

# THE CARTER CENTER



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### *Religious Appeals in Daesh's Recruitment Propaganda*

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#### **Executive Summary**

The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh) employs a complex online media strategy to recruit targeted demographics. Its success has exacerbated conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere, and has become a concern for the international community. The Carter Center (the Center) is working to counter Daesh's recruitment propaganda efforts by undertaking in-depth analysis of its recruitment media, including video, print and social media. This report examines the use of Qur'anic verses in 256 of Daesh's propaganda videos.<sup>1</sup> The use of these verses in Daesh propaganda are analyzed by frequency, partial or full *ayahs*<sup>2</sup>, and whether they are *Madani* or *Makki*.<sup>3</sup> By examining Daesh's manipulation of the *Qur'anic* text to claim religious legitimacy, this analysis can serve as a resource for religious and community leaders' understanding of Daesh's recruitment strategies. This is imperative for effective counter-messaging and rejecting Daesh's misinterpretation of the *Qur'an* to justify political violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Daesh videos examined were released between July 2014 and July 2015. This represents only a subset of the total number of videos coded and analyzed.

<sup>2</sup> *Surah* refers to individual chapters of the *Qur'an*; *ayah* refers to individual verses in a specific *surah*.

<sup>3</sup> *Makki* or *Madani* refers to the place and time a particular verse of the *Qur'an* was revealed.

## Master Narratives and the Role of Religious Appeals

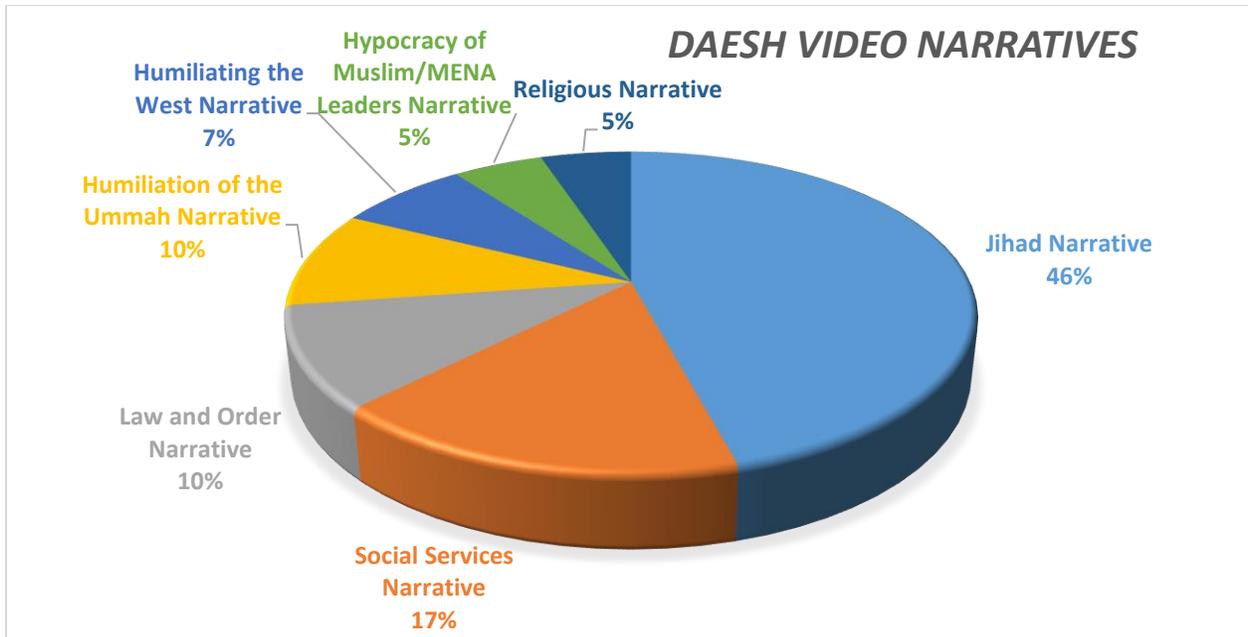
Daesh recruitment propaganda strategies center on the deployment of multiple narratives designed to heighten the socio-political grievances of its target audience. Master narratives employed by Daesh include, but are not limited to, the humiliation of the transnational Muslim community (*ummah*), the desire to humiliate the West, reification and celebration of military *jihad*<sup>4</sup>, providing social services and effectively administering territory, and the hypocrisy of Muslim and Middle Eastern political and religious leaders. Whatever the narrative, Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on the misinterpretation and decontextualization of core Muslim religious texts, including the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*<sup>5</sup> literature, in an attempt to both (1) claim religious authority for their establishment of a Caliphate, and (2) morally justify violence and terror in the service of that larger political project. It is important to emphasize that Daesh is primarily a political group serving political aims (including the establishment of a modern state and the elimination of political rivals), even if those aims are framed in terms of religious discourse and theological appeals. This is clearly evidenced by the frequency of different narratives employed by Daesh—narratives predicated primarily on the glory of warfare (*jihad*), modern notions of political legitimacy (such as the ability to provide social services or administer territory), or historical and political grievances (Sykes-Picot or Western transgression), appear much more frequently in their propaganda than purely religious or theological narratives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The primary meaning of *jihad*, or the 'greater *jihad*', refers to the struggle within oneself for moral and religious perfection. The 'lesser' *jihad* refers to the protection and expansion of Islam, through proselytism, defense or offensive warfare. It is *jihad* in the secondary, military sense (the lesser *jihad*) that is fetishized in Daesh's propaganda.

<sup>5</sup> *Hadith* literature refers to that body of sacred literature in the Islamic tradition that records the sayings and doing of the Prophet, Muhammad ibn Abdallah. The *hadith* comprise a vast body of materials collected within the first several centuries after the Prophet's death.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on the Carter Center's analysis of 285 Daesh recruitment propaganda videos and other online media for narrative strategy. It is important to note that narratives employed by Daesh change over time and based on multiple factors, including gender, language, events, and intended audience. Publication forthcoming.



### The Rhetoric of Religious Justification

Regardless of the narrative, highly emotive religious justifications for violent action are employed. This approach is particularly effective among foreign recruits who, in addition to holding local political grievances, are shown to lack religious literacy. In the recent past, al-Qaida's own publicly available recruitment manual stresses recruitment outreach to targets with low religious literacy.<sup>7</sup> Daesh recruit intake forms indicate that the vast majority (70%) of foreign fighters who arrived in the Islamic State throughout 2014 self-reported their *shari'a*<sup>8</sup> literacy as 'basic.'<sup>9</sup> In 2015 in the United States, 40 percent of individuals arrested with ties to Daesh were recent converts.<sup>10</sup> Lack of religious knowledge among vulnerable groups provides an opening for Daesh recruitment propaganda. Beyond a lack of religious education, these examples also suggest a clear communication gap between disaffected youth and Muslim religious leaders. While Muslim religious leaders have consistently condemned Daesh's violent ideology<sup>11</sup>, their reliance on

<sup>7</sup> Abu Amr al-Qa'idi, "A Course in the Art of Recruiting Mujahidin,"

[https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A\\_Course\\_in\\_the\\_Art\\_of\\_Recruiting\\_-\\_Revised\\_July2010\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A_Course_in_the_Art_of_Recruiting_-_Revised_July2010_djvu.txt); accessed Aug. 23, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Shari'a* has its primary range of meaning in relation to religion and religious law. In Islam, it designates the rules and regulations governing the lives of both individual Muslims and Muslim society, derived, in principle, from the *Qur'an* and *hadith*. The word is closely related to *fiqh*, which means academic discussion of divine law.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* report, April 2016.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note as well that of the entire American-Muslim population, roughly 23% are converts. It is thus expected that converts would be overrepresented among Daesh recruits in the U.S. context. See Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa," *Program on Extremism: The George Washington University*, December 2015.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, an open letter from some 100 Muslim religious leaders to Daesh's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>. Last accessed Aug. 23, 2016.

traditional forms of communication fails to connect with the demographic groups most susceptible to Daesh's recruitment propaganda.

The rhetoric of religious justification employed by Daesh in their online recruitment propaganda is also multifaceted. Persistent themes of their religious message include a rigid *takfiri* (infidel) ideology, a bipolar view of the world, and a fetishizing of military jihad and martyrdom. The practice of pronouncing another Muslim an infidel (*kafir*) or apostate (*murtadd*) was sidelined very early in the Islamic tradition. Daesh recruitment propaganda employs takfir regularly, dividing the world into two opposing camps: the Abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) and the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*). These classifications are legal categories not fully elaborated in the *Qur'an*.<sup>12</sup> Muslims who do not succumb to Daesh's understanding are considered apostates, members of the *Dar al-Harb*, and used as examples in their propaganda. This includes both Western Muslims (such as U.S. Congressman Keith Ellison and Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf), but even more so Muslims in the MENA region. For example, issue 14 of *Dabiq*, released in April of 2016, pronounces *takfir* on the Muslim Brotherhood and its current leadership, Turkey's president Recep Erdogan, Islamist groups in Tunisia, and an Egyptian police captain killed in a Daesh terrorist action in Giza.<sup>13</sup> Daesh recruitment propaganda also stresses the need for Muslims abroad to emigrate (perform *hijra*)<sup>14</sup> to the Abode of Islam as a moral duty. Building their arguments around western transgression, humiliation, and corruption of Muslim leaders, Daesh infers that there is no alternative but to emigrate to Daesh territory. In so doing, they symbolically link their narrative to that of the first community of Muslims and the founding of Islam. Daesh purposefully misrepresents traditional religious concepts like these, as well as the Islamic concept of *jihad*, or struggle, to justify their violent political actions and build religious legitimacy both within their group and among potential recruits.

### Exploitation of Religious Texts

The use of various *Qur'anic* verses in Daesh's recruitment propaganda is intended to establish authority and provide religious legitimacy to their self-proclaimed Caliphate. To understand their strategy of *Qur'an* usage, the Center analyzed 256 videos released by Daesh over a 12-month period, from July 2014 to July 2015. Thirty percent (78) were released by transnational media outlets (al-Hayat, al-Furqan, etc.), the remainder (178) by provincial media outlets. The Center coded the videos for verses used, and catalogued them according to *Makki* and *Madani* verses, which indicates both theological content and the time and geographic location the *Surah* was

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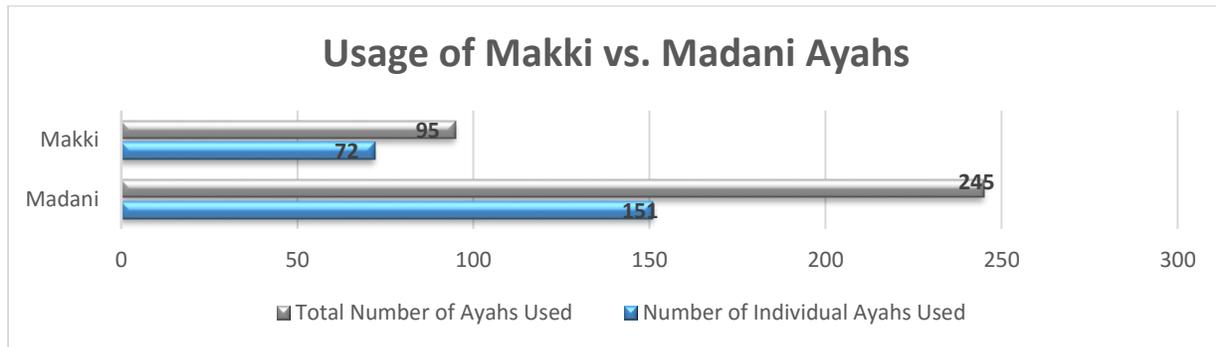
<sup>12</sup> There is a further legal category, the Abode of Treaty (*Dar a-'Ahd*), expounded in the Muslim legal tradition that comprises most of the world. Daesh, understandably, never employs this category in their propaganda.

<sup>13</sup> *Dabiq*, Issue 14, "The Murtadd Brotherhood." Daesh literature uses the term *murtadd*, or apostate, to refer to its Muslim enemies.

<sup>14</sup> Facing extreme persecution in their home city of Mecca, Muhammad and his initial followers received a revelation from God requiring them to emigrate to the neighboring city of Yathrib. Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community's emigration (*hijra*) in September of 622 C.E. marks the beginning of the Muslim *hijri* calendar, and forever changed the name of Yathrib to Madinat al-Nabi', or the city of the Prophet, now simply al-Madina.

revealed.<sup>15</sup> The Center also took note of the repetition of particular *ayahs*—which verses are favorites in Daesh propaganda—and whether an *ayah* was quoted whole or only in part.

Daesh recruitment propaganda relies heavily on *Madani surahs*. Generally, *Madani surahs*, those revealed later in the Prophet Muhammad's career and after the community's emigration to Yathrib, respond to the socio-political life of the Muslim community including, for example, rules of inheritance and warfare. *Makki surahs* are those revealed during prophet Muhammad's residence in Mecca. They are generally shorter and focused on more universal themes: the oneness of God, justice, and the afterlife. *Madani* verses are anthropocentric, while *Makki* verses tend towards being theocentric. Daesh recruitment propaganda utilizes *Madani* verses almost twice as much as *Makki* verses: 151 *Madani ayahs* were used in the 256 videos examined, versus 78 *Makki ayahs*. For comparison, roughly two-thirds of the 114 *Surahs* in the *Qur'an* are *Makki*. There is a clear inconsistency between the text of the *Qur'an* and its presentation in Daesh's online propaganda. This is not surprising, however. The religious rhetoric of Daesh recruitment propaganda aims to link symbolically their self-proclaimed Caliphate to the founding of the early Muslim community. Relying on *Madani* verses facilitates this linkage and attempts to erase the temporal gap between the past and present in the imaginations of potential recruits.



When looking at both *Makki* and *Madani* ayahs in terms of verse repetition, only 26% of *Makki surahs* in our sample were repeated, compared to 57% of *Madani surahs*. In terms of frequency across our sample of 256 videos, Daesh propaganda repeats *Madani* verses with more than double the frequency of *Makki* verses (see graph above).

Just as *Madani ayahs* as a whole are used and repeated with more frequency, a small selection of verses is repeated with very high levels of frequency in Daesh recruitment propaganda, defined as 3 or more uses in the sample. Here too, *Madani ayahs* dominate.

<sup>15</sup> The division of the individual *Surahs* of the *Qur'an* into either *Makki* or *Madani* is a convention developed by scholars in the classical period to aid in their exegesis (*tafsir*). Interpretation of the *Qur'an* is normally predicated on the time and place the verse was revealed, or the 'occasions of revelation' (*asbab al-nuzul*).

<b>Ayahs Used with High Frequency in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda</b>					
Classification	Surah Title	Surah Number	Ayah Number	Number of Times Repeated	
Madani	<b>At-Tawbah</b>	9	14	7	
			111	4	
	<b>Al-Hajj</b>	22	3	4	
	<b>Al-Anfal</b>	8	38	4	
			46	4	
	<b>An-Nisa</b>	4	75	4	
<b>Al Imran</b>	3	102	5		
Makki	<b>Yusuf</b>	12	21	4	
			40	3	
	<b>al-A'raf</b>	7	128	3	

Of the most frequently cited 10 *ayahs* listed above, 3 are *Makki* and 7 *Madani*. Four (4:75; 8:38; 9:14; 9:111) explicitly reference fighting in the way of God in the context of the early Muslim community's series of battles against the Meccans. The evident rhetorical use of these verses is to symbolically link Daesh's violent political project with the ultimately successful struggle of the Prophet Muhammad's early community. Five of the above verses (8:46; 3:102; 12:21; 12:40; 7:128) encourage trust in or fidelity to God, either explicitly or with reference to pre-Islamic prophets. In so doing, Daesh seeks to sanctify their actions, using the *Qur'an* to give moral sanction to their grotesque violence. The final verse (22:3) provides a warning against disbelief.

Daesh rhetorically employs the *Qur'anic* text to adopt the mantle of prophethood, speaking through the text in the persona of Muslim prophets. In the December 2015 video *No Respite*, a Daesh fighter recites a selection of *Surat Yunus* (10:71) adopting the persona of Noah, coopting and speaking through the text to challenge those who mock and disbelieve. By recontextualizing Qur'anic historical references, Daesh embodies a prophetic persona and collapses any distinction between its political project and the historical past. Daesh propaganda also primes the audience prior to the invocation of a *Qur'anic* verse. A Daesh representative will often offer an interpretation of a verse intending to justify or provide religious sanction to an act prior to recitation. For example, *Madani* verse *al-Tawbah* (9:67), revealed nine years after the Prophet's emigration to *al-Madina* and under the threat of a Byzantine invasion, enjoins against the hypocrisy of those who professed to have joined the community, but instead abandoned it at a critical time. Daesh released a video in February 2015 titled *We Will Conquer Rome* advertising the execution of 21 members of Egypt's Coptic Christians. In the video, an armed fighter quoted *al-Tawbah* (9:67) to condone the executions. Prior to reciting the *ayah*, the fighter interprets the verse, explaining this execution as the price of hypocrisy. Daesh ignores the historical context of the verse, misusing the text to religiously sanctify murder. Daesh's perversion of the text ignores orthodox understanding of the verse, twisting the Qur'an and Islamic history to its own political narrative.

The use of the *Qur'anic* text by Daesh for the purposes of propaganda is intended to establish its religious authority and lend religious legitimacy to their political project—the re-establishment of a modern Caliphate. Daesh's religious narrative is centered on a core of concepts—*hijra*, *takfir*, the division of the world into opposing camps, *jihad*—that are taken out of context, rendered as simple and unambiguous, and supported by sporadic reference to partial *Qur'anic* verses. Their use of the *Qur'an* is designed solely to support a narrative of Daesh to their target demographic. With strategically placed images and *ayahs*, Daesh likens the unity of the brotherhood (*ikhwan*) and community (*ummah*) in their territory to the early Muslim community in Medina. Daesh manipulates the meaning of *hijra* and *jihad* in an attempt to link their Caliphate with the founding of Islam. Daesh says to these youth: “*The first Muslims were persecuted and humiliated, like you. They were forced to emigrate, like you. They had to fight to defend Islam, like we do. They built an ideal society, just like we are doing. Come join us.*” These *Qur'anic* verses become part of the video's overall narrative. Daesh asks of its target audience to relive the times of persecution and, just like Noah, to remain steadfast. The past becomes part of the present and future, inferring a constant state of war.

## Conclusion

By manipulating texts for purposes of polarization and recruitment, Daesh seeks to manifest their vision of a global partition of *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*. They purport to describe this division as already existing, but their rhetoric and violence actively seeks to create it. Measures designed to counter Daesh's narrative must then begin with a rejection of this divisive “us vs. them” mentality. When this language is used by Western figures, it marginalizes further the already

marginalized Muslim communities and feeds directly into Daesh's recruitment narratives as evidence for their worldview. Understanding Daesh's strategy in deploying religious texts will assist religious leaders in identifying counter-narratives and offer an alternative paradigm.

The implementation of preventative community-based policies will equip trusted Islamic scholars and religious leaders with the necessary analysis and digital tools. This training should be offered to local leaders, equipping them with the tools necessary to highlight Daesh's fraudulent religious narratives and establish a communication bridge with disaffected youth. In addition, community and religious scholars should seek to work within their communities to increase religious literacy, particularly among youth. Daesh capitalizes on this illiteracy in their propaganda. Muslim leaders should engage in a *jihad* (struggle) of ideas and meaning with Daesh, and refuse to cede interpretative ground on the *Qur'an* and Islamic history. Islamic history and *Qur'anic* texts should be used to undercut Daesh's religious narratives. In fact, *Surah al-Baqarah* (2:256) states that there is no compulsion in religion, and *Surah al-Ma'idah* (5:32) states that to kill one innocent is like killing all of mankind. Religious and community leaders have a crucial role to play in providing moral authority and support to their communities. A complete and nuanced understanding of both the *Qur'an* and the diversity of the Muslim *ummah* is the best way to immunize against Daesh's insidious propaganda.

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