

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S ELECTRONIC OUTREACH

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Over the past several months the world has witnessed a new media creation of jihadis - *al Hayat* ("life") Media Center (not to be confused with the liberal pan-Arab newspaper of the same name) - and has seen a new level of sophistication in messaging and brutality in content, and of effectiveness in communication. In print through the glossy online magazine "*Dabiq*" and on the Internet in video bearing the *al Hayat* brand, the victories of the new *mujahideen* (holy fighters) of the "Islamic State" and their efforts to "purify" *dar al Islam* (the lands of Islam) are glorified and chronicled. These media efforts have effectively silenced most other jihadi channels, and have drowned out all efforts of the West to counter this Internet onslaught.



Frame from al Hayat recruiting video "Let's Go for Jihad" in English and German.

In the heyday of al Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan from late 2004 through early 2007, the terror group's media operation, *as Sahab* ("Cloud"), produced prodigious numbers of videos featuring battle triumphs both in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as pronouncements from its leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri exhorting young Muslims to jihad. These videos, produced on inexpensive video cameras linked to laptop computers and uploaded to the Internet from cafés in Pakistan and elsewhere were a powerful recruiting tool that also served to remind the West that al Qaeda's agenda to defeat the "far enemy" remained operational. Only years of painful and expensive US and allied operations served to silence "al Qaeda central" but then, rising from another quarter, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) metastasized in Yemen, dragging western focus away from Afghanistan and Iraq. AQAP added a new item to the jihadi media toolbox - a slick newsletter in English, "Inspire", featuring how-to articles for what it termed "open-source jihad". Since early 2013, another online magazine, "*Azan*" has appeared, focused on a call to global jihad.

The increasing sophistication of jihadi media means that grainy battlefield video such as that of *as Sahab* has been replaced on *al Hayat* with high definition steadicam shots, carefully scripted and edited narration, and multilingual messaging aimed both at radicalization of young Muslim males, and encouraging emigration of Muslims, particularly educated professionals including specifically engineers, doctors and nurses to the Islamic State (IS).

Whereas most communication among al Qaeda and the *ummah* took place on message boards and chatrooms on the "dark web" (part of the Internet not usually accessible to casual browsers), *al Hayat* and the Islamic State operate quite openly on social media channels including Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube. As quickly as a video is posted and removed, it appears again on another post or channel. Like *as Sahab*, jihadi videos continue to circulate widely in cellphone format, as well as higher resolution computer formats, and is often stored on multiple servers in the West, including the Internet Archive, making it impossible to censor the feed or to trace the ultimate source.

Those in the West with weak stomachs and delicate sensibilities would do well to avoid much of what *al Hayat* is serving up. Battlefield video of clashes between IS fighters and both Syrian and Iraqi/Kurdish fighters is common fare, with many scenes of IS victory featuring summary executions of captured fighters and beheading of both prisoners and the dead. In some videos, a cross or symbol of Shi'ism is removed from a dead soldier to prove the righteousness of the fight. In others, prisoners who cannot or will not pray in the precise manner of the ultra-conservative Sunni fighters are executed as apostates, while hundreds of Yazidis are forcibly converted to Islam.

Such gruesome videos are interspersed with those explaining that IS is governing for the benefit of Muslims in the areas that it controls. Scenes of food distribution, medical care, giving of alms, and devout mass prayer are common, and produced in a style reminiscent of USAID and Peace Corps documentaries extolling the virtues of United States foreign aid programs. These videos, narrated and subtitled in English, are aimed at Western professionals, and explain that it is now a duty of Muslims to emigrate to the IS to care for its people and to help build and expand the new Caliphate, which the leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, proclaimed on June 29, 2014. A sister publication, "IS Report" features English language articles about how the IS has established an office of Consumer Protection, and how it operates seminars to train imams in the Wahabi doctrines of Shaikh Ali Al-Khudair, a Saudi cleric famous for his *fatwa* in 2001 calling on his followers to rejoice in the 9/11 attacks. IS Report also features photos of executions for violation of Islamic law, battlefield victories, and of new recruits from around the world.

Commensurate with his new role as the Caliph, al-Baghdadi has adopted the new title, *Amir al-Mu'minin Caliph Ibrahim*, and has demanded that all in the region now claimed by IS swear personal allegiance (*baya'*) to him. IS has thus asserted that it has authority over all Muslims, everywhere, and over all of *dar al Islam*, a landmass that stretches from the Iberian Peninsula to the Philippines. While there is clearly great discord in the Muslim world over the political wisdom of the declaration of the new caliphate, and only a few Muslim groups outside IS have expressed any support for the new caliph, it is clear that the focus of jihad, once located in the Afghan/Pakistan border region, and then in Yemen (with brief detours to Chechnya, Somalia, and other conflicts) is now in the Syria/Iraq region claimed by IS. While, in the past, Islamic fundamentalist groups from the Magreb to West Africa, to Southeast Asia once rushed to claim affiliation with al Qaeda, it may well be that with its substantial funding and effective communications program, those allegiances of convenience may now shift to IS.

Jihadi media, regardless of its regional origin or source group has had two distinct audiences: young men in the *ummah*, and young men in the West (primarily from immigrant families from Muslim countries.) The structure of the arguments presented is a familiar one to those who have studied the history of the Inquisition (with the

exception of the words “Islamic” and “Allah”):

So until we return to the correct state of Islamic affairs, it's upon us all to work together to eradicate the principle of “free choice,” and to not deceive the people in an attempt to seek their pleasure, neither by calling to “free choice” directly, nor by alluding to it indirectly. Rather, we must confront them with the fact that they've turned away from the religion, while we hold onto it, grasping its purity, its clarity, its comprehensiveness, without any blemishes due to shirk, misguidance or heresy, and that we're completely ready to stand in the face of anyone who attempts to divert us from our commitment to making the religion of Allah triumphant over all other religions, and that we will continue to fight the people of deviation and misguidance until we die trying to make the religion triumphant.

Dabiq, Issue 2, p. 11 (2014).

With its control over territory and resources at unprecedented levels, we should expect that IS will intensify its media efforts at both recruitment and as a means to legitimize itself as a governing institution over its own lands and over the broader world. It may not, in the final analysis, have the resources to extend its newly-declared Caliphate, but the appeal of its jihadi message seems as strong as those of its predecessors, al Qaeda and AQAP, and much stronger than other regional Islamist organizations such as *Boko Haram* and *al Shabab*. It would be wise not to underestimate its ability to attract young men to its cause, and to spread unrest and violence though the Muslim world, and beyond.