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Daesh Meta-Narratives: From the Global Ummah to the Hyperlocal

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Executive Summary

Daesh's innovative and tailored use of social media has enabled the terrorist organization to lure and recruit disaffected young men and women on a global scale. Effective interventions to reduce the flow of foreign fighters to Daesh require a nuanced understanding of the organization's recruitment strategies. This includes both the range of Daesh's propaganda media (videos, online print materials, offline recruitment networks), and the material's content.¹ Such analysis is essential for policy-makers and community leaders who are on the frontlines of developing effective counter-narratives to Daesh's insidious ideology.

The Carter Center identified several main themes that Daesh employs in its recruitment propaganda. These narratives are deployed in multiple languages and are addressed to a range of target audiences. They reinforce each other and evolve over time, collectively working to provide emotional, rational, and behavioral appeals to potential recruits. Daesh does not recruit with one message, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to prevention. Effective intervention requires that credible, grass-roots leaders develop counteroffers and practical pathways to engagement that address core socio-political grievances. Left unaddressed, these grievances provide an opening to Daesh's propaganda and a fertile ground for the growth of violent extremism.

¹ For an analysis of Daesh online print magazine Dabiq, see the Center's report "An Analysis of Daesh's Online Recruitment Magazine, *Dabiq*," December 2015.

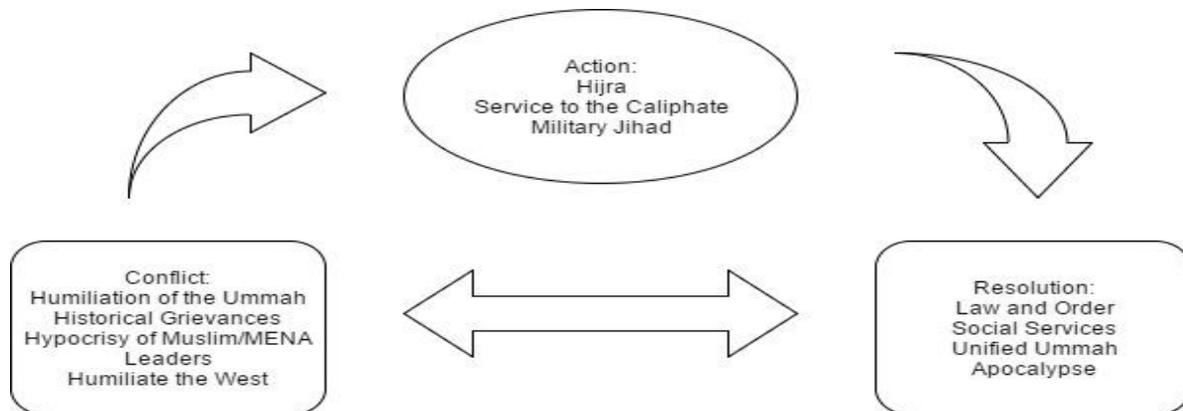
https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/dabiq-report-12-17-15.pdf

Defining the Conflict: Narratives of Division

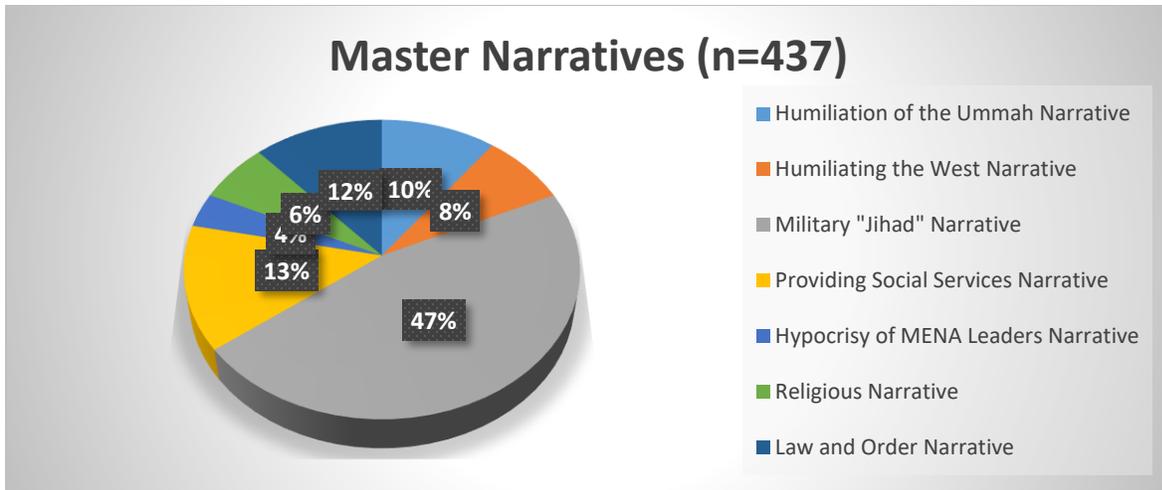
Narratives are a powerful rhetorical device and play a strategic role in Daesh’s communication strategies. They overlay meaning on a complex set of experiences, helping to organize and make sense of the world. Analyzing the narratives that Daesh employs to garner legitimacy and recruit adherents is essential to understanding its recruitment propaganda and developing effective strategies to delegitimize it.

The Carter Center identified seven main narratives in Daesh recruitment propaganda. These master narratives are dialectical and mutually reinforcing. Each narrative, while distinct, functions by identifying enemies, prescribing actions, and/or providing a resolution: 1) anger over humiliation of the *Ummah* or historical grievances; 2) desire to humiliate and expose the hypocrisy of the West; 3) glorification of military jihad; 4) provision of social services and benefits to subject populations; 5) disapproval of the hypocrisy of Muslims and/or Middle East and North Africa (MENA) leaders; 6) propagation of religious/theological doctrine; and 7) ability to administer territory and provide law and order.

The interaction of Daesh’s narratives in their overall frame can be depicted graphically:



Daesh propaganda seeks to reinforce a simplistic but emotionally satisfying division of the world into two camps—the good and the evil. There is no gray zone. The articulations of this division vary—Islam vs. the West, good Muslims vs. apostate Muslims, believers vs. unbelievers—but the central division is always reinforced. Of the 437 videos analyzed for this report, 95 videos, or 22 percent, were directly related to narratives that posit an explicit us-vs.-them mentality.



Often, Daesh seeks to provide evidence for this division via decontextualized clips from Western media. Of the videos The Carter Center analyzed, about 12 percent re-appropriated Western mainstream media clips, almost half of them from the United States. The group uses these Western media clips, including images of political leaders, to illustrate that the West is at war with Islam.

Daesh emphasizes Western transgression in the Muslim world to stress historical grievances and justify attacks as a legitimate response. Videos fueled by this narrative often show in agonizing detail the bodies of children allegedly injured or killed in Coalition airstrikes.² Narratives like these assert a defensive position and seek to establish a hyper-intensified moral space for potential recruits. Battle lines are drawn and action is demanded. Most of these videos are in Arabic, but with subtitles in Western languages (especially French and English). In June 2014, Daesh



Screenshot from a late-2016 video showing then-President Obama as leading a global anti-Islam coalition

spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani stated, “The time has come for the *Ummah* of Mohammed to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace.” In subsequent videos, Daesh featured scenes of destruction from Gaza and the West Bank, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Another video, released in May 2016 and titled “Blood for Blood,” featured children of the “caliphate” walking through rubble. Videos like these define a conflict (between Islam and the West, or Islam and hypocrites or apostates), place blame, and evoke moral outrage toward enemies. Such scenes are designed to convince individuals who experienced the conflict firsthand, as well as those who feel horrified at the suffering in Syria

² The Global Coalition against Daesh was formed in 2014 to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria through military intervention, reduce foreign fighter flows, disrupt financing networks, stabilize liberated areas, and provide countermessaging. It now counts 86 nations as members. <http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/home/>

and Iraq and perhaps those who feel alienated in Western countries. They demand explicit action from the audience: Join the fight.

However, propaganda narratives designed to sow division and define sides in a global conflict are not limited to criticizing the West. Indeed, the clear majority of those who have suffered at the hands of Daesh are Muslim. Daesh propaganda seeks to delegitimize Muslim and MENA leaders, including Western imams. By seeking to discredit Muslim religious leadership, Daesh is seeking to establish its own religious legitimacy and defend against criticism. In December 2015, Daesh released several videos calling for attacks against the nations of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, based on their recent support and coordination with the Coalition. In one video, the king of Saudi Arabia is shown shaking hands with U.S. President Barack Obama; the video concludes by encouraging the beheading of both the king and his Shiite citizens. Other videos, like “God Will Be Sufficient for You Against Them,” released in July 2016, feature footage of Free Syrian Army soldiers being trained by Coalition partners. Appearing in Arabic with English subtitles, the video both delegitimizes Syrian opposition forces as “slaves” of their Western masters, and humiliates Western planners for being ignorant of Middle Eastern cultural norms. Importantly, of videos analyzed by the Center as illustrating the hypocrisy of Muslim leaders, 93 percent were primarily in Arabic, illustrating that Daesh is strategic in the narratives it deploys to specific target audiences.

Daesh also employs narratives that seek to sow division within Western societies, pitting Muslims against the societies in which they live, and non-Muslims against their Muslim neighbors. Such arguments often employ histories of racial or ethnic or religious discrimination in the West. For example, multiple videos as well as print articles have highlighted recent incidents of racial or religious tension in the United States. Daesh regularly includes images of multi-ethnic cadres of *mujahideen* celebrating brotherhood and their arrival to the “caliphate” to promote diversity and acceptance within the caliphate. Interestingly, most videos (65 percent) coded with the ‘humiliating the West’ narrative were released in English, suggesting Daesh targets English-speaking recruits by exposing racism and intolerance in Western society.

“Rise Up, Brothers, Rise Up!”



Screenshot from the November 2015 video
“Rise Up, Brothers, Rise Up!”

Of the 437 videos analyzed for this report, 204, or 47 percent, were focused on graphic images of warfare, the most dominant of the seven narratives in the model. While other narratives describe life in the caliphate as a utopia, narratives focused on military jihad provide an action plan for potential recruits while also highlighting events or persons working to actualize Daesh’s military goals. Daesh ideology redefines the term *jihad* exclusively as outward violence against those unwilling to adopt their strict worldview, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These videos articulate grandeur and heroism in idealized military engagements; combat is glorified to create a warrior

culture. In a video released in January 2016, “Kill Them Wherever You Find Them,” Daesh threatens Paris with more “November 13”-style attacks. In these genres of videos, Daesh regularly portrays fighters between 20 and 30 years of age as shepherds of an impending apocalypse, seeking to both terrorize their enemies and inspire potential recruits worldwide.

Military jihad videos released by Daesh function as advertisements for the adventurous and disaffected. In the video “Let’s Go for Jihad” referenced in the image above, Daesh combatants are shown, first, praying together and studying the Qur’an, and then advancing on opposing forces, riding in tanks and firing RPGs. As the images flow, a haunting *nasheed* (chant or song) builds in tempo and volume, propelling the viewer into battle with the young men on screen. The narrative glorifies military combat, but also attempts the argument that study, prayer, and the bonds of brotherhood lead one inevitably to the battlefield. The images reach their pitch along with the *nasheed*, as subtitles flash across the bottom of the screen in English: “Brothers, rise up! Let’s go for jihad!” It is important to note that Daesh videos that emphasize the military jihad narrative are not simply designed to glorify combat. These videos are imbued with a sense of urgency, not seen in other genres of video. Their appeals are not simply based on reason or emotion; they offer a behavioral appeal—an opportunity to engage and to find agency.

While the military jihad narrative remains a staple in Daesh propaganda, its prominence and frequency fluctuates depending on several factors, including territorial losses and gains or terror attacks abroad. For instance, Daesh increased its use of the military jihad narrative to over 70 percent of its recruitment videos during the spring of 2015 to highlight territorial gains made during that time, including the seizure of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk in Damascus, the city of Ramadi in Iraq, and Sirte, Libya.

Utopia: Life Under the Shade of the “Caliphate”



Figure 1: Screenshot of young man featured in *Mujatweets*, Episode #6, extolling the virtues of Daesh.

In contrast to the uncensored violence of the *jihad* narrative, utopian videos use positive branding to emphasize the benefits of life under Daesh’s black flag. Narratives related to this utopian vision comprise 32 percent of videos analyzed by the Center. Daesh taps into socio-economic grievances of different Muslim communities by offering footage of social services and prosperity, paired with audio condemning corrupt governments and sociopolitical structures. These videos

aim to personify the idea of the “Utopia,” like the innovative “*mujatweets*” series of short (less than one minute) clips of life inside Daesh territory. Released throughout 2015, the *mujatweets*

series advertises the benefits awaiting potential recruits, and the social justice enacted by Daesh, in succinct and precise terms. *Mujatweets* Episode #7, set in Daesh’s Raqqa Market, immerses the viewer in images of bins and shelves overflowing with fresh produce, meat, and fruits. In *Mujatweets* Episode #2, more than 30 children run toward a pushcart selling cotton candy and pink ice cream – a paradise for kids – suggestive of Daesh’s family-oriented and stable atmosphere. These episodes almost always use a subjective or first-person camera angle to put the viewer directly into the scene. Such immersion allows recruits to imagine themselves in the Islamic State. Such video footage aims to depict everyday life through personal settings, diverse nationalities and ages, and intimate camera technique. By alternating production techniques such as camera distance, angles, lighting, and graphics, life under the shade of the caliphate becomes more appealing.³

Narratives that emphasize Daesh’s ability to administer law and order in its territory are designed to garner political and religious legitimacy as a state and as the guardians of Islamic law. Videos coded under the law and order narrative were in Arabic in 82 percent of cases, indicating that this narrative is primarily targeted at either internal Iraqi or Syrian audiences or Arabic-speaking audiences suffering under dictatorial regimes. A well-known video series, “Commanding the Truth,” provides numerous examples of Daesh imposing its version of Islamic law in Iraq and Syria. In Part 4, a Daesh fighter stands in front of a cigarette merchant stall as his men clear out the store’s goods. A crowd gathers as the fighter gives an impromptu sermon on the physical and societal ills caused by smoking. Jokingly shifting his accent to sound more Iraqi, subtly building identity with the audience through humor, he points out the fruit on sale — “The Sharia does not prohibit what is good for you, only what is bad.” Narratives like these attempt to establish Daesh’s piety and religious legitimacy, particularly among conservative Muslims in Daesh territory and beyond.⁴ The Carter Center’s analysis shows this narrative increasing from around 9 percent in the latter part of 2014 to almost 20 percent in January of 2015, and then shrinking back down to 7 percent in 2016 as anti-Daesh Coalition forces gained ground on multiple fronts.

Religious themes are dominant in only 6.4 percent of the 437 videos analyzed, but provide a frame for other narrative arguments. Apocalyptic in nature, these videos emphasize the final clash between Muslims and “crusaders” in Dabiq, Syria. A widely viewed example, “Meeting at Dabiq,” shows Arab and non-Arab Muslim fighters raising the black flag over Rome and Istanbul.⁵ Daesh cites rewards in the afterlife and often lionizes its deceased fighters. When Daesh declared itself a

³ The term “graphics” here refers to High Definition (HD) quality, subtitles, and special effects.

⁴ Subsequent field work in North Africa confirms that law-and-order arguments are particularly compelling among conservative Salafi Muslims, who often feel discriminated against in mainstream Muslim states. Salafism is often confused with terrorism, even in Muslim-majority countries. As a result, Salafi communities are easy targets for security services and broadly applied terrorism laws.

⁵ Daesh propagandists were forced to revise the apocalyptic narrative when Syrian rebels seized control of the town of Dabiq in late 2016. Anticipating this loss in battles fought both on the ground and through propaganda, Daesh renamed its flagship print publication, changing it from “Dabiq” to “Rumiyah,” Arabic for Rome. Daesh made this change roughly a month before the fall of Dabiq.

caliphate in June 2014, it presented itself as the singular political and religious authority over all Muslims. While Daesh’s claim to the caliphate is not novel, its violent misrepresentation of Islam and shocking acts of brutality have sparked international condemnation, particularly within the Muslim community.⁶

Conclusion

Daesh bases its ideology on a spurious and literalist understanding of Islamic texts to challenge the nation-state. It seeks to advance its agenda through innovative use of media, releasing video from multiple media outlets across 14 counties. Daesh’s media strategy is not static. Video content evolves, in terms of both the narratives employed and the audiences targeted. Videos in the first four months of 2017 show a heavy focus on military activities in Iraq and Syria, and an increasing focus on suicide attacks against military targets, while utopian narratives have played a more limited role. Military interventions will continue to erode Daesh’s organizational capabilities and territorial holdings, driving further evolutions in media strategy. However, military intervention alone cannot fracture the range of narratives that Daesh has used to mobilize potential recruits.

The international community must not cede important interpretative ground to Daesh’s ideologues. As important as counter-narratives are, it is perhaps more important to present counteroffers to those most at risk to Daesh recruitment. Muslims around the world, especially the youth, recognize suffering and injustice and are eager to exercise their agency in working toward solutions. However, in the context of decade-long wars and oppressive regimes, narratives of positive social change and economic liberation are, unfortunately, in short supply.

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⁶ For a representative example, see the now famous “Letter to Baghdadi” signed by over 100 global Muslim leaders: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>