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ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

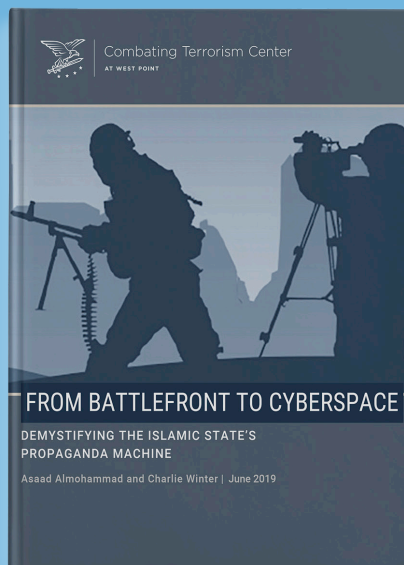


International Reports

16

FROM BATTLEFRONT TO CYBERSPACE

DEMYSTIFYING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S PROPAGANDA MACHINE





International Reports

Monthly Issue - General Directorate of Planning and Coordination

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August 2020

FROM BATTLEFRONT TO CYBERSPACE DEMYSTIFYING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S PROPAGANDA MACHINE

The Islamic State (IS) media rhetoric production, be it audio-visual records, interviews, publications or otherwise expressed, has been meticulously examined and analyzed across the existing body of literature over the recent years. Although the scrutiny has covered all the ideological and technical aspects of IS media, the production method of contents is still shrouded in secrecy, and the formidable media apparatus across its organizational and administrative structure and day-to-day activity remains enigmatic. This report attempts to lay bare the logistics of the IS media production cycle and further explore its structural intricacies.



DETAILED STUDY

A groundbreaking report “From Battlefield to Cyberspace: Demystifying the Islamic State’s Propaganda Machine” was published by Combating Terrorism Center at West Point of United States Military Academy (2019). The said Report was produced by Asaad Almohammad, Ph.D., who is a fellow with the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, and Charlie Winter, who is a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization at King’s College London (ICSR) and an associate fellow at the International Center for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague (ICCT).

The Report makes a uniquely seminal contribution to analyzing terrorism and IS propaganda production in the period leading up to its territorial demise. For assessment purposes, the Report is based on the data collected during the first nine months of 2018 in eastern Syria, including audio-visual records and interviews.

The Report examines the methods used by the IS to cultivate a high degree of operational security, fluidity and efficiency with external and internal pressures. The results reveal how the IS transformed the jihadist communication space in the wake of its rise to global notoriety in the summer of 2014. The IS then announced that it did capture Mosul, declaring its caliphate and creating a sophisticated media production network capable of rushing out about 1,000 unique pieces of propaganda per month.

It should be noted that jihadist media operations did exist long before the IS rose to notoriety; however, the jihadist media operations by IS pale in comparison to other methods. The IS made propaganda production and distribution instrumental to its strategic and tactical operations. Consequently, not only did the IS remunerate its media staff and rank-and-file more generously, it also spent an enormous amount of time and energy to conceal their clandestine day-to-day activities, rendering propaganda as one of its most enigmatic operational cachets.

The Report seeks to lay bare the logistical services of the IS media production cycle, by exploring its structural intricacies, protection methods and facilitating its workings in a period marked by unprecedented material duress and the inevitable

possibility of territorial defeating. In spite of this, the Report shows how the IS managed to continue run its media apparatus as part of a bureaucratic model that remains persistent like other operational areas.

METHODOLOGY

The Report draws on semi-structured and unstructured interview data collected from the eastern part of Syria over the first nine months of 2018. The data included propaganda materials collected by 13 people on the ground and online, and 41 active members of IS were interviewed within 9 months.

The Report used various measures to improve the integrity and validation of the data, such as analysis of contradictory evidence and identification of the respondent. To this end, the Report collected various data sets reviewed constantly, such as documents and advertising materials, and those captured after the confidentiality was removed by the US Department of Defense. These data, collected from interviews, were methodologically cross-checked and catalogued, while removing inconsistent and inaccurate data, and data based on subjective observations were also dropped.

ADMINISTRATIVE HIERARCHY

The authors outline the administrative hierarchy that undergirds the IS media production, assessment and distribution operations in the eastern part of Syria in 2018. The IS core elements comprise the Media Council, the Media Judiciary Committee, the Media Security Office, the Media Agencies and Offices and the Information Bank.

1. MEDIA COUNCIL

It tops the IS hierarchy of information and is fully cloaked in secrecy. The Media Council consists of the senior management of the Central Information Directorate. It could also be the “Central Information Office” referred to in the IS internal documents captured by the US Department of Defense and were declassified in August 2018. As of 2018, the Media Council consisted of eight officials, “seven members and one emir”, who exercised oversight over the Media Judiciary Committee, all Media Offices, and the Information Bank. This meant it had the final say as to whether the media material could be published internally or externally.

2. MEDIA JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

The Media Judiciary Committee is an immediate subordinate to and subsumed under the Media Council. It had strategic and operational roles at the same time. Functionally, the Media Judiciary Committee was mandated with determining the themes of future media products and their release dates and nature, be it published, visual or audio. At the strategic level, it established the goals media products and their ideological themes.

3. MEDIA SECURITY OFFICE

The Media Security Office is overseen by the Unified Security Center, which is a subordinate entity of the Directorate of General Security and the Media Judiciary Committee. The Directorate of General Security managed a number of the IS special activities, including intelligence and special military operations and managerial and religious affairs. In this capacity, the Media Security Office cooperated closely with the Media Judiciary Committee, the Media Offices, the Information Bank, Operational Units i.e. photographers, videographers, internal and external distribution units, work teams, editing teams, and was mandated with verifying that the Media Offices followed the guidance of the Media Judiciary Committee.

4. MEDIA OFFICES

The Media Offices operated with direct oversight from the Media Judiciary Committee and Media Security Office and indirect oversight from the Media Council. Likewise, the IS network of Media Offices in the eastern part of Syria was structured according to a rigid set of guidelines presided over by one emir. Hierarchically, each media office had an administrative team and staff, along with media technicians, field operatives, editors and digital units.

5. INFORMATION BANK

The Information Bank was a highly secretive entity, which reported directly to the Media Judiciary Committee and was hierarchically overseen by the Unified Security Center and Media Council. The Information Bank was operated at least by nine permanent employees headed by one director. The Information Bank was entrusted with storing, archiving, managing, cataloguing media data, media-related operations and documents and information.

To keep the media workstream flow seamlessly, the Information Bank attached a special focus to two tasks: validation and storage; the Information Bank received raw content and assessed its credibility and quality and provided materials to media offices to be yet validated for editorial processing and ultimately to be put into publication.

The activities of communication with the Information Bank were very limited, the movements of its members were closely monitored at all times; the Information Bank was always keen to ensure that there was no unnecessary communication between its members and operatives in the liaison offices to reduce the risk of unauthorized access, and to ensure that archives are not leaked. Hence, access to information and archives was compartmentalized. When such pieces of information were desired, the operatives concerned were required to submit an access form and only the emir of the Information Bank had the authority to deny, restrict or permit it. The Media Judiciary Committee that oversaw the operations of the Information Bank stipulated that any attempt to access the information by operatives from outside or inside the Information Bank without permission or from outside the scope of the respective department shall be considered a breach of the law and shall be punishable.

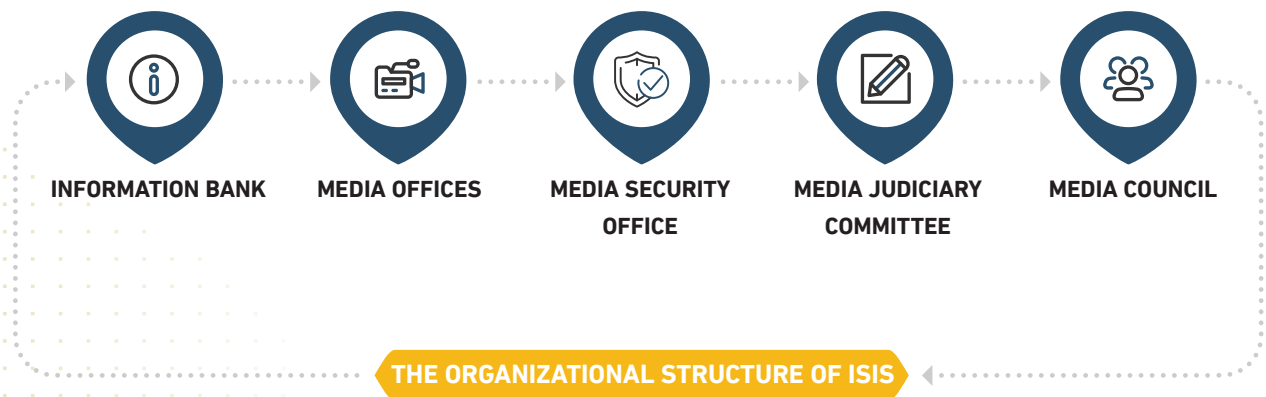
THE MEDIA PRODUCTION CYCLE

The existing literature on the IS propaganda strategy is bulky; yet, little is known about the method in which the IS carried out its media activities on a day-to-day basis as the IS media infrastructure is shrouded in secrecy. The documents revealed that the implementation would take place in accordance with a three-stage cycle:

1. Preparation of information material according to the rules and regulations.
2. Verification and storage process once the material is collected and production is completed
3. Publication of material through the IS media, then securing the media activities to "make it safe" at the operational level.

1. PREPARATION OF INFORMATIONAL MATERIAL

The Media Security Office had the upper hand in collecting data. In the context of projects of high sensitivity and accuracy, relating to senior leaders,



the Media Security Office assigned its components to follow up such data before assigning the production team to do so for protection and control while on site. When the production team would complete its work, the raw materials would be passed directly to the security official who would transfer them to the Information Bank for approval and processing. The operatives would always remain invisible albeit working on site.

2. MEDIA MATERIAL PROCESSING

Raw materials would be processed and verified in the Information Bank, and the Media Offices are not allowed to use the materials they collected unless such materials were meticulously screened and approved, and then stored strictly under the oversight of Information Bank officials. To expedite this process, the Information Bank officials would require four basic pieces of detail: sender's location, source, guidelines issued by the Media Judiciary Committee, the names of data collectors and carriers and the name of the media office or agency that would publish the ultimate product. Once received, the material would be examined, and sensitive information would be removed, then the Information Bank would store two copies thereof; one encrypted copy and one edited and assessed copy for publication. Once approved, it would be sent to a media office designated by the Media Judiciary Committee for development and distribution.

3. SECURING INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS

The security officers worked in the IS secretively, and each media office had a security officer working in tandem with the office administration to stay in line. They were entrusted with different roles:

1. Ensuring the office operational secrecy and information security;
2. Reducing personal interactions between different media teams;
3. Ensuring the physical security of the office operational base;
4. Approving and delivering purchase orders;
5. Screening and keeping records on all equipment and materials;
6. delivering equipment and personnel to cover media-related events.

In a similar vein, media offices were also entrusted with hosting a security secondee to carry out the following roles:

1. Assessing the operations of security officers;
2. Receiving and assessing reports on production team performance;
3. Ensuring the direct delivery of media materials to media operatives;
4. Reporting on the performance of other security media operatives at the office.

As such, media offices were shut off from the outside world by a dual system of intelligence oversight, which



readily created a high degree of operational blackout and effectively safeguarded raw and processed media materials. To keep the work flow faultlessly, security enforced a standardized approach toward information security and encryption to conform to a strict set of behavioral guidelines and restrictions.

MEDIA PRODUCTION CYCLE

The media production cycle in the eastern part of Syria in 2018 is further detailed in the Report. The media production cycle falls equally into five stages:

- 1) Pre-production
- 2) Production
- 3) Assessment and approval
- 4) Editing
- 5) Publication

1. PRE-PRODUCTION

In the pre-production stage, the production team would be sent on a mission with all the guidelines provided by the Media Judiciary Committee. Only members of media offices could negotiate these guidelines, which often include:

1. The thematic focus of the media products.
2. The general scope of media coverage.
3. The nature of the events to be covered, such as executions and battlefield gains.
4. The specific form of documentation, such as text, audio, still images and videos.

5. Any other production preferences, restrictions, cautions and caveats.

In some cases, the media offices submitted specific requests to the Media Judiciary Committee through their representatives. Based on the documents disclosed and leaked by the US Department of Defense following the territorial demise of IS, "The Media Judiciary Committee usually provides guidelines for the production of media materials, and representatives of agencies and offices can also provide a proposal to produce a media propaganda. If the products do not comply with some of the said guidelines, the Committee shall still have the final word, and it shall be mandated to find religious and tactical justifications for the production of materials, and permission shall be obtained before producing any propaganda".

2. PRODUCTION

The Production stage first would set the date for the start of taking the relevant photos and filmmaking, and the Media Council would provide the Media Judiciary Committee with specific instructions regarding production guidelines, schedules, and responsibilities. This information would be transmitted by the Media Security Office, to the Media Office selected for the mission. The Media Security Office was mandated with the following roles at this stage:

1. Protection of the production team members.



2. Monitoring and reporting the performance of the production team.

3. Ensuring that the production team adheres to the production guidelines.

Once the filming or photography was over, the production team would be taken back to the Media Office with its primary product after it had been marked with date and code according to the Information Bank.

3. ASSESSMENT

In the Information Bank, a team of editors would handle any clips, footage, snippets or records that would not meet the minimum production guidelines in terms of content and quality, after which another team would initiate security editing, montage, and archiving procedures, and would inform the Media Judiciary Committee of the receipt of the material, and then records would be carefully catalogued; it would be allocated to a unique number and file, and the designated media office would be permitted to convert it into ready-to-publish propaganda.

4. EDITING

All snapshots approved would be submitted to the montage and printing teams in the Media Office, provided with the comments of the Media Judiciary Committee, and any additional instructions made

by Information Bank officials while working on the final materials for publication. These efforts would be overseen by the emir of the office concerned, then a primary approval would be given. The coordinator of the liaison committee in the office would submit the materials to the Media Judiciary Committee to decide whether it was ready for publication or needed further editing. When the committee decided that the material met the guidelines, it would be sent to the Media Council that had the final word in publishing, rejecting or making further revisions.

5. PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION

As for the Publication and Distribution stage, both in-theater and externally, most data collectors had reconfirmed that documents captured by the Ministry of Defense revealed that it was being handled by a special team known as the "external media team"; as the media offices were prohibited from using the internet for reasons related to information security. One can reasonably infer that these digital teams operated from separate locations, and were closely monitored by the Media Security Office, and this was confirmed by data collectors in the Report.

One of the documents published by the US Department of Defense related to IS information

security revealed that the media products were distributed via the internet by a publisher (nashir), and it meant a network of very secret channels on Telegram. Although the data collectors did not specifically mention this institution, they referred to a sub-network known as the News Publisher Agency (Wekalat Nasher Lil Anbaa'). There are individuals outside the IS-controlled territory who render assistance to the IS to upload and publish video clips from Lebanon and European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden; they are republishing the material through alternative links due to its continued removal.

The Nashir News Agency, as the data collectors reported in the Report, is still an unofficial entity that operates voluntarily. It is highly important not to be confused with the original Nashir channels, which were operated by officials in the Media Security Office.

CONCLUSION

It stands to reason that the shifts in the internal workings of insurgent organizations bring about significant implications for intelligence and counterterrorism practitioners. The Report greatly contributes to the understanding of the way IS operated in the media field at the strategic and tactical levels, and provides insight into the means used to maintain a steady production of propaganda in 2018 and 2019, despite the regional losses it has suffered.

The Report examined closely the administrative hierarchy of the IS media, and how the Centralized Media Directorate achieved a high degree of operational blackout, opacity and efficiency. The Report also analyzed the administrative infrastructure that undergirds the administrative oversight, supervisory bodies, media production and distribution. The authors displayed the IS media activities, particularly in relation to operational security and personnel administration.

The Report revealed a high degree of systemic standardization that has governed the performance of the IS media; the implementation of specific technical standards or specifications that clarify

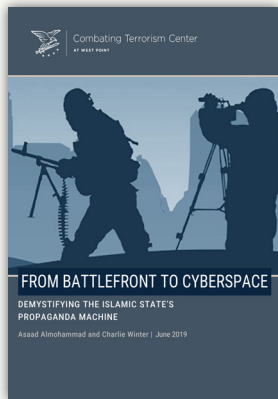
guidelines, restrictions and rules to achieve the optimum level of system and operational quality. The results of the Report reveal that the IS spent a great deal of effort in developing practical forms for these standards to do the following:

1. Determining the scope of the operations and interactions of the media personnel within the media department and with the security apparatus;
2. Guiding and restraining the activities of media personnel and the use of information assets
3. Describing the processes and entities in the production of media material.
4. Ensuring desired quality and assessment plans.

The IS Centralized Information Directorate used de jure and de facto standardization measures. The IS was very keen on the authenticity of its brand; the degree of the reliability of its information. These complex media standards and regulations were specifically directed to quality assurance throughout the various stages of production, which further depict the strategic and methodical line of thought of the engineers and operatives of the IS propaganda machine, displaying full commitment to the compliance, efficiency, standardization and quality of workflow to evince much credibility.

The results of the Report are a testimony to the value of primary data collection in the field, albeit highly risky. The research methods used by the Report provide important insights into the daily work of secret organizations such as IS, which are also seminal to future efforts. Using similar methods in other regions leads to a better understanding of the organizational assets and operational processes of terrorist groups, making it feasibly possible for policymakers to make sound and better-informed decisions in addressing their potential risk, evil and menace.

In conclusion, it can be said that the understanding of the method the IS managed its media apparatus in 2018 provides critical insights into how its potential operational structure is orchestrated in Syria and abroad. This is critically essential to determine the effective countermeasures against the IS in the wake of its territorial demise.



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June 2019

Combating Terrorism Center at West
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