



# Retransmitting the Caliphate

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## **STRATEGIC MULTILAYER ASSESSMENT**

**Authors: Haroro Ingram, PhD, The George Washington University Program on Extremism  
Craig Whiteside, PhD, US Naval War College  
Monterey**

**Charlie Winter, PhD, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, ExTrac**

**Series Editor: Ali Jafri, NSI Inc.**

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## Haroro Ingram, PhD

Dr. Haroro J. Ingram is a Senior Research Fellow with The Program on Extremism (PoE) at The George Washington University. His research primarily focuses on the role of propaganda and charismatic leadership in the evolution and appeal of violent non-state political movements; militant Islamist propaganda targeting English-speaking audiences; and the role of strategic communications in national security operations, strategy and policy, particularly in the areas of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE). Haroro's work draws heavily on primary source materials, most of which are collected during field research in countries across the Middle East, as well as South and Southeast Asia. He currently runs several in-country applied research projects in these regions, mostly focused on enhancing civil society CVE capabilities. Haroro is a Senior Researcher on [The ISIS Files](#) Project and on PoE's core partnership with the Global Network on Extremism and Technology ([GNET](#)), and a Senior Investigator with the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center ([NCITE](#)). He also provides support for PoE's partners in the [Congressional Counter-Terrorism Caucus](#), the leading bipartisan voice in Congress for pragmatic approaches to tackling extremism and radicalization.

Haroro's research has been published in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *RUSI Journal*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *War on the Rocks*, *The Atlantic*, *The National Interest* and *The Washington Post* amongst others. He has been a visiting fellow with institutions such as the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (The Hague), the Naval Postgraduate School's Defense Analysis Department (Monterey), and the Australian National University's Department of International Relations (Canberra). A former national security practitioner, Ingram regularly consults across government, private, and civil society sectors.

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### Craig Whiteside, PhD



Dr. Craig Whiteside is an Associate Professor at the US Naval War College Resident Program at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, where he teaches national security affairs to military officers as part of their professional military education. He is a senior associate with the Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and a fellow at The George Washington University's Program on Extremism. Whiteside's current research focuses on the leadership succession and military doctrine of the Islamic State militant group, and he co-authored *The ISIS Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2020). He has a BS from West Point and a PhD in Political Science from Washington State University and is a former U.S. Army officer with experience in Iraq. His

recent publications can be found [here](#).

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## Charlie Winter, PhD



Dr. Charlie Winter is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), and Research Coordinator for the ICSR-led, GIFCT-funded research consortium, the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET). He is also Co-Founder of the conflict analytics system ExTrac ([extrac.io](http://extrac.io)).

His work focuses on how and why violent extremists use strategic communication to further their political and military agendas in both on- and offline spaces. His position at ICSR is currently supported by the Global Internet Forum for Counter-Terrorism (GIFCT), Facebook, the UK Home Office, and the US Department for Homeland Security. In

addition, Winter is an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in the Hague, and an Associate of the Imperial War Museum Institute in London. Winter is also member of the RESOLVE Network Research Advisory Council.

His PhD in the Department of War Studies at King's College London was supported by Facebook as part of the Online Civil Courage Initiative. It explored how violent extremists articulate meaning through visual propaganda. He also holds an undergraduate degree in Arabic from the University of Edinburgh and a Master's Degree in Middle East and Mediterranean Studies from King's College London.

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## Retransmitting the Caliphate

Haroro Ingram<sup>1</sup>, PhD, George Washington University Program on Extremism; Craig Whiteside<sup>2</sup>, PhD, US Naval War College Monterey; Charlie Winter<sup>3</sup>, PhD, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, ExTrac

The Islamic State's complete loss of territorial control in Iraq and Syria in 2019 forced its central media unit to adapt in order to continue to produce the high-quality products for which it had become infamous. This paper evaluates this transformation, and measures both output, themes, and quality of product in the years since the collapse of the territorial caliphate. We distill some of the elements the group has used to successfully produce and disseminate products from strengthening affiliates abroad, and the impact the central media has had on these distant media cells. Through our research regarding non-state actor influence operations, a sense of the larger, comprehensive character of the ever-evolving information environment can be derived.

## Introduction

The Islamic State's caliphate has collapsed into uniform insurgency in its core turf of Iraq and Syria, and provinces near and far. Its Central Media Diwan, which heralded the first "caliph" in almost a century, still functions despite the loss of territory. At its heart a clandestine yet prolific enterprise, the Islamic State's media department long ago learned how to produce quality products for strategic communication purposes in a secure and careful manner, in order to protect its experienced workers and the leaders they serve.

This paper attempts to explain the resilience of the media department as a function of the combination of the structure, people, and ideas that have sustained it since 2016, when it suffered catastrophic leadership losses. We used Islamic State propaganda and other sources to put together a picture of how this vital organization works to build a global level of support for the group to facilitate its return to prominence and the achievement of *tamkeen*, (territorial and political consolidation). We start with a brief summary of the media department's history, describe its structural evolution to date, and follow with an explanation of current media production. We conclude with an analysis of its vulnerabilities for

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<sup>1</sup> Contact information: haroro\_ingram@email.gwu.edu

<sup>2</sup> Contact information: cawhites@nps.edu

<sup>3</sup> Contact information: charlie@extrac.io

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exploitation, and generally, what we can learn about the current information environment from this media unit's practices.

## Background and History

We cannot understand the impact of the Islamic State Central Media Diwan without an appreciation of its history, and the lessons it absorbed into its DNA as a clandestine and innovative outlet, under great pressure by counterterrorism forces, for almost two decades. The media unit has provided continuity for the group, managing the release of the first leadership speech by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in January 2004 and continuously serving the movement in its various name changes and political transformations since then. To this point, the current spokesman claims to have served in the department under its first spokesman Abu Maysara al-Iraqi while it served Tawhid wal-Jihad and later al-Qa'ida in Iraq (Islamic State of Iraq, 2011).

The early media unit saw relentless targeting by US counterterrorism forces. As a result, it developed strong security practices that allowed it to serve the leadership safely, while consistently producing products for its online supporters and Iraqi Sunnis. These early successes, and the emphasis the group had on Abu Maysara's position of spokesman, raised the political value of the unit within the organization. By 2006-2007 the group was led by prominent figures Muharib al-Jubouri and Khaled al-Mashadani. The Islamic State of Iraq's defeat in 2007 during the Surge led to a revamping of the department by Abu Mohammad al-Furqan and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, amir and spokesman, respectively (Whiteside, 2016).

Al-Furqan is credited with founding the al-Furqan Media foundation in 2006 (which still produces the group's strategic communications), the first of many specialty units he created during his long tenure: al-l'tisam (social media), al-Hayat (foreign language translations and magazines like *Dabiq/Rumiyah*), al-Ajnad (religious songs), al-Furat (non-Arab propaganda), al-Naba (weekly online and print newsletter), al-Bayan (radio), and the gray media/unofficial outlet A'maq News Agency (Roggio, 2016; Islamic State, 2016; Whiteside, 2016). Furqan's partner, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spent five years as the public face and voice of the Islamic State movement, as well as the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq, ISIS, and finally the Islamic State (al-Binali, 2014). Some claim he was being groomed to replace the caliph before al-Adnani and al-Furqan were killed in 2016 along with Al-Furqan's deputy Abu Harith al-Lami (McCants, 2016; United States Department of Defense, 2016). All three were killed during the same week, in what must have been a catastrophic security breach of the media department.

The triple leadership decapitation event introduced flux at a critical moment, as the Global Coalition Against ISIL gained traction and the end of the caliphate became a matter of time. For the first time, the media was led for a time by spokesmen and leaders from outside of Iraq and Syria, beginning with Abu Hassan al-Muhajir and Abu Hakim al Urduni respectively (al-Tamimi, 2019). Al-Urduni's tenure was short

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and controversial, with the group’s leadership council stepping in to replace him with Abu Abdullah al-Australi sometime in 2018 (al-Tamimi, 2018; Schliebs, 2018). Most of the media leadership was killed in the final fight of the physical caliphate in Baghuz, including al-Australi, French language editor Abu Anas al-Firansi, and Russian language editor Abu Jihad al-Shishani. Al-Furqan’s other lieutenants, including A’maq News Agency founder Rayad Meshal<sup>4</sup>, Abu Yasir al-Belgiki, Abu Muqatil al-Amriki, Mohammad Khalifa from Canada, and the American Ahmad Abosamra did not survive the fall of the caliphate (Weiss, 2019; Mr. Orange, 2019; Orton, 2019; Van Ostaeyen, 2019; Caki, 2019; Callimachi, 2019; Islamic State, 2017). Al-Adnani’s successor Abu Hassan al-Muhajir did survive the battle, but later died during the same week as caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2019 (Ingram, Whiteside & Winter, 2019).

A new spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, was named in the same announcement introducing the new caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi, once again signifying the significance of the position. As has been the pattern with new amirs appointed during down cycles in the movement, the new caliph has relied on the spokesman to be the sole voice of the movement until there is sufficient momentum for the new caliph to speak with authority and legitimacy. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi set this pattern in his own early reclusiveness—balanced by his outspoken media frontman al-Adnani in 2010—a pattern we see repeated today (Ingram & Whiteside, 2019). The amir of the media department is currently unknown, and the loss of foreign talent might explain why the new spokesman, Abu Hamza, is once again thought to be an Iraqi, based on his accent/dialect (Counter Extremism Project, 2021).

## Current Structure

As early as 2007 the media structure mirrored the larger organization, with branches in each region, district, and locality, and controlled through its parallel hierarchy in different Iraqi provinces. This design meant local media offices were directed by higher level offices and the central media department, while also supporting (and being supported by) the local or regional commander. The department back then already had public relations, internet, photography, production, publishing and distribution, and archival offices. A media committee that worked for the media amir vetted products (Anonymous, 2007a). Even in its earliest stage, the department transcended being a media outlet, but also functioned as public relations office, a library for institutional memory, and a communication hub for leadership and other departments in the organization (Anonymous, 2007b).

Today, despite the downgrade of all other departments in the caliphate structure and distribution under governors for Iraq and Syria (Al-Hashimi, 2018), the media office is still officially titled the Central Media

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<sup>4</sup> An Islamic State unofficial biography from Telegram related al-Furqan’s mentoring of the A’Maq News Agency’s founder and encouragement to start the innovative outlet that used “scoops” from insiders to feed Western media looking for “legitimate” sources.

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Diwan—another indication of its centrality to the larger movement. Despite the title, the media department is more of a hub connecting geographically distant parts. The department is divided into a Media Council (board of directors), a Judiciary Committee (religious advisors), a Security Office, media agencies, geographically outlying offices, and the Information Bank (archive) (Winter & Almohammad, 2019). Much of the work beyond strategic communication (largely leadership statements) has been pushed out of the central department and into the specialty agencies that al-Furqan established (described above). The Central Media Diwan has also expanded beyond media personnel, integrating religious and security experts from the Islamic State’s other departments in order to better regulate content for quality and ideological purity, as well as to secure the transmission of raw media products to the production teams in the central media. This centralized support serves provinces near and far. For example, captured media documents from the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province demonstrate the involvement of the central media unit in serving as “the focal point for the distribution of external content” (Milton, 2018b). For provinces like Khorasan, East Asia, and West Africa, this level of centralized support often means remote editing, production, publication, and dissemination to a variety of official outlets. The management of unofficial online outlets and social media channels that have expanded in the post-territorial caliphate era has been the newest challenge for a department that no longer operates in a contiguous area, but still desires a high level of narrative control.

## Media Trends of the Post-Territorial Caliphate

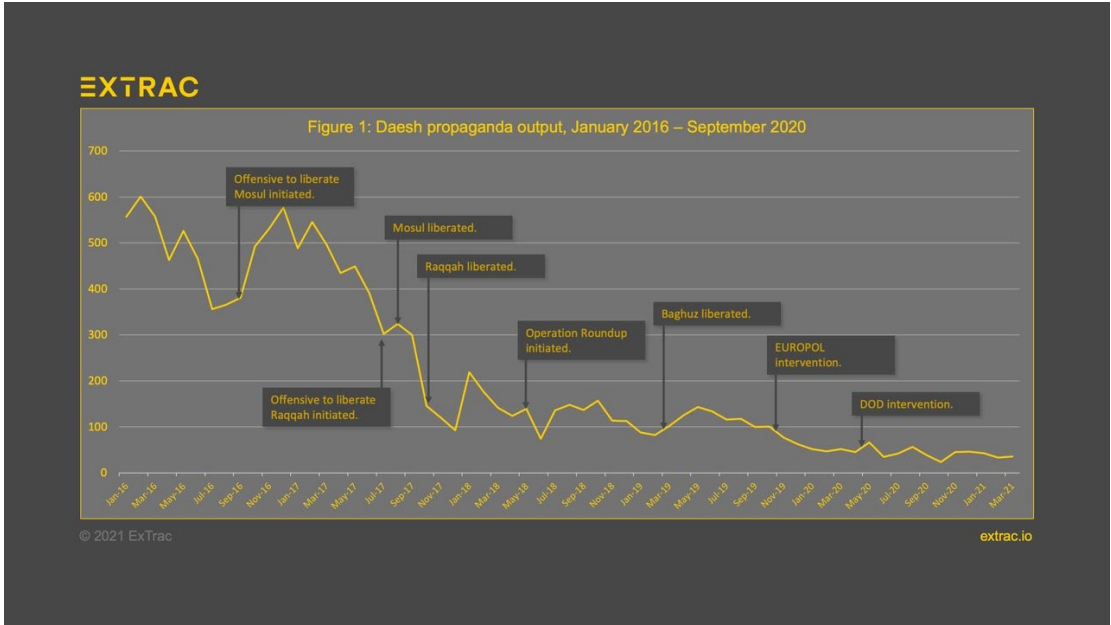
Since the Islamic State’s territorial prime back in 2015-16, its media output has declined dramatically. This trend is evidenced in the below visualizations, which are based on a complete archive of Islamic State media output dating back to 2015. The archive was collected from its closed-access official channel on the encrypted social media platform, Telegram. Each of its 50,000+ data points—every single attack claim, photograph, video clip, radio program, leadership statement, and so on—was ingested and processed using ExTrac, a conflict analytics system that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to augment human subject matter expertise.<sup>5</sup>

When rate of output is considered longitudinally, as in Figure 1, the extent to which the Islamic State’s media enterprise has suffered due to territorial loss is easily apparent. The data offer incontrovertible evidence that, by early 2021, its media infrastructure was about seven percent as productive as it had been in early 2016. This finding is consistent with Milton’s work, which noted an across-the-board propaganda deceleration through 2016 and 2017, as the territorial caliphate was forced to contract (Milton, 2016; Milton, 2018a).

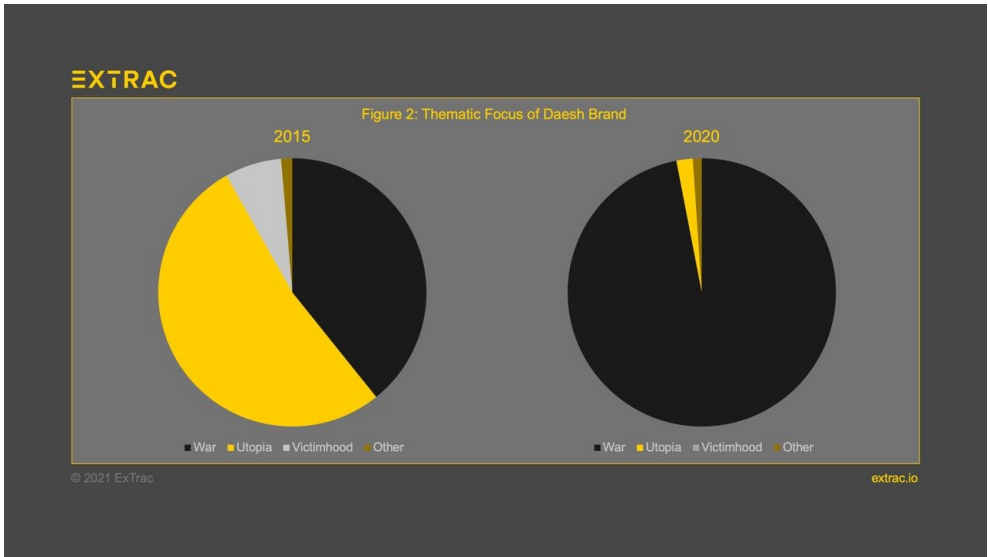
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<sup>5</sup> Visit [extrac.io](https://extrac.io) for more information



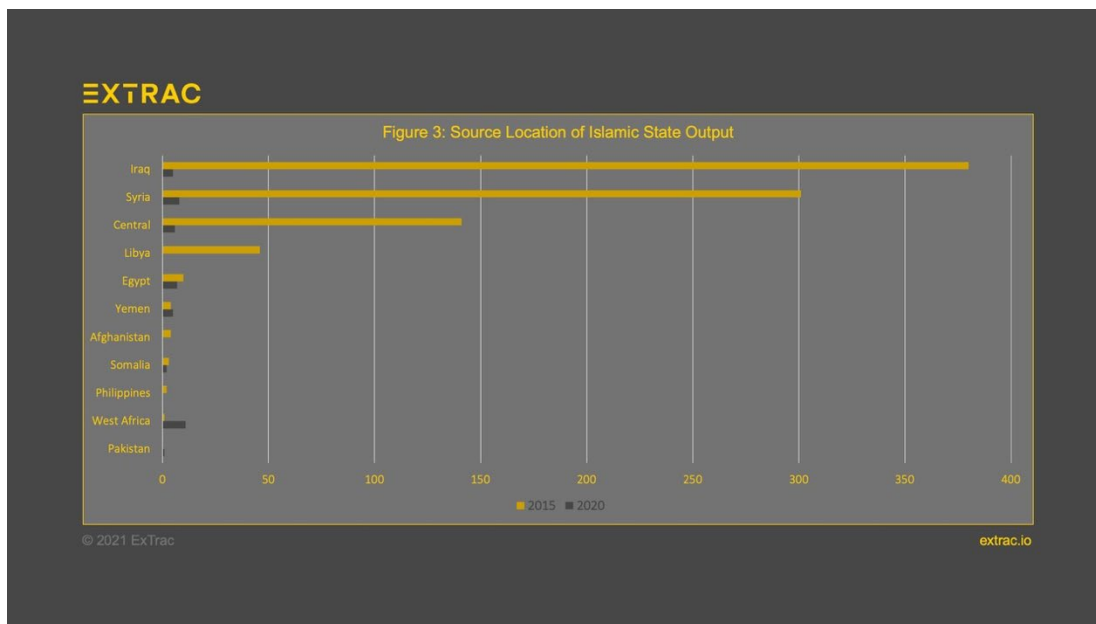


Similarly, the thematic constitution of the Islamic State brand utterly transformed between 2015 and 2020, something that is captured in Figure 2. Whereas more than 50 percent of its day-to-day output revolved around civilian affairs in 2015/16, this proportion had dwindled to just two percent by 2020. This massive turnaround in the thematic priorities saw its story shifting away from utopianism towards simple emphasis on its military capabilities and agenda.<sup>6</sup> It tracked a change in its overarching strategic communication objectives away from recruitment and towards retention—that is, maintaining the coherence and consistency of pre-existing networks of supporters (Winter, 2020b).



<sup>6</sup> This shift was identified as far back as 2017. See Winter, C. (2018). Apocalypse later: A longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 35(1), 103-121.

Interestingly, from a geographic perspective, the data indicate that the Islamic State’s brand, as of 2020 at least, now relies more on the communication dividends it reaps from affiliates external to its logistical bases in Syria and Iraq—first and foremost from its Nigeria- and Sahel-based Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya (West Africa Province), but also the likes of Wilayat Sinai in Egypt and Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya (Central Africa Province) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (BBC Monitoring, 2019; Munoz, 2018). Given that the reverse was true in early 2017, when the Islamic State’s brand had contracted to become less global, this recent branding expansion becomes even more noteworthy as depicted in Figure 3 (Ingram, Whiteside & Winter, 2021). Its implications are clear; as the caliphate territories dwindled in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State’s Central Media Diwan systematically sought to shed more light on its exploits elsewhere, framing the Islamic State—both operationally and in terms of its overall branding—more to the global adhocratic aspects of its insurgency than to its ‘conventional’ core in Syria and Iraq.



We can be almost certain that the above-tracked trend of decline did not come about solely as a result of strategic choice (though internal policy will have had some bearing on it). This notion, i.e., that the Islamic State’s media operations altered course because they were forced to by external circumstances rather than because they were an outcome of centralized decision-making, can be tracked through the timeline presented in Figure 1, which lists key real-world and cyber-based military campaigns against the Islamic State between 2016 and 2021. Notwithstanding a significant productivity uptick in the first few months of the battle for Mosul in late 2016 and a smaller, less impactful acceleration in mid-2017 with the launch of the campaign to liberate Raqqa, the data clearly show that, as time passed and the

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Islamic State lost territory (and, along with it, resources and manpower), its media capabilities inexorably collapsed.<sup>7</sup>

The decline dynamic can be explained by three sets of overlapping factors relating to territory, expertise, and the cyber environment. Regarding the first of these, it is patently clear that, based on its current structure at least, the Islamic State needs to be in control of territory—and administering said territory—in order to produce propaganda at levels comparable to 2015/16. This requirement steps from the finding that, besides acting as subject matter for its propagandists to work with, ample territory is needed to house safe spaces for the compilation and editing of media products (Winter, 2018; Winter & Almohammad, 2019).

Regarding the second set of factors, which are related to manpower and expertise, targeted strikes on key figures in the Central Media Diwan are also certain to play a critically important role, as we can see from the unit’s output after the catastrophic leadership losses listed in the first section of this paper (Wright, 2016). Given the importance of technical expertise in the field of media, there can be little doubt that depleting human capital adversely affected the group’s ability to produce propaganda.

The last set of factors relates to online environments, i.e., the spaces in which the Islamic State distributes its content. Due to the ramping up of counter-propaganda moderation efforts, the Islamic State’s internet ecosystem in early 2021 barely resembles its 2015/16 counterpart and, while still an undeniably potent force, the group’s virtual operatives are nowhere near as accessible or ubiquitous as they once were. As numerous studies have tracked, this decline in infrastructure and capability has led to an across-the-board drawdown for overt pro-Islamic State activism online (Conway, et al., 2019).

## The Islamic State’s Global Adhocratic Insurgency

Having established the history of the Islamic State’s propaganda apparatus and identified key trends in its media strategy and output since 2016, it is important to understand the strategic principles and organizational traits that characterize the contemporary Islamic State movement. The Islamic State has only recently evolved into a transnational enterprise with its formal extension into Syria in 2013.<sup>8</sup> However, it was in 2014, after announcing that it had established its caliphate that its network of transnational affiliates exponentially grew as the group framed joining its ranks as an obligation for all Muslims (al-Adnani, 2014). While the Islamic State’s management of its transnational network has been inconsistent, and the group went through a significant restructure and rationalization of its affiliates in

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the Islamic State’s Mosul campaign, see Winter, C. (2020a). Framing war: Visual propaganda, the Islamic State, and the battle for east Mosul. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5). 667-689.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Islamic State movement’s history from its founding in the 1990s to the death of al-Baghdadi see Ingram, H., Whiteside, C. & Winter, C. (2020). *The ISIS Reader*. Oxford University Press.

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2018, a core set of criteria has generally been central to being formally accepted as an affiliate: pledging allegiance to the Caliph and adopting the Islamic State's *aqeeda* (creed) and *manhaj* (method) (Unknown author, 2014; BBC Monitoring, 2018). This practice has been especially important for facilitating its media strategy during this current period of decline in two important ways.

First, by requiring its affiliates to adopt and apply its ideology and strategy in their specific corner of the world, the Islamic State provides its propagandists with constant fodder for its media outputs. Little wonder that as pressures in Syria and Iraq have persisted, its propagandists have increasingly featured the activities of its affiliates, especially those in Africa.<sup>9</sup> This shift in content does more than just demonstrate that the Islamic State persists and is active in dozens of countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. It also showcases the practical efficacy of its way of war and governance. The Islamic State's claim that its method for establishing an Islamic State reflects the will of the Prophet lies at the heart of its claims of credibility over those of fellow jihadi rivals.

Second, the Islamic State's central media output is, itself, a way to coordinate and synchronize actions across its network of affiliates. For instance, the Islamic State's media spokesman or caliph periodically calls for a global campaign. The campaign could involve what it calls "harvesting," which involves the killing of government officials and security personnel, or "breaking the walls," involving attacks on prisons. Whether affiliates already have actions planned or actually respond to the call is secondary to the perception it creates: the Islamic State's symphony of violence is global and coordinated. Enabling and driving these strategic dynamics of the Islamic State's global insurgency is indicative of an organization characterized by adhoc traits.

The Islamic State has a demonstrated ability to organizationally transition as strategic conditions change. While for the vast majority of its history, the Islamic State has operated as an insurgency below the threshold of tamkeen, during periods of fleeting success it has hybridized its military activities with greater conventionality, and even bureaucratized its governance efforts (e.g. 2014-16). Throughout its history the Islamic State organizationally is characterized by centralized command and control<sup>10</sup> with decentralized management and execution (Mintzberg, 1989). Adhocracies, like the Islamic State, tend to emerge in dynamic, high risk environments with a "structure of interacting project teams" all working to achieve a purpose and/or express a shared identity (Mintzberg, 1981). It is due to the fluidity of the environment within which adhocracies tend to operate that decision-making tends to be operationally and tactically decentralized with overarching strategic direction, often emerging from a hierarchical leadership core (Waterman, 1990). This inherent operating structure imbues adhocracies with an ability

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see, Candland, T. et al., (2021). *The Islamic State in Congo*. George Washington University Program on Extremism.

<sup>10</sup> As highlighted earlier, the Islamic State's centralized media production is one of the core functions that has remained centralized with regional media units typically channeling their content centrally prior to release.

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to operationally and tactically exploit opportunities as they emerge at the coalface. Moreover, as an organization calibrated to respond and adapt, the Islamic State's adhocratic qualities enable it to move towards more or less formal and bureaucratic organizational structures, depending on current or forecasted strategic conditions (Mintzberg, 1981).

As an adhocracy, the Islamic State demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses that are typical of this type of organization. Flexibility, innovation, and adaptability are important strengths, but within those strengths lie the roots of its key weaknesses. For one, adhocracies rely on the deployment of liaison personnel and/or communication technologies for coordination. If these communication mechanisms break down, that flexibility and adaptability become brittle, and the organization is susceptible to fraying. Competition within adhocracies can fuel intra-organizational rivalries that drive vulnerabilities to ideological and operational extremism on its peripheries (Mintzberg, 1989). Moreover, adhocracies can mistime their organizational transitions, resulting in, at best, the unnecessary loss of personnel and resource, or at worst, organizational breakdown (Mintzberg, 1989).

There are significant policy implications of the Islamic State's strategic and organizational characteristics that have been outlined here. Three are especially important. First, it is essential to assess the Islamic State's affiliates on a case-by-case basis, and nuance counterstrategy responses accordingly. There is no universal template that can be applied, and there are significant pitfalls in either overstating or understating the Islamic State's influence on local affiliates. Second, maintaining pressure on the Islamic State's transnational enterprise, especially its communication capabilities, will exacerbate inherent organizational weaknesses. These types of pressure not only include counterterrorism operations to identify and capture liaison personnel and interrupt communication networks, but also, wherever possible, disruption of its online propaganda dissemination through takedowns and the spread of disinformation to thwart more overt coordination efforts. Finally, it is during periods of transition that the Islamic State, as an adhocracy, is going to be particularly susceptible. In 2021, the movement is continuing its transition into the battle rhythms of a long-running insurgency in its heartlands of the Levant, and so it is keen to project attention onto its global affiliates. This tendency underscores the importance of simultaneously supporting allies to confront Islamic State provinces wherever they emerge while continuing to apply multidimensional pressure on the Islamic State core.

## Conclusion

The loss of territory and key leaders over the past five years has had a significant impact on the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan, but these efforts have not broken it. Contrary to predictions about the future of insurgency being decentralized, it is the sophisticated, layered and integrated bureaucracy and specialization of its different media agencies that have allowed the Central Media Diwan to maintain control over its online supporters while producing quality products, even if at a lower rate and without the governance themes that used to dominate its content. The key factor in its continued output has

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been the role of the central office in maximizing efficiency and quality, while protecting its key nodes, lines of transmission, and key leaders. Today, it blends clandestine practices with its public facing nodes, much like it did with its local kiosks in Mosul during the caliphate period, and transmits its messaging on official social media channels, websites and fan sites, including leadership speeches from its carefully anonymous spokesmen and leaders.<sup>11</sup> It is the adhoc nature of the group that facilitates serial experimentation, shifting resources into the technologies that allow them to continue to publish propaganda that is true to its creed and method, while exploiting local Salafi-influenced insurgencies to promote the global brand and narrative with the goal of slowly connecting its archipelagic caliphate.

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<sup>11</sup> The current caliph was anonymous until the US government released his interrogation records from 2008 (Milton, 2020). As for the external network, a recent example of the clandestine nature and links was the arrest of Benjamin Alan Carpenter of Knoxville, Tennessee, who ran the Ahlut-Tawhid website for the Islamic State Media Department, a fansite that translated Islamic State media into English on behalf of the group (The U.S. Attorney's Office of Eastern Tennessee, 2021).

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