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Exploring the Role of Instructional Material in AQAP's *Inspire* and ISIS' *Rumiyah*

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1 Introduction

In recent years Europe has faced an increasing wave of so-called ‘lone actor’ attacks committed by jihadist (or jihadist-inspired) terrorists. This trend has continued in 2017. For example, the attacks in London and Stockholm, which were simple but devastating in their methodology. Both attacks used vehicles to run pedestrians down. While the London attacker disembarked to engage in a deadly knife attack, an unexploded bomb was subsequently found in the truck used in the Stockholm attack¹. As has been noted by commentators, all of these methods have been described in detail in recent ‘how-to-guide’ articles in English language jihadist magazines, such as in the ‘Open Source Jihad’ (OSJ) section of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine and the ‘Just Terror’ (JT) section of ISIS’ *Rumiyah* magazine. These trends have re-opened the debate about the role and impact of such ‘how-to’ guides in provoking violence by providing would-be terrorists with the practical knowledge to carry out such attacks. Drawing on content analyses of *Inspire* and *Rumiyah* magazines, we argue that groups like ISIS and AQAP understand that their instructional material is of little value unless they can convince supporters to adopt their ‘competitive system of meaning’ (i.e. their way of perceiving the world, its actors and events). Thus it would be wrong to focus myopically on ‘how-to’ operational guides when trying to understand and counter violent extremist propaganda. This paper begins by exploring the history of instructional material in terrorist propaganda before going on to examine the role of *Inspire*’s OSJ section and *Rumiyah*’s JT section within the broader context of the groups’ messaging efforts. It concludes by outlining CT-CVE strategic communications recommendations for both proactively undermining this type of violent extremist messaging and responding post-incident to directed versus inspired attacks.

¹E. Allen & B. Henderson: Westminster attack: Everything we know so far about the events in London. In: The Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/22/westminster-terror-attack-everything-know-far/> (26 March 2017); L. Dearden: Stockholm attack: ‘Homemade bomb’ found in lorry used to kill at least four people in Sweden Suspect arrested on suspicion of murder and terror offences. In: The Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/stockholm-attack-sweden-lorry-truck-crash-terror-isis-islamic-state-manhunt-latest-suspect-police-a7673527.html> (8 April 2017)

2 Historical Overview of Instructional Material

The history of modern instructional material can be traced back to at least the late-1800s and bomb-making manuals produced by anarchist groups, a trend that continued to grow in the 1900s, with examples such as the *Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerrilla*, the *Anarchist Cookbook* and *The Turner Diaries*.² Meanwhile, groups like the original Irish volunteers were including ‘how-to guide’ sections in their magazine, ‘An T’Oglach’, as early as the 1920s.³ In short, the ‘how-to guide’ sections in jihadist magazines are not particularly unique. Indeed, as is so often the case, these materials should be seen as merely strategic plagiarising of best practice.

History provides extensive examples of terror attacks that were carried out using modi operandi gained from ‘how-to guides’. From the Haymarket Square bombing in 1886,⁴ in which *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare* is alleged to have provided instruction for the bombers to *The Turner Diaries* which, since its publication in 1978, has inspired attacks resulting in over two hundred deaths, including the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh – the single deadliest act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history.⁵ What is important about *The Turner Diaries*, and this gives the key to understanding the role of OSJ and JT, is that the instructional material is embedded within a narrative designed to justify and inspire such attacks, including ideological justifications and frantic calls to action. McVeigh did not just draw out operational guidance from reading *The Turner Diaries*, his world view was shaped by the ‘competitive system of meaning’ espoused within its narratives. Similarly, the key to understanding how magazines like *Inspire* and *Rumiyah* may motivate supporters to engage in terrorism is to understand how OSJ and JT within the same broader context.

² A. Larabee: A Brief History of Terrorism in the United States. In: Knowledge, Technology & Policy 16, p.21 (2003)

³ The Official Organ of the Irish Volunteers. In: T’Oglach Magazine 3(31), p.3 <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/an-toglach-magazine/results?title=&subtitle=&text=&pubdate=1921> (21 October 1921)

⁴ K. Anderson: The History of Do-It-Yourself Weapons and Explosives Manuals in America. In: Lawfare <https://www.lawfareblog.com/history-do-it-yourself-weapons-and-explosives-manuals-america> (21 June 2016)

⁵ J.M Berger, “The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism’s Deadly Bible”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 8 (2016) <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Berger-The-Turner-Legacy-September2016-2.pdf>.

3 Decline of Training Camps and the Move to Individual Jihad

In his analysis of how Europe's jihadis gained their training, Peter Nesser noticed that there were two distinct generations. The first "generation networks that were closely associated with Al Qaeda and received terrorist training in Al Qaeda run camps in Afghanistan"⁶, which carried out attacks in Europe from 1998 until 2003/4, a couple of years after the destruction of the training camps. The second "generation networks that have weaker or more indirect ties to Al Qaeda and presumably have found alternative ways to obtain training after Al Qaeda camps were destroyed", emerging as a European threat from 2003/4 onwards.⁷ In contrast to the first, the second "generation activists, the "home grown" terrorists, operated quite autonomously" from the militant groups that inspired them,⁸ seemingly highlighting a transition to a new terrorist wave, that Sageman would describe as "consists mostly of would-be terrorists, who, angered by the invasion of Iraq, aspire to join the movement and the men they hail as heroes. But it is nearly impossible for them to link up with al Qaeda Central, which was forced underground after 9/11. Instead, they form fluid, informal networks that are self-financed and self-trained. They have no physical headquarters or sanctuary, but the tolerant, virtual environment of the Internet offers them a semblance of unity and purpose. Theirs is a scattered, decentralized social structure-a leaderless jihad".⁹

The notion of leaderless or individual jihad is not new, and can be found in the writings and lectures of influential jihadi strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri back in the 1990s. In his strategic concept that became known as "The Global Islamic Resistance", al-Suri highlighted lone wolf attacks carried out by individuals with no direct connection to AQ, but which were nevertheless carried out in support of AQ global Ideology¹⁰. In 2003, following Al-Qaeda's routing from Afghanistan it sought to re-calibrate its military strategy, adopting an approach aimed at exhausting the

⁶ P. Nesser: How did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for their Militant Causes? In: Terrorism and Political Violence 20(2) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546550801920758> (2008)

⁷ Ibid, 235

⁸ Ibid, 241

⁹ M. Sageman: The Next Generation of Terror. In: Foreign Policy <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/08/the-next-generation-of-terror/> (8 October 2009)

¹⁰ A. Stenersen: Bomb-Making for Beginners: Inside an Al-Qaeda E-Learning Course. In: Perspectives on Terrorism 7(1) <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/241/html> (2013)

enemy by attacking his interests world wide¹¹. This new strategy would in turn have a direct impact on how Al-Qaeda trained its operatives. As Kohlmann articulates “Given its weakened position, al Qaeda no longer had the luxury of importing large numbers of unskilled operatives into Afghanistan solely for the purpose of training, only to then immediately export them elsewhere. With a renewed emphasis on self-financed, self-trained, and self-motivated terrorist cells, Bin Laden’s aides began ardently working to spread their collective knowledge and practical skills over the Internet”.¹²

This change of strategic direction, would require a new approach to training recruits to replace training camps, both for practical and ideological instruction. The real challenge with the move to individual jihad, would be how to inspire and motivate individuals into action without direct contact. The internet would soon fill this void with jihadist propaganda designed to inspire individual jihad. Soon English language magazines such as AQ’s *Inspire*, and ISIS’ *Dabiq* and then *Rumiyah* would emerge. The objective of the former has been described as “*Inspire* is characterized by a streamlined and seamless fusion of ideologically driven material with pragmatic instructional and skill-building content. Taken together, these elements are intended simultaneously to increase motivation and lower the barriers of entry to terrorism, with the aim of fostering a do-it-yourself ethos resulting in terrorist behaviors”.¹³ In the section below we give an overview of the instructional material in OSJ and JT.

¹¹ E.F. Kohlmann: “Homegrown” Terrorists: Theory and Cases in the War on Terror’s Newest Front: In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618(1), p. 98
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716208317203> (2008)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A.F. Lemieux, et al.: *Inspire Magazine: A Critical Analysis of its Significance and Potential Impact Through the Lens of the Information*. In: *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(2), p.355
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2013.828604> (2014)

4 *Inspire* – ‘Open Source Jihad’

Inspire magazine was first published by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2010, the brainchild of Americans, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan. The magazine was notable for its engaging format, its focus on inspiring followers to engage in ‘individual jihad’ against the west, and its ‘how-to-guide’ section ‘Open Source Jihad’. OSJ covered a wide variety of technical advice (see Table 1) from training in the use of encryption to using firearms and building home-made bombs. What is particularly interesting about *Inspire’s* OSJ section is the variety of instructional advice it provides supporters, from methods requiring relatively high levels of sophistication, such as improvised explosive devices, to vehicular and arson attacks. The technical advice gained from OSJ has been cited by law enforcement in many successful and foiled terrorist attacks, most notably the 2013 Boston Bombing in which the pressure cooker bomb used was based on OSJ instructions.¹⁴ Reflecting the tendency for Western jihadists to be undiscerning in the propaganda they consume, OSJ guides have apparently influenced ‘homegrown terrorists’ whose attacks were preceded by a pledge of allegiance to AQ’s rival, ISIS (e.g. San Bernadino shooters).¹⁵

¹⁴ H.A. Sarat-St. Peter: “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom”: Jihadist Tactical Technical Communication and the Everyday Practice of Cooking. In: *Technical Communication Quarterly* 26(1), p.77 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10572252.2016.1275862?journalCode=htcq20> (2017); A.F. Lemieux, et al.: *Inspire Magazine: A Critical Analysis of its Significance and Potential Impact Through the Lens of the Information*, p.355 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2013.828604> (2014)

¹⁵ H.A. Sarat-St. Peter: “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom”: Jihadist Tactical Technical Communication and the Everyday Practice of Cooking. In: *Technical Communication Quarterly* 26(1), p.77 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10572252.2016.1275862?journalCode=htcq20> (2017)

Table 1: Inspire’s ‘Open Source Jihad’ Section

Inspire Magazine	Open Source Jihad (Instructional Material)
Issue 1	“Make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom”, The AQ Chef “How to use Asrar al-Mujahideen: Sending & Receiving Encrypted Messages”, Terr0r1st
Issue 2	“The ultimate mowing machine”, Yahya Ibrahim “Asrar Al-Mujahideen 2.0 extras”, Terr0r1st
Issue 3	(Special Issue)
Issue 4	“Destroying Buildings”, AQ Chef “Training with the AK”, Abu Salih “Advice for those who want to help Al-Malahem Media”, Terr0r1st
Issue 5	“Training with the AK 2”, Abu Salih
Issue 6	“Training with the AK”, Abu Saleh “Making acetone peroxide”, Dr Khateer
Issue 7	(Special Issue)
Issue 8	“Training with the handgun”, Abu Saleh “Remote control detonation”, Dr. Khateer
Issue 9	“The convoy of martyrs: Rise up and board with us” “It is your freedom to ignite a firebomb”, The AQ Chef “Qualities of an urban assassin”, Uthman Ibn Al-Ightiyal
Issue 10	“Torching parked vehicles”, Ibnul Irhab “Causing road accidents”, AQ Chef “You ask, we answer”, AQ Consultant
Issue 11	(Special Issue)
Issue 12	“Car bombs inside America”, AQ Chef “Car bomb: Field data”, AQ Chef
Issue 13	“The hidden bomb” “Breaching security barriers”, The AQ Chef “Making the hidden bomb”, The AQ Chef “Field Tactics” External Operations Reconnaissance Team
Issue 14	“Assassination Operations” “Designing a timed hand grenade”, The AQ Chef “Assassinations Field Tactics” Reconnaissance Team
Issue 15	“Professional Assassinations”, Prepared by the External Operations Team “Home Assassinations: Parcel Bomb, Magnet Car Bomb, Door-Trap Bomb”, The AQ Chef
Inspire 16	(Special Issue)

5 Rumiya – ‘Just Terror’

First published in September 2016, Islamic State’s *Rumiya* magazine, translated as ‘Rome’, is a reference to the Hadith in which the Prophet Mohamed declared that the Muslim armies would conquer Constantinople and then Rome. Unlike its predecessor magazine *Dabiq*, *Rumiya*’s ‘Just Terror Tactics’ section offers its readers in-

structional guidance for engaging in terrorist attacks. Detailed in Table 2, *Rumiyah's* JT section is not unique in the operational advice that it provides readers with, similar content featuring in *Inspire* (not to mention often years earlier too). JT has tended to focus on simpler, less sophisticated types of attacks whereas *Inspire* tended to offer a mix. While drawing causal links between JT and recent attacks is problematic, analysts have noted the similarity in JT's operational advice and the Berlin Christmas market, Westminster and Stockholm attacks.¹⁶

Table 2: *Rumiyah's* 'Just Terror Tactics' Section

<i>Rumiyah</i> Magazine	Just Terror Tactics (Instructional Material)
Issue 1	-
Issue 2	Knife Attacks
Issue 3	Vehicle Attacks
Issue 4	Knife Attacks
Issue 5	Arson Attacks
Issue 6	-
Issue 7	-
Issue 8	-
Issue 9	Hostage Taking

6 Role of Instructional Material

It is interesting to first examine what the groups themselves say about the West's reaction to these 'how-to-guide' sections. *Inspire's* chief editor openly mocks the West's fixation on the sections, writing that "[t]he kuffar [disbelievers] are so terrified by this section. In fact, they limit the weight of the magazine on this section alone, while they forget that all a Muslim needs to fight the kuffar is enough Iman [faith] and the simplest of tools. Thus, the magazines [sic] content complete each

¹⁶ C. Mortimer: Berlin attack: Isis magazine offered tips on carrying out Nice-style lorry assault Rumiyah offered tips and tricks to maximise the number of casualties. In: The Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/stockholm-attack-sweden-lorry-truck-crash-terror-isis-islamic-state-manhunt-latest-suspect-police-a7673527.html> (8 April 2017); U. Friedman: The Terrifying Simplicity of the Stockholm Attack "Very few actually comprehend the deadly and destructive capability of the motor vehicle," an ISIS publication advises. In: The Atlantic <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/stockholm-truck-attack/511364/> (7 April 2017)

other”.¹⁷ The point is that, at least from the perspective of *Inspire’s* architects, the knowledge contained in OSJ is not most important for carrying out an attack, rather it is a shared understanding of the world as presented by AQAP. After all, *Inspire*, like *Rumiyah*, is dominated by content that is designed to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of its readership via a range of appeals wrapped in powerful narratives while operational content in either magazine takes up a handful of the 40-50 pages that make up an issue. It follows that if instructional material was deemed most important for radicalising and operationalising supporters, this would be reflected in a much greater proportion of the magazine being devoted to such content. To motivate an individual to follow the advice contained in either AQAP’s or ISIS’ ‘how-to-guide’ requires an individual to perceive their actions as not just justified, but an urgent necessity within at least a wider politico-military strategy if not a cosmic struggle.

7 Competitive Systems of Meaning

A key purpose of violent extremist propaganda is to provide supporters with a ‘competitive system of meaning’, i.e. through which it seeks to shape its readership’s perceptions, polarise their support and radicalise them towards legitimising and engaging in terrorism.¹⁸ While space considerations will not allow an in-depth analysis here, groups like ISIS and AQAP variously interplay in-group identity, Other, crisis and solution constructs into cyclically self-reinforcing narratives.¹⁹ As graphically represented in Figure 1, both ISIS and AQAP present themselves as champions of the in-group identity (Sunni Muslims) and everyone else as out-group identities (Others) as enemies responsible for crises that only they (i.e. AQAP or ISIS) are able to solve. Consequently, the more that perceptions of crisis can be increased and attached to Others the greater the sense of urgency for the in-group to implement solutions (and vice versa). As perceptions of crisis become increasingly acute, it follows that solutions need to be more and more extreme.

¹⁷ Y. Ibrahim: Inspired by ‘Inspire’. In: *Inspire Magazine* 11 <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/inspire-magazine-issue-11.pdf> p.19 (2013)

¹⁸ H.J. Ingram: An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War. In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (40)5 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551> (2017)

¹⁹ H.J. Ingram (2016) ‘Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change’. *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 9 <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Ingram-Deciphering-the-Siren-Call-of-Militant-Islamist-Propaganda-September2016.pdf>.

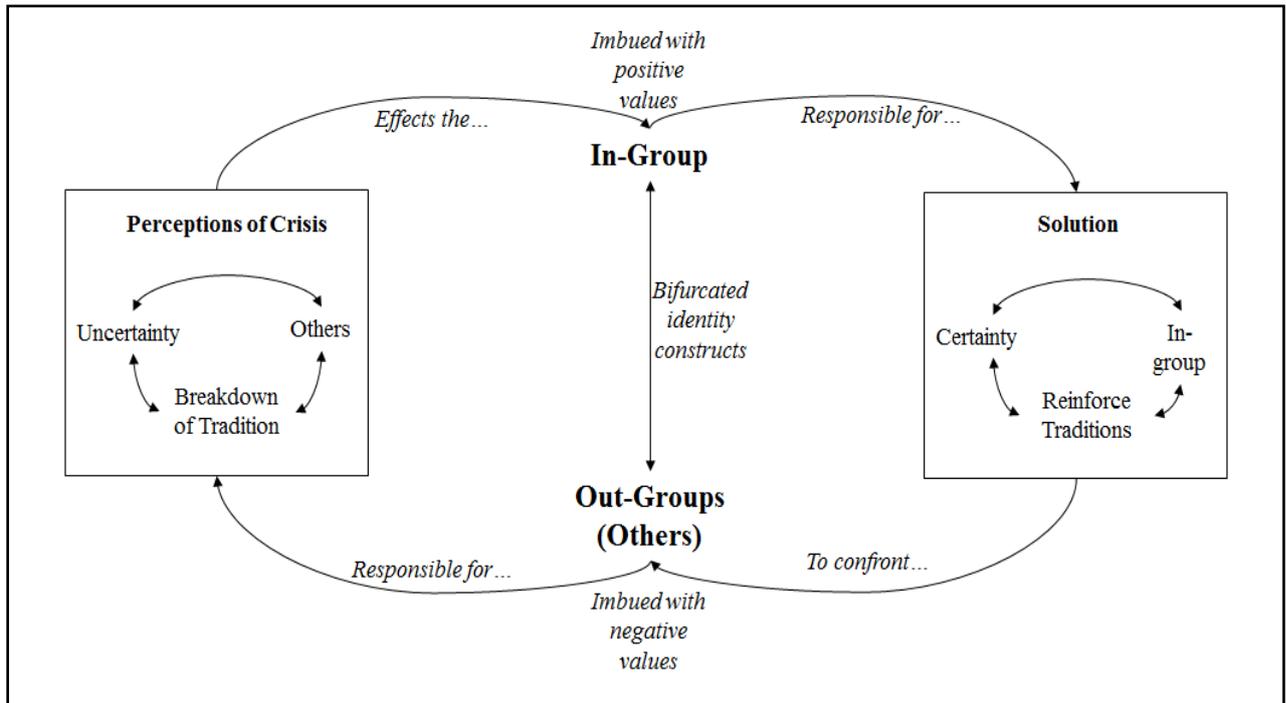


Figure 1: System of Meaning

Groups like ISIS and AQAP understand that the deeper supporters can be coaxed into this psychological web and adopt this as *their* lens through which to understand the world, the easier it becomes to convince them to engage in acts of violence. Take issue 9 of *Rumiyah* as an example. The issue opens with its feature article titled ‘The ruling on the belligerent Christians’ stating:²⁰

At a time when Muslims are being killed in the east and in the west – men, women, children, and the elderly altogether – and when the *mushrikin* and *murtaddin* are deploying all manner of destructive weaponry against them, raining devastation on their villages and towns, the evil scholars, the preachers of misguidance, and the *tawaghit* of the democratic parties are busy weeping over every *mushrik* struck by the hands of the mujahidin and disavowing themselves of every attack carried out against their Crusader allies, claiming that Islam does not permit such deeds and accusing those who carry them out of tarnishing the religion’s image. Their sinful tongues and filthy pens even go so far as to give those *harbi* (belligerent) *kuffar* protection with respect to their blood and their wealth, and to defame the noble *muwahhidin*, who car-

²⁰ The ruling on the belligerent Christians. In: *Rumiyah* 9, pp.5-10 (2017)

ried out Allah’s judgment on the *mushrikin* and, through their blessed deeds – not just their words – revived *shar’i* rulings which the *tawaghit* and their allies endeavored to either wipe out or replace. From among these blessed deeds were the successive attacks which the soldiers of the Islamic State in Misr and Sinai carried out against the Christians in those lands, targeting them with killings and assassinations, and afflicting their churches with burning and explosions.²¹

It should be clear from this quote how ISIS seeks to increase perceptions of crisis in their audience, attaching responsibility for that malaise to not only those outside of the in-group identity but traitors within it, to justify and legitimise violence. Extreme crisis requires extreme solutions. This is what follows *before* the ‘Just Terror Tactics’ section:

- A one page infographic identifying five reasons why ‘Jews and Christians’ are enemies then appears,²²
- A rehashed article by ISIS’ deceased founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi titled ‘And likewise the Messengers are afflicted, then the final outcome is theirs (Part 2)’,²³
- Another infographic titled ‘Seven shaded by Allah in his shade’,²⁴
- An article for women ‘The woman is a shepherd in her husband’s home and responsible for her flock’,²⁵
- An article by Shaykh Sulayman Ibn ‘Abdillah Ibn Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdil-Wahab titled ‘They took their scribes and monks as lords besides Allah’,²⁶
- An ‘exclusive’ content article ‘Be patient, for indeed the promise of Allah is true’ by ‘The Mujahid Shaykh Abul-Hasan Al-Muhajir’,²⁷

²¹ Ibid, p.5

²² Ibid, p.11

²³ Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi: And likewise the Messengers are afflicted, then the final outcome is theirs (Part 2). In: Rumiya 9, pp.12-16 (2017)

²⁴ Seven shaded by Allah in his shade. In: Rumiya 9, p. 17 (2017)

²⁵ The woman is a shepherd in her husband’s home and responsible for her flock. In: Rumiya 9, p. 18-21 (2017)

²⁶ Shaykh Sulayman Ibn: Abdillah Ibn Muhammad Ibn Abdil-Wahab, They took their scribes and monks as lords besides Allah. In: Rumiya 9, pp.22-25 (2017)

²⁷ Abul-Hasan Al-Muhajir: Be patient, for indeed the promise of Allah is true. In: Rumiya 9, pp.26-35 (2017)

- The third article in ‘The establishment of the Islamic State’ series titled ‘The Twelver Rafidah from a fabricated claim to a non-existent Imam’,²⁸
- The regular ‘Military and Covert Operations’ section outlining military actions across ISIS’ wilayats and beyond,²⁹
- Finally, an infographic titled ‘Epic Battles of Mosul’ featuring operational statistics.³⁰

The ‘Just Terror Tactics’ section on hostage-taking then appears. It should be clear that the instructional content is deeply embedded in existential, historical, jurisprudential and strategic narratives that variously seek to not only increase Other-generated crisis and the need for an ISIS-generated solution but increasingly coax supporters into adopting ISIS’ ‘competitive system of meaning’. The instructional material, much of which is readily available online with a simple Google search, is merely a bonus. *Inspire’s* editor reminds us of the shared strategic logic: ‘...all a Muslim needs to fight the kuffar is enough Iman [faith] and the simplest of tools’.³¹ Furthermore, violent extremists will respond to acts of terrorism, especially so-called ‘inspire’ attacks, by describing the perpetrators as heroic members of their organisations, inflating their actions as part of a broader movement and politico-military campaign. It is a post-incident messaging strategy designed to encourage future operatives. The obvious question to emerge is how can this propaganda strategy be confronted by CT-CVE practitioners.

8 Proactive and Post-Incident CT-CVE Strategic Communication Recommendations

Two key findings can be drawn from the preceding analysis. First, violent extremists embed instructional material within a broader sea of narratives that are designed to legitimise, justify and inspire engagement in violence. A proactive CT-CVE strategic communications approach is required to address this aspect of the violence extremist strategy. Second, post-incident messaging from groups like ISIS and

²⁸ The Twelver Rafidah from a fabricated claim to a non-existent Imam. In: *Rumiyah* 9, pp.36-41 (2017)

²⁹ Military and Covert Operations. In: *Rumiyah* 9, pp.42-44 (2017)

³⁰ Epic Battles of Mosul. In: *Rumiyah* 9, p.45 (2017)

³¹ Y. Ibrahim: Inspired by 'Inspire'. In: *Inspire Magazine* 11, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/inspire-magazine-issue-11.pdf> (2013)

AQAP are designed to inspire a ‘copycat’ effect in audiences while reinforcing the group’s overarching message. A post-incident communications strategy is required to address this aspect of the violent extremist strategy. Upon this basis, the following recommendations draw upon the ‘linkage-based’ approach to counter-terrorism strategic communications.³²

8.1 Proactive Recommendations

The ‘linkage-based’ approach to CT-CVE strategic communications recommends the deployment of messaging that are designed to dissolve the ‘linkages’ violent extremists make between themselves and solutions *and* their enemies and crisis (see Figure 1). Put simply, the entire strategy is calibrated to undermine the ‘competitive system of meaning’ championed by jihadist groups like ISIS and AQAP. While space considerations will not allow an in-depth analysis of the ‘linkage-based strategy’, it is worthwhile considering three elements: core narrative, message variety and synchronicity of message and action.

8.2 A Core Narrative

A key lesson that we could learn from AQ and ISIS is to have a clear and simple core narrative that is supported by a variety of messages. There has been a tendency in counter-narrative campaigns to focus on individual messages rather than on creating a narrative constructed by a set of inter-locking messages. As we have seen, the strength of messages is not individual, but rather how they reinforce each other to create a coherent narrative supporting a system of meaning. Simply put, the sum is greater than the individual parts. Hence it is crucial that CT strategic communication campaigns are anchored around a core, but simple, narrative which allows the messages to build on and reinforce one another, otherwise the messages risk seeming incoherent and contradicting.

³² H.J. Ingram (2016) ‘The strategic logic of the “linkage-based” approach to combating militant Islamist propaganda’, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 6 <https://icct.nl/publication/the-strategic-logic-of-the-linkage-based-approach-to-combating-militant-islamist-propaganda-conceptual-and-empirical-foundations/>.

8.3 A Variety of Messaging

A variety of messaging types should be deployed, not just a variety of messages.³³ Individuals may be more receptive to different types of messages, and different types of messaging will build to support each other. In particular, this should contain: 1) Rational choice and Identity based messages. ISIS will often for example fuse identity messages, such as that it is your duty as a Muslim to come and join the caliphate, with rational choice arguments that highlight the quality of life you would enjoy living within the caliphate. Through providing both types of messages you can appeal to a wider spectrum of people, but more importantly the two messages are mutually reinforcing. 2) Offensive and Defensive messages. Counter message campaigns are inherently defensive, however past campaigns show that they are most effective when combined with offensive messaging, with emphasis on the latter. Whilst defensive messaging focusses on the opposition's message, going on the offensive gives the opportunity to get your key messages across.³⁴

8.4 Synchronise Message and Action

Communication is not just what you say, but the totality of what you say and do. Messages lose their credibility and hence impact, when there is a disparity between message and action. Hence care should be taken to ensure that message and action are closely synchronised together to increase effectiveness. Further, a key messaging technique of both AQ and ISIS, to expose the say-do-gap, between what western governments say on the one hand and the policies they enact on the other. Through synchronisation, this area of attack is minimised, and in turn allows the focus to be put on exposing the say-do-gap of the opposition.³⁵

8.5 Post-incident Messaging Response: Inspired-attacks

Distinguishing between 'directed' and 'inspired' attacks is important for identifying opportunities and risks for countering this threat. Directed attacks, while in theory having a greater potential for lethality, also provide security and law enforcement

³³ H. J. Ingram and A. Reed (2016). "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 4 <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Ingram-CTSC-June-2016-3.pdf>.

³⁴ A. Reed (2017) 'IS Propaganda: Should We Counter the Narrative?', *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, <https://icct.nl/publication/is-propaganda-should-we-counter-the-narrative/>.

³⁵ H. J. Ingram and A. Reed (2016). "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications" <https://icct.nl/publication/lessons-from-history-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/>.

agencies with more opportunities for discovery compared to ‘inspired’ attackers who have little to no contact with a central organisation. While it may seem counterintuitive, increasing the incentives for groups to engage in directed attacks while diminishing incentives for ‘inspired’ attacks has the benefit of increasing operational risks upon these groups rather than affording them ‘free kicks’ with inspired attacks. Building on the proactive recommendations outlined above, post-incident messaging should focus on plainly and factually describing events for what they are: cowardly criminal violence targeting innocents. If the incident is an ‘inspired’ attack and, as is often the case, the attacker has a history of criminality, mental illness or is ignorant of their own supposed motivations, it presents an opportunity for governments to set a ‘trap’ for militant Islamists by derisively predicting that they will claim the cowardly actions of a disturbed criminal reflecting their desperation. This leaves the violent extremists with two options:

1. Acknowledge the perpetrator as *their* ‘inspired’ attacker. The follow-up messaging to such a response is to highlight how that messaging reinforces the themes within the original message augmented by newly-available information.
2. The perpetrator is not officially acknowledged by ISIS. This is ideal because it means the violent extremists have missed an opportunity to claim an attack. Government messaging merely acknowledges the accuracy of their original description of the attack as a cowardly criminal act.

9 Conclusion

Although often perceived as a new phenomenon, the instructional guides in jihadist magazines such as OSJ and JT are, in reality, the latest iteration of a long history of instructional material. In our response to jihadist propaganda we need to be careful that we do not place too much weight on these guides in themselves, for they only make sense when seen in their place within the wider context of jihadist propaganda. The instructional material is of little value unless the reader can be convinced to adopt the groups’ competitive system of meaning. Ultimately, strategic communication efforts should focus on dissolving the system of meaning championed by violent extremists and, in doing so, undermine the mechanisms used to legitimise and justify engaging in terrorist violence. However, an essential part of this strategy must be the implementation of appropriate post-incident messaging to minimise the ‘copycat’ effect and reinforce broader CT-CVE messaging themes.

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