

ISIS: Marketing Terror

Abdel Bari Atwan

Editor-in-Chief, *Rai al-Youm*, Author, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*

Sara Khan

Director, Inspire

David Butter

Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Chair: Peter Taylor OBE

Investigative Reporter, BBC

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
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Peter Taylor

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. The title of the session today could not be more apt, Marketing Terror. You will have seen on the news yesterday, the desperate pleas of two husbands for the return of their three wives who appear to have gone to join IS along with their nine children. And on Monday there was news that a young sixth former from Dewsbury had blown himself up as an IS suicide bomber near the Baiji oil refinery in Iraq and the same day there was news that a sixth former from a village just outside High Wycombe had been killed fighting for Al Shabaab in Somalia, killed in an engagement with the Kenyan security forces. All the families, needless to say are utterly distraught and at a loss to try to understand how this has happened.

The answer to why it happened is complex, there is no simple answer, but certainly the title of our session, Marketing Terror is important, because we don't know the details yet, but it's highly likely that some, if not all of them were influenced by a particular ISIS propaganda machine. ISIS in Al Shabaab market terror to hundreds of young British Muslims and Muslims in other parts of the world and they do with terrifying effect. As you know already, around 700 young British Muslims have gone to Syria, not all to fight for ISIS but to fight jihad and many of those will have been influenced by the IS propaganda machine. It's a subject that I've covered for, terrorism and political violence, for over 40 years, and since 9/11 I concentrated on Islamist text extremism Al Qaeda and latterly on IS. I did a documentary for the BBC last month on ISIS, called World's Richest Terror Army, and I earlier did a series on BBC2, five years ago called Generation Jihad. It was three programmes that looked at radicalisation. This was five years before anybody had even heard of ISIS.

The format: this event is on the record, you can comment if you wish by Twitter using the hashtag #CHEvents and it would be appreciated if you'd all put your phones on silent or in aircraft mode, if you haven't already done so. Our speakers this afternoon, distinguished speakers, Abdel Bari Atwan, the former editor, editor for 25 years of *Al Quds* and now editor-in-chief of *Rai al-Youm* which means Opinion Of Today, which is an online daily newspaper with huge number of hits every day. Bari has the unique distinction of having interviewed Osama bin Laden, not once, but twice. And he is the author of several books on Al Qaeda and his latest is on the Islamic State and is called *The Digital Caliphate* and I see a pile of that book there. No doubt they are there for a good reason.

David Butter, David at the end is a home-towner. He is an associate fellow in Chatham house's Middle East and North Africa Programme and was previously director for the Middle East at the Economist Intelligence Unit. And Sara Khan is the director of Inspire but there is no relation to AQAP's glossy magazine because Sara's views and the views of the people that she represents are diametrically opposite of the views of Al Qaeda and the Arabian Peninsula and other Jihadi organizations. The purpose of Inspire, Sara's Inspire, is to encourage, in particular, Muslim women to stand up and be counted. She's recently spearheaded a remarkable roadshow which you can have a look at online called Making a Stand in which she interviewed a whole range of very impressive Muslim women, young women, mothers, daughters, well worth looking at.

So that's our panel, I sound a bit like Jonathan Dimbleby on Any Questions and I shall ask each one to speak for between six and eight minutes. I shall be strict with timings on my iStopwatch and I'd like to ask Bari first of all to make his contribution.

Abdel Bari Atwan

Thank you Peter. I asked Peter as a friend to give me an extra one minute and he said no. So it didn't work.

Peter Taylor

No favouritism.

Abdel Bari Atwan

Where shall I start? We are witnessing unprecedented phenomena in our part of the world. It is the most dangerous organization we've ever actually seen in the Middle East. When I say that, there are three reasons to make me, you know, talk about this make these statements. First, it is different from any other organization. Al Qaeda would be amateurish in comparison with the Islamic State.

When I say three reasons, the first one, it is self-sufficient financially. All other terrorist organizations usually fully dependent on donors or countries. This one is self-sufficient. Why? Because they have oil fields, they have gas fields, they have population, they have about \$3 million worth of oil export and they actually managed to loot more than half \$1 billion from the Mosul central bank when they actually control the city. So it is self-sufficient financially. It is self-sufficient when we talk about weapons. They put their hands on huge amounts of weapons and equipment, military equipment when they actually took over [indiscernible] in Syria and Mosul in Iraq so they've got Soviet or Russian weapons and they also got American, very sophisticated weapons which were actually supplied to the Iraqi army.

So they don't need to import and they are adding to their collection of weapons, 2,700 tanks and armoured vehicles, they captured from Ramadi and Mosul. So they are self-sufficient, have very sophisticated weapons on the hands.

The third important thing which is, it is a state, it is a sovereign state. All other terrorist organizations used to be a host of other countries, a host of other governments, telling Ben for Al Qaeda for example with a host of Taliban, they have the bosses, Mullah Omar, and they have to give [indiscernible] of allegiances to him. Even the PLO for example which is not a terrorist organization, but it was actually a guest of either Lebanon or Jordan or Syria or other countries, but when we talk about the Islamic State, it has a land which is bigger than Britain, so nobody can kick them out. For example Sudan kicked out Osama bin Laden and set their state, but here you can't. They have a state which is bigger than Britain, or about 10 million people. They impose taxes on them, they have a cabinet, they have administration, institutions, police forces, an army, a flag, you name it, they got everything which other states have.

So until you approve them, they are there, maybe to last. How long? I don't know. Nobody can predict. So that's why it is very dangerous. The other thing which I would like to talk about, they are the master of the media, they are the master of the digital age, they managed to out-fox most of these so-called intelligence services, even Western intelligence service. You cannot actually compete with them. For example, they have 94,000 tweets every day on the Twitter.

They have thousands of accounts on Twitter, Facebook and they have a media arm which is very sophisticated. They produce very sophisticated documentaries, films, other materials and they have actually expert in IT under their disposal. And one of them actually, a Syrian in exile, he was born in France and he moved to Massachusetts, his father is a doctor and he gave up everything and he joined, his name is Ahmad Abousamra and he's got a degree in IT. So he is now the head of the media arm of the Islamic State.

The problem with this Islamic State, you cannot predict what is the next step. They are very tight lipped, you expect them to go and attack Baghdad and suddenly they actually attack Ramadi. Recently after 3,000 American air [indiscernible], we were under the impression that they were weakened and they managed to curb them, they are not going to expand. Suddenly they capture two cities, Palmyra in Syria and Ramadi in Iraq and again, more population, more land. The difference between Al Qaeda and Islamic State, Al Qaeda used to just hit and run, use the style of take revenge from the West. Send a few people and they go and blow up an embassy here, embassy there and 11 September. But when we talk about the Islamic State, no. They want land, they want to grab land, they want to expand, they want to consolidate their lands, or their domination of the land they actually managed to conquer from other people or cities in particular.

The other thing is, the Americans, okay, they train the Iraqi army, they armed the Iraqi army, but they don't have the will to fight and when it comes to the Islamic State, American, maybe they are very sophisticated on military theories, but they cannot tell people to go and blow themselves up. This is the only expertise that the Americans don't have, the British don't have, but when it comes to the Islamic State, they have the will, they train their people for that and they actually convince them to do so and to go to heaven after that. So that's why they are very dangerous and it is very difficult to contain.

This is how it looks actually and they are planning for the future... One minute? Okay... So they are very attractive to the younger generations of Muslims in particular. They are not stupid with long beards, dirty clothes as many people anticipate. Those people are the outcome of the failed states which actually is spreading in the Middle East. If you look at the situation in the Middle East, nothing is functioning. You have a failed state in Iraq, a failed state in Yemen, a failed state in Syria, a failed state in Libya and a semi-failed state in Egypt or others, so this is the problem. And when I say they are very sophisticated, many people think those people are the camel hoarders, foot soldiers, no. The hard-core of the Islamic State is the ex-Republican guards for Saddam Hussein.

Peter Taylor

I have to stop you there I'm afraid Bari.

Abdel Bari Atwan

Okay, here? Okay.

Peter Taylor

Sara.

Sara Kahn

Thank you Peter. I just wanted to touch on something Peter mentioned earlier about Talha Asmal and also that case in the media at the moment, the three women from Bradford who had allegedly taken their nine children to join ISIS and really, nobody should be shocked about that and the reason why I say that is because those who understand ISIS's appeal, success and effectiveness, understand just how effective they are. Because of their brand. Because of the tools and channels that they use.

Because of their incredibly smart and sophisticated communication strategy and because of the current effectiveness of ISIS in all these three areas, be under no doubt that we will continue to hear cases of families, of women, of young people who will leave the UK to join ISIS and they will continue to do so for some time. Because as I've said, this is a phenomenon, a new phenomenon and I'll also add that for every one person that has gone out there, I can guarantee you there'll be dozens right now in this country who are thinking and contemplating of going to join ISIS.

What I want to really focus on in the time I have is the three components I mentioned earlier. ISIS's brand, their communication strategy and the tools and channels that they use to communicate their brand, but also want to touch on the certain risk factors, many of which have existed for a long time in this country which facilitate a climate, or creates the conditions which can normalize the message of ISIS amongst ordinary British Muslims who will end up resonating with the ideology.

So just first, a few words about the ISIS brand. Many people who are susceptible to the ISIS brand and to their narrative, is that they find it empowering, they find it motivating and they find it emotional. And I saw a key to demonstrate that and they have established a functioning state, a utopia in which suddenly Muslims can live contently and it proclaims, for example that the establishment of this caliphate is an auspicious moment in history, something that Muslims have waited for a long time, has been granted by God himself and that glory is guaranteed. And it uses publications such as *Dabiq* magazine to present this compelling evidence that this caliphate is a reality. And of course, its announcement of this new gold, copper and silver currency as an example of this idea that they have got the state.

ISIL's approach to communications is highly skilled and so it is clear from the time and resource that the group invests in its output, that it places a substantial premium on the value of communications and its centrally controlled media arms consistently issue slickly produced, well calibrated and effectively promoted communications product. So for example on the day that ISIL announced their caliphate back almost a year ago, it issued the declaration, a professionally designed document available in five different languages.

It then arranged for its leader Baghdadi to deliver a carefully staged managed sermon from Mosul great mosque filming it in high definition and promoting it in different languages via social media to generate the sense of global momentum.

The tools and channels that ISIL use, corporately produced written and filmed output, particularly in the English language. The al-Ḥayāt media arm and it has consistently produced impressive production. So its video content, again, is in high-definition and *Dabiq*, their online magazine exceeds that of any other previous Jihadi publication. And through its communication, ISIL is able to present sometimes really unexceptional material like the long winded and dull, boring speech of al-Baghdadi and ISIS spokesman Adnani as compelling and visually lively.

They have developed what is now a pro ISIL app, but defunct ISIL app now called the Dawn of Glad Tidings, which enabled more than effective distribution of ISIL online propaganda installed between five to 10,000 times helping it reach a global audience of hundreds and thousands and ISIL just continues to innovate, its production techniques, its approach to online production, hijacking popular but non-relevant Twitter hashtags to spread its material. And I know for example, recently I was at a conference where they had attached to beheading videos to a Peppa Pig online material. So you could be putting your child on the Internet innocently and Peppa Pig and beheading videos would be coming up even though they're watching something so innocent.

The final point I wanted to touch on are the possible risk factors which can help create a climate of conditions which could accelerate the normalization of ISIS message in these risk factors I believe, act as barriers in preventing vulnerable Muslims, being resilient to the ISIS narrative. And to very briefly highlight what some of those factors are; firstly, the global rise of modern 20th-century ideologies like political Islamism and Salafi jihadism which often bring religious zeal, but often in the guise of literalism, fundamentalism, a hatred for all things Western, a supremacist outlook deeply embedded in us versus them narrative, but all glued together by a very strong victimhood narrative and so successful has the mainstreaming of these ideologies become, through satellite channels, through preachers who I know have been operating in this country, going up and down, speaking in university campuses and in Muslim communities, through social media and other websites, which often have hundreds of thousands of followers. That many young Muslims today genuinely believe that living in a caliphate is part of the requirement of being a Muslim and ISIS's call to come and live in this caliphate will resonate with many.

Linked in with this is the inability of faith leaders, bar a few, to articulate in Islam which is compatible and comfortable with modernity, human rights, individual liberty, women's rights and this failure to articulate this either politically or theologically has resulted in a void, which are then often filled by extremist propaganda with this fundamentalist ideology through the successful tools and channels and communications at its disposal. And talking about faith leaders, many imams, again in the UK, bar a few, have often been unable to counter the Islamist inspired extremism or to provide serious and effective counter narratives. They are unable to appeal to young people and because of the inability to inspire from the pulpits, young people are often going online, where there are thousands of extremist websites or engaging with these fiery preachers who are operating in Muslim communities and university Islamic societies.

So our mosques, faith leaders, imams, organizations, institutions, are they able to play their parts in developing resilience in people against the extremist narrative? [Indiscernible] with almost 250,000 children a year go to in this country, are they developing resilience and teaching young people counter narratives to ISIS, Al Qaeda and Islamist inspired extremism? And as many mothers have expressed to me over the years, they feel let down by these faith institutions, that nobody is teaching their children these counter narratives to extremism.

And are these institutions teaching young people the importance of critical thinking, which focus on teaching children how to think and not what to think, which will help children critically assess what groups like ISIS are saying? Just to really end, to say that it's important to consider that it's not just about the messaging of ISIS, but it's about understanding the ground, the fertile ground and how those messages are resonating amongst Muslim communities in this country and until we address that, we will continue to see women, families, converts and others leaving the UK to join ISIS. Thank you.

Peter Taylor

Thank you Sara. And finally, David.

David Butter

Thank you. Talking about counter narratives, I propose to do a slight counter narrative to Bari, in a sense that most of what he says I think is absolutely true and accurate and I wouldn't have any difficulty with it, but I think there are aspects that need to be examined from the perspective of where things are not quite so inevitably great for the Islamic State and where the contradictions are within their very effective model.

If indeed, as Abdel Bari says, it is a state in many forms and has some sort of foreign existence, well then it has all of the problems that any state or government or sovereign power would face and one of the critical ones is its financial model. Its administrative model is also an interesting aspect of that, as Abdel Bari said quite rightly, there is this hard core of people with experience of the Saddam Hussein military and bureaucracy who are in control. There is a very strong hard core of Saudis on the clerical side, but when they're in other territories, particularly Syria, there is a notable absence of Syrians in any higher parts of their hierarchy and I think this is a weakness in the sense that they are a kind of colonialist power to some extent in the Syrian context on which I'm going to focus in particular. I think it's going to be more difficult to uproot the men in Iraq, but I don't think that that's necessarily the case in Syria.

Yes, there is a great deal of self-reliance, I think when ISIS first appeared on the scene, people on the outside thought that this was a new variant of Al Qaeda and they said, 'Okay where are these Gulf Arabs who are backing this group, let's root them out and find them.' Well ISIS, I think, recognized that it's more difficult to base your organization on money from the Gulf, it's much better policed and also creates all sorts of internal contradictions when you're kind of competing for funds from various rich people in the Gulf. So they deliberately avoided that route and they started out with a pretty strong war chest based on accumulating wealth in the Iraqi space where they had influence, before they really

came up upfront. They were a very effective mafia in Mosul, they took a cut from most contracts they had there.

In a sense their main source of finance, as they built up for their expansion campaign was the Iraqi state, which was a relatively rich state and they managed to tap into and act as a very effective parasite on that wealth. They also developed modes of taxation around Iraq, or expropriation. Their roadblocks would take cuts from people going through and trucks going through and largely the people that they were interacting with, whether it was the drivers or the tribes in those areas in Iraq and Syria, they didn't have much option, but they did accept the ISIS way.

They tended to be perhaps a little bit more professional than what they were used to from the loose situation in Iraq, certainly from the corrupt officials of the Assad regime. They got a receipt from the Islamic State when they paid over their tribute. So this in a sense explains the degree of could send among their subject population. They also provided incentives to people to accept them being the top dogs in the area, like people would get subcontracts to do the work in the oil fields or to do various municipal services or construction jobs.

So in that case, people shrugged their shoulders, you know, we're used to a pretty oppressive and brutal people rolling us and taking our money off us. These guys, you know, let's give them a chance at least they're quite devout. So it's a well thought out model and has had this buy in, but there are weaknesses. Can this model be sustained and how dependable are their resources to finance an expansion of their project.

Let's look at oil and gas briefly; when they went into Syria, they kind of had a purple patch in mid-2014. They muscled in on oil and gas assets that had been run by local tribes or other groups as the Assad regime departed and for a while they were involved in production of anything up to 70,000 barrels a day which was being extracted, people were being paid to extract it, that would go to purpose-built small refineries, made into products and sent into the Iraqi area and over the border into Turkey.

This trade I think has been severely disrupted since the coalition bombing, a lot of the refineries has been hit, it's become more difficult and the fields they're operating with do need maintenance. There's a lot of very small fields in Syria, they were already in steep decline in 2011 and I suspect it's going to be increasingly difficult for any sort of high rated production to be maintained. Added to which, of course, the oil price has halved since October. So I don't think that this oil bonanza is something that's going to sustain them in the long term.

Likewise, for a while ISIS could tax the population, but a population that was receiving funds from central government and there is still some central government funds going in, most of them are pensions and so on but by and large, civil servant salaries and so on, are not being paid by the central governments in Damascus and Baghdad to the extent that they were when ISIS was really having a field day in taking its cut of these resources circulating in their micro-economies. Then recent acquisitions, that the acquisition or the conquest of Palmyra gave them control over some phosphate mines a little bit to the south-west of the city which were quite a useful source of revenue for the Syrian government, anything up to 150 million, \$200 million a year, but ISIS can't really do

anything with that phosphate. It needs to have control of other parts of the export process, in this case these are railways going up to the coast in Syria to processing plants or to fertiliser plants in Homs.

Likewise natural gas, natural gas is critical for Syria's electricity, it's not something that can derive much revenue from Islamic State unless through arrangements whereby it allows the natural gas to go to the central government, the electricity comes back and there's some sort of protection money or quid pro quo going on which I think has happened in the past. But I think this is declining.

Another aspect of course is that militarily, everything is not necessarily going in the Islamic State's way. They've recently suffered quite a serious setback in Tell Abyad, which is the area on the northern border, quite important outlet and trading link into Turkey and this has been demonstrated that ISIS has basically lost in its confrontations with Kurds, of course, who benefited from coalition help. There are also other things going on in Syria, that the free Syrian Army in a sense, especially in the south, has become more of an credible concept, it was more or less falling off the map about a year ago and it's started to become more of a real prospect and of course the Syrian Sunni anti-regime rebels are basically anti-ISIS as well and there's not a great deal of prospect for ISIS deepening its appeal into the whole Sunni population.