CNN*, published on November 1, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/>.

<sup>186</sup> “Tunisia stops militant cell plotting attacks in Sousse.” *Al Arabiya English*, July 20, 2016. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/north-africa/2016/07/20/Tunisia-stops-militant-cell-plotting-attacks-in-Sousse.html>

<sup>187</sup> Agence France-Presse. “A timeline of the Islamic State’s gains and losses in Iraq and Syria.” *PRI*, February 19, 2017. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-02-19/timeline-islamic-states-gains-and-losses-iraq-and-syria>

<sup>188</sup> Al-Sahli, Ayman. “Libyan forces say foil Islamic State car bombings in Sirte.” *Reuters*, September 22, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN11S28E>

<sup>189</sup> Agence France-Presse. “A timeline of the Islamic State’s gains and losses in Iraq and Syria.” *PRI*, February 19, 2017. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-02-19/timeline-islamic-states-gains-and-losses-iraq-and-syria>

<sup>190</sup> Morenne, Benoit. “Prosecutor Says Arrests Disrupted ‘Imminent’ ISIS Attack in France.” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/25/world/europe/isis-terrorism-attack-france.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20\(ISIS\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/25/world/europe/isis-terrorism-attack-france.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20(ISIS)).

<sup>191</sup> Adel, Loaa. “Security forces dismantle ISIS cells and arrest its members.” *Iraqi News*, November 22, 2016. <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/security-forces-dismantle-isis-cell-arrest-members/>

<sup>192</sup> Walsh, Declan. “Jubilant Libyan Militias Declare Victory Over ISIS in Surt.” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/africa/isis-libya-surt.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20\(ISIS\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/africa/isis-libya-surt.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20(ISIS)).

<sup>193</sup> Gladstone, Rick. “Iraqi Forces Take Eastern Mosul from Islamic State.” *The New York Times*, published on January 18, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-isis.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20\(ISIS\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-isis.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FIslamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20(ISIS)).

<sup>194</sup> Knecht, Eric. “Egyptian army kills 14 militants in central Sinai raid: Spokesman.” *Reuters*, February 6, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-insurgency-sinai-idUSKBN15L154>

<sup>195</sup> “Islamic State-linked group claims rocket attack on Israeli resort.” *Reuters*, February 9, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-idUSKBN15O0GF>

<sup>196</sup> Bulos, Nabih and Haidar Abdul Ilah. “U.S.-backed Iraqi Forces Recapture Mosul Airport and Military Base.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-iraq-mosul-airport-20170223-story.html>.

- February 26, 2017: ISIS bomber attempts to attack a police state in eastern Algeria but is shot and killed before entering the building.<sup>197</sup>
- March 3, 2017: Syrian government forces capture city of Palmyra and surrounding areas from ISIS.<sup>198</sup>
- April 13, 2017: U.S. government drops largest non-nuclear bomb on an ISIS tunnel complex in Afghanistan.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Markey, Patrick. “Bomber targets police office in eastern Algerian city: Algerian media.” *Reuters*, February 26, 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-security-idUSKBN1650W2>

<sup>198</sup> Cook, Lonzo and Hamdi Alkhshali. “Syrian regime recaptures ancient city of Palmyra from ISIS.” *CNN*, March 3, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/02/middleeast/syria-palmyra-isis/>

<sup>199</sup> U.S. Central Command. Twitter Post. April 13, 2017, 10:33AM.  
<https://twitter.com/CENTCOMArabic/status/852575508537778176>

## 8.2 Islamic State Graphic Depicting Mosul Successes



## 8.3 Islamic State Nightly News, April 13



ISLAMIC STATE

## النشرة المسائية للأخبار المتفرقة ليوم الخميس

16 رجب 1438 هـ

**ولاية نينوى**

- هلاك 5 عناصر من الجيش والشرطة الاتحادية الراضيين وميليشياتهما قنصا في أطراف منطقة تي باب الطوب والصناعة القديمة وفي حي اليرموك في الموصل، ولله الحمد.
- إطلاق 265 قذيفة هاون مختلفة العيارات و 13 صاروخ كاتيوشا وقذيفة صاروخية على مواقع وتجمعات الجيش الراضيين وميليشياته في قرية تل زلط وأطراف قرية حليلة وعدة مناطق من مدينة الموصل، نسأل الله السداد.
- صال عدد من جنود الخلافة بمختلف الأسلحة على مواقع الشرطة الاتحادية الراضية وعناصر ما يسمى بالرد السريع في أطراف منطقتي رأس الجادة وباب جديد بالجانب الأيمن من الموصل، نسأل الله النكاية في أعدائه.
- تدمير موقعين يتحصن فيهما عناصر من ميليشيا سوات الراضية إثر استهدافهما بـ 7 صواريخ SPG9 في منطقة المطاحن وأطراف حي الآبار غرب الموصل، ولله الحمد.
- إعطاب عربة همر للشرطة الاتحادية الراضية إثر استهدافها بسلاح قنص من عيار 12,5 في أطراف منطقة باب الطوب بالجانب الأيمن من الموصل، ولله الحمد.

**ولاية الفرات**

- إسقاط طائرة مسيرة للجيش الراضيين في مدينة عنة، ولله الحمد.

**ولاية صلاح الدين**

- ذك مواقع الحشد والشرطة الاتحادية الراضيين في قرى البو دريب ومحمد الموسى والشوبرتان والديس وعلى الطريق الرابط بين بيجي وحديثة بـ 21 قذيفة هاون 120 ملم و 3 صواريخ B10 وكانت أغلب الإصابات مباشرة، ولله الحمد والمنة.

**ولاية ديالى**

- استهداف مقر للجيش الراضيين قرب قرية عمر مدان بناحية قرية تبة بعدد من قذائف الهاون 82 ملم، نسأل الله النكاية فيهم.

**ولاية الرقة**

- مقتل قيادي من الـ PKK المرتدين وإعطاب آلية رباعية الدفع تحمل مدفعا رشاشا من عيار 23 ملم إثر قصف من طائرة مسيرة بمنطقة البابلي غرب الكرامة، ولله الحمد.
- هلاك 3 عناصر من الـ PKK المرتدين في هجوم لجنود الخلافة قرب قرية جب شعير غرب منطقة تل السمن، ولله الحمد.
- استهداف نقاط الـ PKK المرتدين في قرية البابلي غرب منطقة الكرامة بـ 30 قذيفة هاون 120 ملم، نسأل الله السداد.

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