

iN2 Practitioners' Series

This paper is the first in a series within which iN2 practitioners will look back at the exclusive experience and insight collected through observing unique initiatives in Syria, Iraq and beyond, as well as public and private online platforms. Interrogating on-the-ground situations with scholarly debate and decision-maker discussions, the series intends to identify opportunities, support priorities and inspire debates related to the ever-pressing question of “what next?”. To prevent the pervasive influence of extremist violence, these papers aim to further the collective learning process and bring the hard-learned lessons of Syria and Iraq to the global scene.

THE ENVOY AND THE BOT: TANGIBILITY IN DAESH'S ONLINE AND OFFLINE RECRUITMENT⁽¹⁾

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“A Bird in the Hand is Better than Ten in the Tree” – Syrian proverb

ABSTRACT

Daesh's messenger came with an offer: arms, money and a non-aggression pact. Their Telegram automated messaging service was even more flexible: you too can become a mujahideen from your home. With an envoy and a bot, Daesh gained vital territorial access into southern Syria and a global legion of skilled media officers.

Daesh did so by formulating concrete offers anchored in the reality of the group's needs and actions; they articulated a message that felt tangible to their target audience. By adapting the message and the messenger, they co-opted former enemies and spurred passive followers into action.

This paper explores in detail how this was achieved and what it means for strategic communications and countering violent extremism. By examining successful communication resistance in Mosul, we argue counter-messaging can no longer afford to ignore best practices and should place tangibility at its core. As violent networks proliferate globally, the stakes are too high for these lessons to be ignored.

As first in a series, the paper sets the ground and aims at introducing a few of the wealth of case studies collected by iN2 practitioners over the years. The subsequent papers will proceed to explore some of those cases in detail and extract lessons learned as the international community moves forward.

(1) Outside of direct citations, iN2 has chosen to refer to the group otherwise known as ISIS, ISIL or IS by its Arabic acronym: Daesh. An BBC overview of the debate on how to refer to the organisation can be found here: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277>

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have long documented how Daesh has developed a sophisticated recruiting system, one that can adapt to its evolving needs and the various contexts and roles it operates in⁽²⁾. The organisation was able to switch from the rapid mass recruitment of international fighters to specific head-hunting for competent local administrators⁽³⁾, from long-term brainwashing of children⁽⁴⁾ to forceful enrolment of minorities⁽⁵⁾. In this way, Daesh resembles historical European terrorist organisations and differentiates itself from earlier forms of global violent Islamist groups⁽⁶⁾. Based on this research, NATO⁽⁷⁾ identified three rational recruitment drivers exploited by Daesh; ideology, finance and coercion. Our case studies reveal a more nuanced picture with interlinkages between pragmatic decisions, ideology and personal priorities at the fore. It highlights the crucial importance of tangible offers in decision making tipping points.

In examining two case studies of successful recruitment by Daesh communication operatives - from 2014 and 2018 - one of a vigilantly selected Syrian FSA commander and the other casting a wide online net of automated recruitment, this paper explores both the specific common thread in Daesh's recruitment communications and its broader communication strategy. It highlights how Daesh was able to 1) create a tailored sense of purpose and meaning around two very different offers; 2) select means and styles of communications that felt trust-worthy to their target audience; and 3) manoeuvre strategically between their group needs and those of individuals, whilst balancing military and communication objectives. IN2 practitioners have witnessed these factors at play again and again, and refer to them as the 'tangible elements' in Daesh's communication. Tangibility does not only refer to that which can be physically touched, but also to something which is definite, unambiguous and has intrinsic value.

After exploring this concept, a third case study, of concrete resistance in Mosul, will shift the discussion to the subsequent consequences for strategic communications and counter-narratives. The relevance of the findings to the 'what next?' question will be explored — the work awaiting the international community to prevent the resurgence of violent extremist networks in Syria, Iraq and beyond.

Tangibility refers to something which is definite, unambiguous and has intrinsic value.

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- (2) Bloom M. (2017) Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and "Talent Spotting" in the PIRA, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism Journal*, Vol 4.
- (3) Bloom M. (2017) Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and "Talent Spotting" in the PIRA, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism Journal*, Vol 4.
- (4) Horgan J., Taylor M., Bloom M., Winter C. (2016) From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.
- (5) Ebraheem M. (March 19 2018) Islamic States brainwashes Yazidi children into fighting in Syria, *Iraqi News*, available at <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/islamic-state-brainwashes-yazidi-children-into-fighting-in-syria-lawmaker/>
- (6) Semati M., Szpunar P. (January 2018) ISIS beyond the spectacle: communication media, networked publics, terrorism, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 35.
- (7) Mironova V. (2016) Understanding the changing tactics of so-called Islamic State, *Nato Review*, available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/tactics-isil-fighters-goal/EN/index.htm>

CASE STUDY 1. AN ALLIANCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Abu Yahya's story is an example of sophisticated targeted recruitment of a high-value fighter by Daesh. Until his death in 2016, Abu Yahya continued to present his decision to join Daesh as a rational calculation. His case reinforces the call to tie strategic communication to the ground situation and tangible activities and offers.

Summer, 2014. Abu Yahya⁽⁸⁾ is a young Free Syrian Army (FSA) commander in Bir Al-Qassab, the desert region south of Damascus International Airport. His brigade is part of the FSA's Southern Front – at one-time an effective and promising umbrella organisation of internationally-backed FSA units fighting the Syrian Regime in southern Syria. Abu Yahya, a respected commander who had defected from the Syria Arab Army's Republican Guards with a substantial amount of weaponry, was well-known and vocal against extremist factions in besieged Eastern Ghouta, including Jabhat Al-Nusra, Daesh and Jaysh Al-Islam. His profile fitted the cornerstone of western intervention: a moderate and tactically effective opposition leader who led a credibly sized group of FSA fighters.

Yet after a number of visits from a Daesh envoy, by late August 2014, Abu Yahya had defected to Daesh.



Abu Yahya - Amman, Jordan 2014

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS: A TANGIBLE OFFER

Abu Yahya was first approached a few months earlier when a Daesh envoy undertook the arduous journey through the desert to where Abu Yahya's brigade was established. The envoy knew Abu Yahya's frustrations and motivations — he was primarily in the desert region to break the Regime's military siege on opposition-held Eastern Ghouta. Frustrations were linked to frictions with the International Coalition, which had been financially supporting Abu Yahya until four months beforehand. The coordinated international support centre based in Jordan, known as the Military Operations Centre or MOC, required regular communication from its beneficiaries and according to Abu Yahya failed to recognise the difficulty to share updates from the middle of the desert. This refusal to acknowledge his ground reality led Abu Yahya to believe the MOC was riddled with corrupt FSA commanders exploiting the support for their own personal gain, something that proved to be true. Inter-personal tensions and an attempted abduction by FSA commanders, further isolated Abu Yahya from his local FSA Military Council.

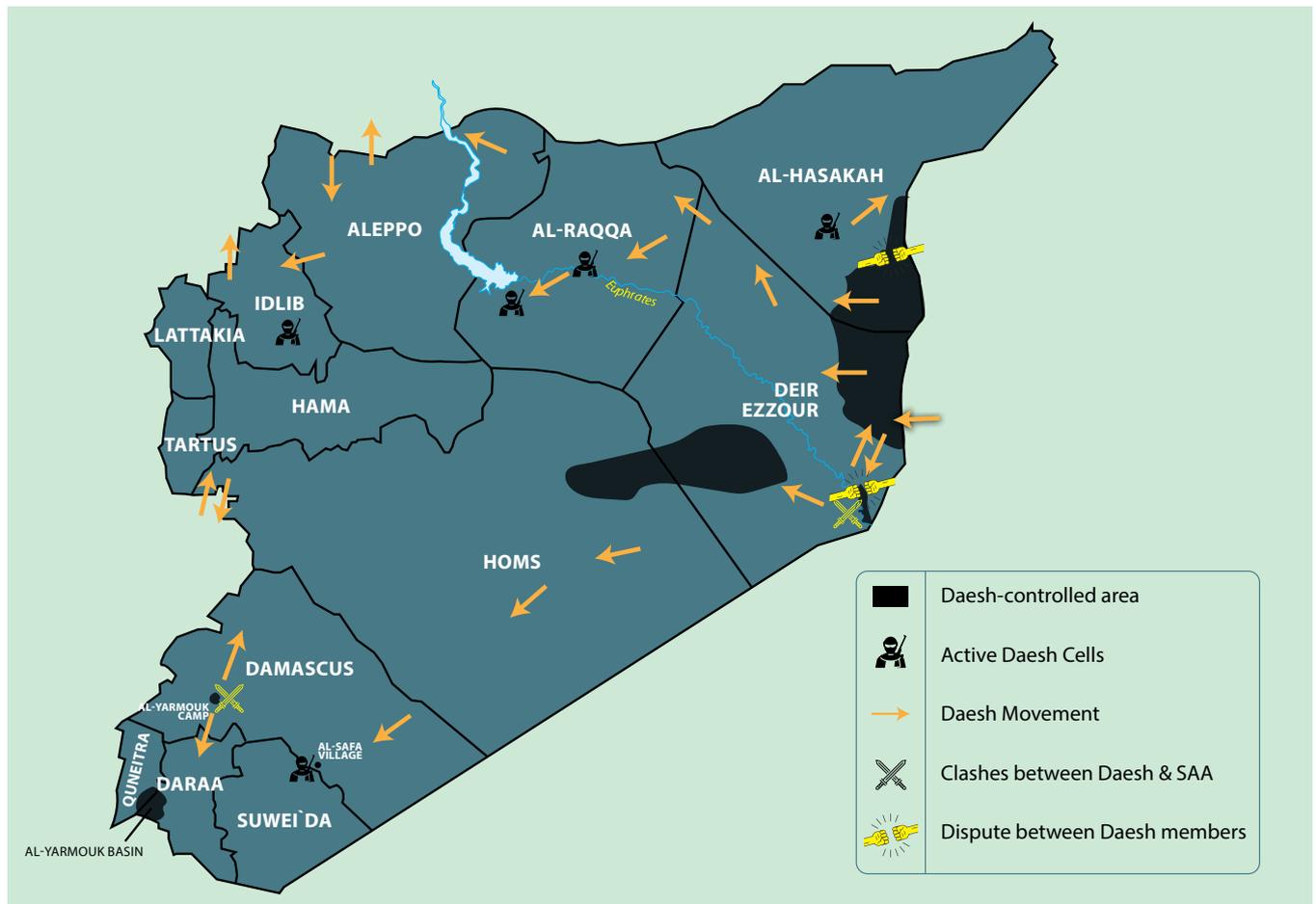
Carefully navigating these leverage points, the Daesh envoy offered a pragmatic solution: Daesh would

Daesh played on a personal motivation to tailor its offer

provide the means – arms, cash, men – to break the siege on Eastern Ghouta; and in exchange, Abu Yahya's brigade would not oppose Daesh if they advanced to Bir Al-Qassab or into Al-Qalamoun. The envoy's direct, tangible style and his knowledge of Abu Yahya's history made him credible. The offer further validated and reinforced Abu Yahya's purpose and main driving force: breaking the siege of Ghouta. While all individual drivers were difficult to understand and act upon for the International Coalition, Daesh exploited this deficiency to play on a personal motivation to tailor its offer. Daesh's requirements were much simpler and demonstrated a better understanding of the challenges faced by opposition units in the south.

Twice, Abu Yahya turned down the offer, but in the end, he trusted – or claimed to trust – in the envoy to fulfil his promise, and in Daesh's tactical ability to break the Eastern Ghouta siege.

(8) For the purpose of this article, names have been altered, iN2's practitioner data and experience collected from 2014 to 2018.



Daesh in Syria - Spring 2018

CONTEXT AND CREDIBILITY: THE BIGGER PICTURE

The envoy's credibility benefitted from a wider context. Daesh was gaining increasing military dominance, and the global publicity surrounding these victories was gaining momentum. By the end of summer 2014, Daesh had gained full control over its respective de-facto capitals, Raqqa and Mosul. This backdrop invariably strengthened the envoy's argument. The unspoken suggestion was that Daesh's help would lead directly to success, as it had done on countless previous occasions. Daesh successfully built on their momentum to attract high value recruits, while its opponents generally took longer to capitalize on victories.

Abu Yahya's recruitment is an example of the active communication strategy linked to Daesh's information manoeuvring in southern Syria. While Abu Yahya was himself a target audience of a Daesh communication campaign, he was also a key influencer. His story and profile were well-known in the area and he commanded respect, especially among a key demographic – males of fighting age. Further, he had established good relations with a number of the Arab-Bedouin tribes in north-east Suweida – a predominantly Druze and pro Assad Regime province. Abu Yahya thus presented an opportunity for Daesh to recruit further and to access communities that were isolated and that had exploitable grievances.

Abu Yahya would become an influential ambassador for Daesh in the area. Simply killing him might have proven counter-productive in the long-term and Daesh was able to play on this synergy between military and communication action. Daesh's presence in north-east Suweida was subsequently established along with supply lines running from the eastern deserts of Al-Bukamal to Damascus and Suweida. Currently (Spring 2018, Daesh's diminished territory is being further eroded by multiple military actors, these supply lines are now providing fleeing Daesh members a lifeline and a means of escape to further prolong their severe application of violence. Daesh is now reaping the rewards from its long-term strategy and investment in the south.

CASE STUDY 2. AUTOMATED HEAD-HUNTERS

The capacity of Daesh to use communications strategically and adapt its messages and methods based on its audience and needs are further exemplified by the second case study. As noted earlier, Daesh first welcomed and targeted a very wide audience, prioritising numbers over any other criteria for the foreign members it attracted. As Daesh consolidated its territorial gain and organisational structure, the recruitment shifted to a more selective approach, with specific skills or connections being targeted⁽⁹⁾. This case study describes a tool that has been used online at the international level. It shows once more how trusted messengers and context are crucial to effective narratives.

A recent example of this targeted recruitment for the online battle space is well highlighted in Daesh's recruitment on Telegram channels⁽¹⁰⁾. One of Daesh's strengths lies in harnessing freelancers around the world to work for the Caliphate's propaganda arm. It has crowdsourced employees that not only work for free, but work for entities whose identities are kept hidden. The recruitment of such individuals takes place via direct employment, as well as individual volunteering. Such participation in promoting Daesh takes many forms: translating and disseminating products; providing graphic design capabilities or IT advice; as well as creating unofficial Telegram channels and groups to promote Daesh content.

The study of one Arabic language Telegram group⁽¹¹⁾ — hereafter referred to as Al-Ansar group⁽¹²⁾ — demonstrates how easily Daesh can recruit. An advertisement was published through Al-Ansar requesting for applications from translators and editors; within 24 hours several applications had been submitted. These unpaid volunteer recruits are now translating, editing and disseminating content on a daily basis on behalf of, and under the control of, Al-Ansar.

One of Daesh's strengths lies in harnessing freelancers around the world to work for the Caliphate's propaganda arm

(9) Bloom M. (2017) Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and "Talent Spotting" in the PIRA, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism Journal, Vol 4.

(10) A cloud based encrypted messaging app used extensively by Daesh.

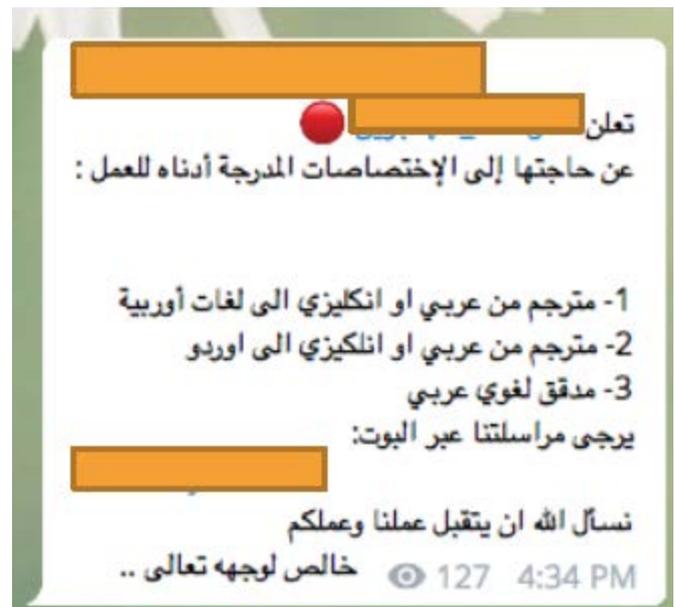
(11) These groups are generally closed groups and only joined by invitation.

(12) iN2 Practitioners data, Daesh Telegram groups monitored since early 2017.

CREATING TANGIBLE MEANING AND CONTEXT

It is well documented that Daesh's demands were tailored to the profile and personality of the individuals sensitive to their narrative, from male to female specific roles and promotion of jihad at home or in Syria⁽¹³⁾. Daesh has shaped its narrative to provide context to the tangible roles it offers individuals. Over the course of the last two years, Daesh has published infographics and documents detailing the necessary role of media operatives for the organisation. Daesh first contextualised the work of media operatives, equating them to Mujahideen. One of their posters for instance reads, "O' media operative, you are also a Mujahid". Another emphasises, "O' supporters of the Caliphate, the internet is your battleground"⁽¹⁴⁾. Daesh is defining part of its battleground to be online, and therefore the role of these supporters is presented to be as important as the fighter on the ground. In doing so, it enabled itself to tap into a wide pool of skilled recruits towards which it could make concrete offers based on strategically identified needs in multiple languages⁽¹⁵⁾.

Daesh has shaped its narrative to provide context to the tangible roles it offers individuals.



Al-Ansar Group advertises for media officers positions - screenshot April 2018

(13) Manoogian A., Chao K-B., Shcheglova D., Khalikova L., Swipe Left: U.S.-Russia Cooperation in Countering Digital Female ISIL Recruitment, *International Affairs Review*, Winter 2017.

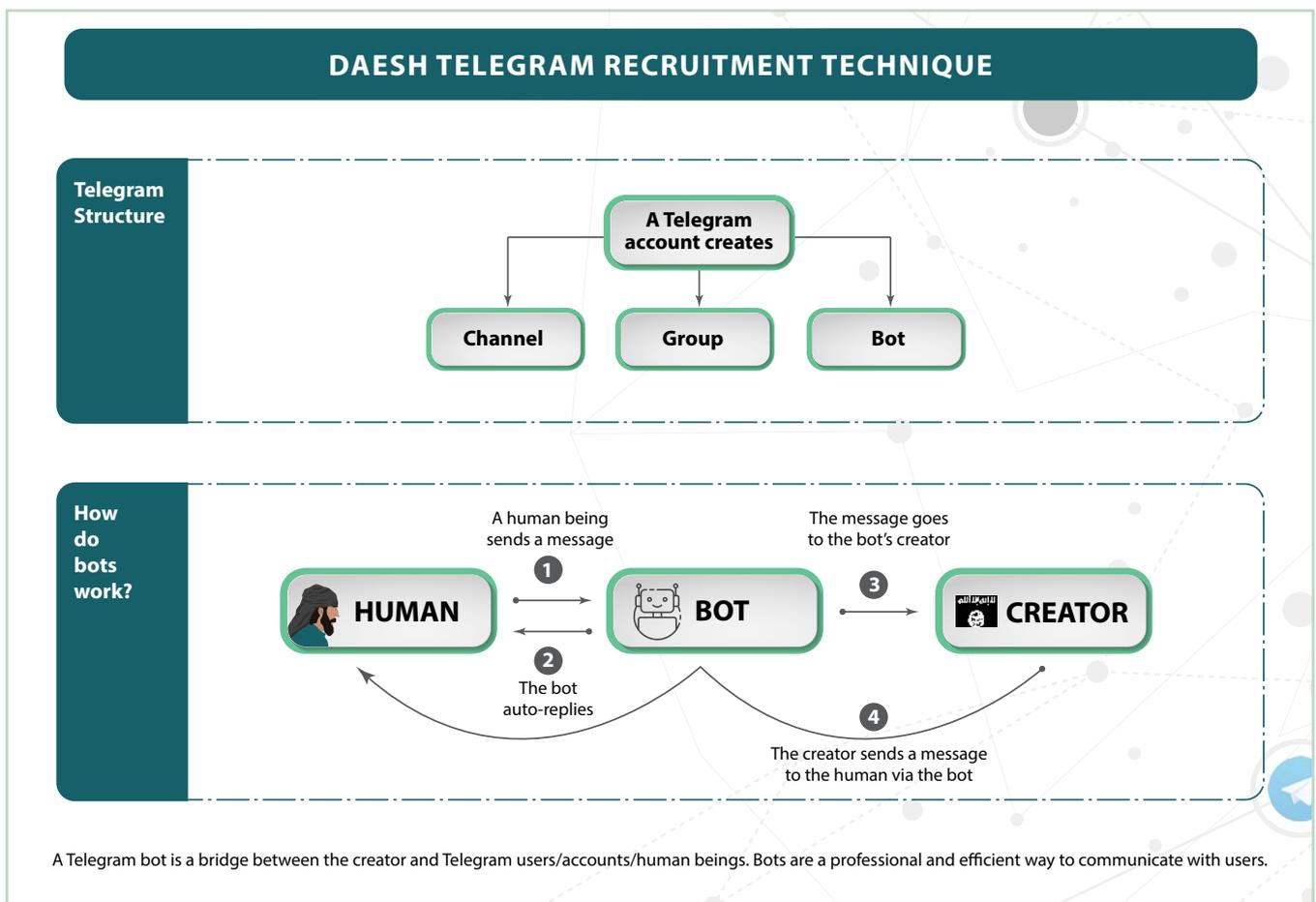
(14) "Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too," Salahuddin Province Media Office, May 2015.

(15) Nato Strategic Center of Excellence (2016) *Daesh Recruitment How the Group Attracts its Supporters*, NATO Publication, Riga.

ADAPTING THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Beyond shifting their messages⁽¹⁶⁾, — Daesh advocated in its early days for every supporter to make the trip to its territories — the organisation responded to feedback on its messaging platform. Al-Ansar used a bot to run its advertisements and interact with the applicants. A bot is defined by Telegram as, “*third-party applications that run inside Telegram. Users can interact with bots by sending them messages, commands and inline requests.*”⁽¹⁷⁾ Bots perform automated tasks and respond according to established parameters to the individuals who interact with them. While the advertisement and ensuing interaction ran successfully through the bot, a similar recruitment notice handled directly by a human proved much less effective, as Daesh’s sympathisers systematically behaved more

suspiciously than when interacting with the bot. The bot was seemingly perceived as more secure by the applicants. It was also more responsive and provided an instant gratifying response which capitalised on the individual’s motivation at the critical early stages of decision making.



Uses of recruitment bots by Daesh

(16) The Carter Center (January 2017) The Evolution of Daesh Recruitment Propaganda in Light of Territorial Loss, Carter Center Research Brief available at https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/research-brief-deash-territorial-loss.pdf

(17) Telegram, Bots: An Introduction for Developers, available at <https://core.telegram.org/bots>

CASE STUDY 3. MOSUL'S RESISTANCE: ANCHORING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT AND ACTION

With case studies looking at envoys and bots, we have explored the flexibility and adaptability of Daesh and its demonstrated skills in targeting and planning for talent recruitment. iN2 believes these cases advocate for even more attention to be invested in the effort to develop integrated strategic communication projects tied to ground realities and tangible actions. The story of Mosul's resistance is an example of how communication can become tangible and embody hope for afflicted populations. iN2 believes this story can help oppressed and at-risk populations globally believe that resistance and alternative choices are possible.

Mosul, 2015. Daesh has progressively tightened its grip on the communication channels of the city it occupied; access to digital media, GSM networks and TV is heavily restricted. Within homes, however, radios remain accessible: one of Daesh's preferred communication medium with the population is its own radio channel — Radio Al-Bayan. Building on this insight, Mosul residents having fled the city establish radio Al-Ghad which starts broadcasting early the same year⁽¹⁸⁾. The radio offers popular music and alternative news — anathema to the discourse being pushed by Daesh. Soon its target audience — residents and occupiers of Mosul as well as residents having left the city — started calling in to the station to pass messages anonymously and increasingly debate the situation in Mosul. A public space opens in occupied Mosul.

Al-Ghad was a tangible action which was a source of hope and change serving Mosul residents

Al-Ghad, an anti-Daesh radio station, is a message in itself. To Daesh, the station's message was one of defiance; to the oppressed residents of Mosul, they provided a message of hope. Daesh responded to this message by targeting the radio's transmitters and jamming/ overbroadcasting its transmissions. Daesh additionally physically threatened — and in one instance killed — individuals calling the station. Al-Ghad was additionally the sum of the opinions that were voiced on air: information passed from one relative to another, alternative reading of events, discontent — and most importantly voices from women who were the first

residents to start calling in from inside their homes. Those voices were a direct rebuttal to the unanimity demanded and claimed by Daesh. A testimony of the need for public space and evidence of the limitations and shortcomings of Daesh's method. A tangible proof of Daesh's lies.

Critically, Al-Ghad was also finely in tune with, and participating in, events on the ground. As small groups that had fled the city started resistance action, Al-Ghad enabled the dissemination of their action. Al-Ghad was proving resistance was possible as it constituted resistance itself. It accompanied the creation of the 'meem movement' which saw residents of Mosul spread symbols of support for those fighting against Daesh's presence on the walls of the city and on Daesh's administrative buildings.



A wall in Mosul featuring the Meem resistance symbol

In short, Al-Ghad was a tangible action which was a source of hope and change serving Maslawis. It was at once an act of resistance, proving that resistance itself was possible and disseminating messages that enabled a greater part of the population to feel hopeful. By its actions, behaviour and knowledge of the ground, it established itself as a trusted source of information and established a connection with its audience. By 2016, Daesh officials were calling in to respond to accusations — hence validating the tangibility of the platform. iN2 will explore the success of Al-Ghad and other similar local radio stations that were able to break the Daesh communication siege in later papers.

(18) Stevens M. (2018) Blood Between Us Psychological Occupation and Resistance in Mosul, The RUSI Journal Vol 163

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic communications' best practices promote an integrated approach to countering violent networks⁽¹⁹⁾ and manuals of counter-narratives have advocated for messages to formulate concrete alternatives⁽²⁰⁾ rather than simply trying to disprove and respond to violent extremist networks' claims.

While the above 'StratCom' approaches are commonly recognised but less frequently implemented, our third case study proves it is possible to put those principles into action. Too often still, communications projects and campaigns are taking place in a vacuum and have been reduced to well-polished social media pages fighting for easily quantifiable results – likes, comments and shares. Initiatives need to move away from producing mechanisms that answer back to Daesh's message and build their communications around tangible activities.

Strategic communication therefore needs to be an integral part of the majority of interventions implemented towards at-risk populations and engaging the audience in the conversation. Communication efforts need to be integrated to a wide variety of initiatives – governance, military, stabilisation and humanitarian. Integrated strategic communication should be planned early-on as the activities get developed. Communication has become a segment of the vast majority of internationally

funded projects; projects' communication element now needs to become a strategised and fully exploited resource in the effort to counter violent networks. The strategic communication campaigns and messages need to be led by an in-depth understanding of the audience at the hyper local to the strategic level as Daesh so ably demonstrated in their recruitment of Abu Yahya. From this in-depth understanding the best communication platform or combination of platforms can be determined to maximise the chance of success in changing behaviours and attitudes.

Finally, literature has often pointed to the early-stage mistake of states and governments attempting to push messaging by themselves⁽²¹⁾. While it is now becoming rarer to see governments directly disseminating counter-messaging, practitioners and decision-makers alike are still struggling to identify and work with trusted sources and voices on the ground. Finding credible entry points should be considered an integral part of the project in the effort to build the tangibility of the message. As we have seen with radio Al-Ghad as it engaged with the audiences, local activists operating directly from Daesh's held territory ensured the successful psychological destabilisation of Daesh and its narratives.

CONCLUSION

As we go forward, scholars gaining access to data and information from territories once held by Daesh will help to further illuminate the functioning of the organization and the interlinkages between its online and offline communication – until now under-analysed. It may confirm, complement or nuance some of the insights articulated in this paper. What iN2 is calling for, however, is a focus on increasing our understanding of the adaptability, flexibility and tangibility of Daesh's communication and what it might mean for the future of the organisation and other groups modelling themselves on Daesh. This is required to further prevent the evolution of Daesh into an insurgency-based, destabilising and subversive influence in Iraq, Syria and more importantly in new territory

farther afield. Daesh are learning and evolving the way they influence individuals, groups and nations – we have much to learn from them that will help us to devise more effective communication strategies that resonate, initiate dialogue and create lasting tangible effect.

Additionally, as we prepare to turn our attention to other regions of the world, there is a need to further document the action of resistance of the Syrian and Iraqi populations. This resistance is a direct illustration that refusing Daesh's message is possible and will be a useful basis for communication in the future. Finally, there is a clear need to improve our capacity to anchor communication in local contexts and identify and work with trusted entry points into at-risk or targeted communities.

(19) Reed A., Ingram H., Witthaker J., (November 2017) Countering Terrorist Narratives, European Parliament Study available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596829_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU(2017)596829_EN.pdf)

(20) Braddock K., Horgan J. (2015) Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism

(21) Braddock K., Horgan J. (2015) Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism

ABOUT iN2

iN2 is a specialist, strategic communications and media company.

We use innovative and engaging communications to connect with audiences in a language and framework that feels natural to them, bringing positive and measurable change to their understanding, perception or behaviour.

We have a commitment to bringing empowerment, growth and stability to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Our Clients:

We work for a host of supranational, government, NGO and multinational private sector clients on a range of issues, themes and challenges.

Our Audiences:

Our audiences are often untrusting. They are besieged by conflict, authoritarianism, violence, propaganda, extremist ideologies and corruption.

We create and shape the conditions for two-way dialogue that helps our clients understand and access these hard-to-reach markets.

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