

The Paris Attacks: Terror and Recruitment

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To many analysts, the Nov. 13, 2015, Paris attacks signaled a shift in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) strategy toward attacking Western targets (Schmitt and Kirkpatrick, 2015), but that largely missed the point. With a continent spiraling into anxiety and all media attention turning toward the group, the elaborate ISIS media machine had actually succeeded yet again in promoting its brand globally. The terror campaign that targeted Paris was not only meant to instigate

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The Paris Attacks: Consistent Trends and Narratives

For the purpose of this report, we will define the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a virtual state (Seib, 2011). This helps us more objectively and rationally examine this nonstate actor's sophisticated military, political, financial, and communication apparatuses and not naively underestimate its abilities by dismissing ISIS as a group of fanatic maniacs with psychological disorders. In a mission to win Muslims' hearts and minds, ISIS has sought to establish its legitimacy through synchronized mediated real-time action built around terrorism spectacles. These violent attacks are justified within an apocalyptic religious narrative, which emphasizes an impending clash of civilizations that will restore Islam's lost glorious days and vindicate Muslims around the world. This report uses the Nov. 13, 2015, Paris attacks as a case study to elaborate the ISIS media-terror model.

On the heels of twin suicide bombings in Beirut that killed 43 people, ISIS struck France's capital in a series of coordinated terrorist attacks. The attacks, which have been described as "the worst [...] since the Madrid bombings in 2004," left 130 people dead and hundreds more injured (Werber, 2015). At 9:20 p.m., six locations were targeted in a series of shootings and suicide bombings—including the Stade de France stadium and the Bataclan, a popular concert hall. At the time, ISIS took no official stance, despite French officials' quick accusations. The speculation spilled

over into social media an hour after police put an end to the Bataclan siege, where 89 people were killed and two gunmen detonated their suicide vests.

In a clear indication of how ISIS takes advantage of crowd-sourcing on social media, numerous pro-ISIS tweets emerged so quickly and so systematically that one suspects at least some of them were preplanned to be part of the terrorism campaign. Indeed, ISIS supporters clamored online to cheer for the group that had committed the Paris *ghazwa* (raid). In parallel with international outcry that condemned the attacks, extremists on social media quickly rejoiced and credited the attacks to ISIS. One Twitter user posted in Arabic: “France, do you think that the Islamic caliphate will forget you. By God, no...” Another also tweeted in Arabic: “Even if the Islamic State does not claim responsibility for this operation, we rejoice when we see the West trembling. God is Great.” Other users changed their profile images to a French flag stamped with a boot’s footprint and included in their posts the hashtag #ParisOnFire, which became a worldwide trending hashtag along with #PrayForParis. This social media activity effectively creating a Twitter storm—a common trend in ISIS media campaigns that are associated with major terrorism campaigns (Stern and Berger, 2015) and that effectively manipulate existing grievances.

The immediate happiness of certain ISIS supporters taps into longstanding resentment toward Western powers, which ISIS has long integrated into its branding strategy in order to attract alienated Muslim youths around the world. For millions of Arabs and Muslims, the colonial legacy that left their regions weak, decades of injustice in Palestine, and the brutality of Arab authoritarian puppet regimes propped up by Western powers remain widely legitimized grievances. Within its propaganda, ISIS’s jihadist narrative is constantly contextualized to reiterate these tropes and paint itself to be the only viable solution, as opposed to Al-Qaeda and the many other extremist groups operating today inside Syria.

ISIS strives to “restore idealized eras of earlier Islamic history,” an idea that still resonates

with some Muslims around the globe (Shane & Hubbard, 2014). By framing this struggle as a religious clash of civilizations, which has seen the rise of a united *ummah* (nation) with the establishment of the caliphate against a Judeo-Christian world order, the group’s extreme violence becomes justified. As such, ISIS has branded itself as the de facto representative of all Muslims, imbuing its brand within a definitive understanding of Islam. Unlike other Islamist movements, the Islamic State’s theologians stress the concept of *ijmaa* (consensus) whereby the group borrows from the four schools of Sunni Islamic legal tradition and uses them as justification in its governance, executions, and attacks (Amarsingam and Al-Tamimi, 2015).

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For example, the Jordanian pilot’s brutal execution was justified by citing five different instances in Islamic history where burning was an accepted punishment (Al Hayat Media Center, 2015a, p. 7–8). As such, the group’s desire to extinguish what it calls “the gray zone” is essential (Al Hayat Media Center, 2014). Usually understood as an area of uncertainty (Crelinsten, 2002), ISIS’s definition of the gray zone is largely based on a speech by Osama bin Laden in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Bin Laden draws the line between Muslims who adopt the jihadist lifestyle and “everyone who treads behind Bush in his plan [who] has apostatized from the religion of Muhammad” (Al Hayat Media Center, 2014, p. 44). ISIS’s branding strategy exacerbates this othering narrative, which has long been utilized in every major ideological conflict, as it ties it into a prophecy signaling the end of time. In an epic battle in Syria’s northern city, Dabiq, the jihadists of the caliphate will rise triumphant against their enemies. In order to do so, it must attract Muslims

of the world to its side by showing it is able to rule through God's laws and its ability to terrorize the enemy.

The Paris attacks, in that sense, fit into this strategy, as they help justify ISIS's cause while also anticipating retaliation from the French government, which had first entered the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in September 2014. Calling it an "act of war" (Heneghan, 2015), French President Francois Hollande vowed in a live address a day after the attacks to intensify airstrikes on ISIS locations in Syria. At the time, France had only carried limited operations, primarily in Iraq. By justifying its terror within an apocalyptic religious prophecy and playing on Muslims' long-held grievances, ISIS not only uses social media to propagate its narratives but also guarantees that mass media coverage of its terrorist operations will reproduce them.

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The ISIS Brand From Social to Mainstream Media

By opting for a more decentralized strategy built on crowdsourcing, hashtag hacking, and in-house designed apps and bots, ISIS is able to bridge the gap between new and traditional media and target different audiences. Two hours after the French president's announcement on Nov. 14, a statement by ISIS began circulating online and was quickly picked up by different news outlets. In the statement, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks and hinted that they had been months in the making. Similarly, the stealth and rapidity in which both the group's official media arm, Al Hayat Media Center, and other provincial media centers produced and published media content in the aftermath signaled a coordinated and preplanned media operation. Indeed, a day before the Paris attacks, a widely circulated Al

Hayat video promised "soon very soon, the blood will spill everywhere" (Al Hayat Media Center, 2015b). Only three days after the attacks, the 12th issue of the official Dabiq magazine was released, with the Paris attacks featured on the cover.

On social media, some Twitter users affiliated with the group had already begun circulating a photo that purports to show the inside of one of the locations attacked. The picture, which was featured in several online news outlets' coverage despite its graphic content (Charlton, 2015; Batchelor, 2015), was taken inside the Bataclan. ISIS-linked Twitter users co-opted the rapidly trending topic #PrayForParis in order to diffuse similarly gruesome pictures and advance ISIS's narratives. This strategy, referred to as a Twitter storm (Stern and Berger, 2015), creates a synergy with the online communication campaign and ensures at least brief mass media attention. For those who were sympathetic to the group's cause, the attacks were considered a victory for Muslims worldwide that offered an opportunity to recruit more alienated youth to the ranks of ISIS.

Unlike previous Islamist movements, ISIS provides both real action and a distinct story. The Paris attacks allowed frustrated youths to believe the ISIS brand's promise of extreme adventure, conquest, and revenge. Enticed by Hollywood-like videos, potential recruits are drawn toward the fantasy of earning larger-than-life status as heroes and martyrs and winning a place in history (Spens, 2014; Sachs, 2012). In the propaganda material it would later produce, ISIS exalted the fighters who carried out the attacks in Paris for their bravery and heroism. On the other hand, the extreme violence the ISIS brand relies on also serves to send a warning to those who oppose the caliphate. In that sense, the group is able to promote a simultaneously terrifying and alluring image of itself built on terrorism acts that are synchronized with media acts and both propagated via online and offline media.

Terrorism may ensure a temporary media boost, but it does not necessarily guarantee the perpetrator will win continuous media access. ISIS's media strategists seem to be aware of this matter and often quickly follow up the terror/media-boost campaign with a recruitment campaign. For

instance, a few hours after the Paris attacks, ISIS pushed a recruitment video that targeted French Muslims. Snippets of the official ISIS statement and the recruitment video were continuously broadcast on several news channels, allowing ISIS to reach its audiences and promote its intended news frames. A quick scan of the available digital archive of ISIS media compiled by the Jihadology blog showed that the video was an unedited version of a previous one, released in May. The latter, titled “Pledge Your Allegiance,” included snippets from a blue-eyed French-speaking fighter’s speech that urged French Muslims to migrate to ISIS territories in Syria and Iraq. In the aftermath of the attack, the full video that first appeared on ISIS’s Telegram channel revealed more testimonies. The French fighter, identified as Abu Osama Al-Faranci, taunted French Muslims watching the video: “What are you waiting for?” Joining him were a group of silent, uniformed, and heavily armed men, looking foreboding. Another fighter, Abu Maryam Al-Faranci, encouraged those who couldn’t make *hijrah* (migrate) to “fight the *kafir* wherever you find him” (Al Hayat Media Center, n.d.).

Even seemingly uncoordinated ISIS terror attacks seem to carry this feature of post-attack recruitment media campaigns. ISIS, unlike Al-Qaeda, has largely endorsed lone-wolf attacks as part of its decentralized terror strategy. A year earlier, fresh from the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris, an attack on a kosher grocery store east of the city left four dead. In a telephone interview, the assailant, Amedy Coulibaly, told BFMTV that he operated under ISIS’s command. After his death, his *bayaah* (pledge of allegiance) was included in ISIS’s propaganda material, and an in-depth feature appeared in Dabiq’s seventh issue.

ISIS’s Marketing of Terror

The ISIS brand looks to spreading an image of a united caliphate that is strong and prosperous. Yet in order to guarantee continuous promotion, it utilizes spectacular terrorist events to maintain control over access and meaning. In the post-9/11 era, ISIS has been able to capitalize on—rather than be damaged by—the “war

on terrorism” frames that dominate much of global news coverage of the Middle East. In that sense, the group advances a narrative that the press can already place within existing media frames (Wolfsfeld, 1997). As the subject of the Paris attacks dominated all major news outlets, ISIS’s claim of responsibility propelled the group into the spotlight, allowing it to manipulate its double-pronged discourse into mainstream media. Terrorism spectacles such as the latter can often create powerful news frames. Seib and Janbek (2011) described media as “terrorism’s oxygen.” When news institutions cover terrorist attacks, they are simultaneously serving the terrorist attackers by offering them publicity, recognition, and legitimacy. News institutions, particularly in a democratic state, can rarely resist covering terrorism, especially when these attacks target their own compatriots or the interests of their nations (Seib and Janbek, 2011).

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Taking the Paris attacks as a case study, a survey of six news channels—three of which cater to a pan-Arab audience—showed coverage of ISIS spiked just as Europe spiraled into anxiety amid security concerns of some terrorist attackers having fled France. We examined the main YouTube channels of CNN, Sky News, and Russia Today as well as Al-Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Al Mayadeen. A total of 292 televised reports between Nov. 14 and Jan. 18 were surveyed. CNN had the most extensive coverage with 96 reports, 25 of which focused primarily on ISIS. This is contrasted with Saudi-owned Al Arabiya (11), Qatar’s Al Jazeera (10), Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News (8), Beirut-based Al Mayadeen (6), and Russia Today (1).

Simultaneously, the continuous coverage of the group’s recruitment video coincided with different reports speculating on the identities of the terrorist attackers as a European manhunt was

underway. France closed its borders and declared a state of emergency (Gander, 2015); Belgium was in lockdown (Taub, 2015); and British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the United Kingdom was placed on high alert for an imminent terrorist attack (McTague, 2015). Despite the negative mass media coverage on ISIS, the group enjoyed immense access to a global audience, allowing it to spread its two key narratives: one recruiting and for keeping the support of its domestic audience, and one for an audience it considers its enemy although, in most cases, the same message achieves both aims. Terrorism, therefore, is utilized as a psychological warfare tactic to undermine the enemy and demoralize its fighters (Melchior, 2014) and simultaneously to promote the ISIS brand to potential recruits and sympathizers.

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With the brutality of the Paris attacks dominating headlines and broadcasts around the world, ISIS also capitalized on the violence “to awaken potential recruits to the reality of the jihadis’ war” (Stern and Berger, 2015, p. 115). This strategy is largely credited to a 2004 document, titled “The Management of Slavery,” penned by the pseudonymous Abu Bakr Naji. In it, Naji offered a blueprint for jihadists to establish a caliphate in which he advocated the escalation of violence in order to attract supporters and effect polarization between enemies and advocates (Stern and Berger, 2015, p. 46). The second section of the document, titled “Path to Empowerment,” explicitly explained how “to attract new youth through... conducting operations that attract people’s attention” (Stern and Berger, 2015, p. 17).

ISIS’s “media model” bases itself on the marketing of savagery while also promoting a utopian, united Islamic front—the caliphate—where all forms of discrimination will not be

tolerated. For alienated and disenfranchised Muslims, the caliphate becomes a response to the incoherence and tensions many recruits face in their lives in Western societies, a response that offers closure, coherence, and a resolution to a deep existential crisis. The caliphate, then, embodies a world where Muslims retake their agency, their power, and their glory.

To balance out the extreme violence, the group also diffused propaganda material that emphasized its unity in celebrating the Paris attacks across its territories. This theme, which succeeds in promoting a successful ISIS brand, is understood through Stengel’s (2011) conception of “fundamental human values” that are used by successful brands. These fundamental values are represented through five fields that improve people’s lives: eliciting joy, enabling connection, evoking pride, inspiring exploration, and impacting society. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, 16 ISIS-linked videos were released between Nov. 14, 2015, and Jan. 24, 2016, of which 75 percent were released by provincial media outlets. In them, men are seen celebrating the terrorist attacks and praising the attackers across the Islamic State. In a photo report from the ISIS-occupied Libyan city of Sirte, uniformed fighters distributed sweets to citizens in celebration. This brand image is important in ISIS’s recruiting strategy, especially in relation to its potential foreign audiences and supporters. Indeed, the propaganda material emphasizes the harmonious life in the Islamic State despite France’s promise of intensifying airstrikes. The caliphate is, therefore, portrayed as a functioning, better, and viable alternative to the West.

This report summarized the impact of ISIS’s use of terrorism, social media, and branding strategies in the aftermath of Paris’ Nov. 13 attacks. In the post-9/11 era, extremists online have expanded from secretive online communities to take a more prominent role with the advent of real-time news and ubiquitous social media. ISIS, which has sought to tap into this new dynamic, has succeeded in creating a brand that promotes a utopian community in which alienated Muslim youths are encouraged to pursue a dangerous, exciting life akin to the one they’ve grown accustomed to through video games and

Hollywood action films. At the same time, the ISIS brand targets the enemies of the Islamic State and utilizes terrorism as a psychological warfare to thwart its foes' efforts in undermining the caliphate. By taking the Paris attacks and its aftermath as a case study, the paper analyzed the way in which ISIS was able to engage in mediated public diplomacy by framing its narrative for mainstream media. Similarly, ISIS is able to divert mass

media's attention from its territorial losses in order to retain supporters' enthusiasm to their cause. In 2015 alone, the group lost 14 percent of its territories in Syria and Iraq (Hutt, 2015). The physical threat that ISIS poses to the world is undeniably real, and while efforts to curb its territorial gains have proved successful, they must be synchronized with a serious reconsideration of the role of mass media in the group's ideological success.

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