

ISIS IN LIBYA

Winning the Propaganda War

BY AREF ALI NAYED



كلام للبحوث والإعلام
KALAM RESEARCH & MEDIA

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Winning the Propaganda War

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ANSAR AL-SHARIA is attacking the Libyan state. They are attacking the flag, the army and the young. I recently screened an incredibly disturbing video shot in my hometown of Benghazi, filmed by ISIS affiliates from Ansar Al-Sharia. It is from an attack by Ansar Al-Sharia on the Libyan National Army.

The video shows a Libyan National Army tank being targeted and destroyed. There were young people, young Libyans, in that tank. These young National Army soldiers were representing their country, not a special interest, a party, a group, or a militia.

What I find particularly troubling is that this and other extremist videos bear an unsettling resemblance to violent computer games like “Call of Duty”: the red crosshairs on the tank, the cinematography cutting quickly to the anti-tank weapon, the slow-motion launch of the missile, the explosion as the tank is hit, the musical accompaniment.

This is not an isolated media phenomenon. It is part of an increasingly sophisticated strategic communications exercise being led by ISIS.

I wanted to understand this phenomenon further so I reviewed some of the propaganda videos produced by ISIS to get a sense of why their media efforts seem to be so effective. One of the most striking things is the similarity between the Ansar Al Sharia video and the ISIS video produced by their media centre.

These videos demonstrate a grotesque perversion of Islam. These films were produced by Al-Hayat Media Center, ISIS’s media arm. It is important to understand that Libya is in very real danger of becoming an ISIS garrison and an ATM for ISIS operations in Syria and Iraq. There is a good chance that Libya’s oil wealth was siphoned off by Islamists and provided oxygen for the growth of ISIS during the recent Islamist regime. It certainly has not been used to make our country a better place for Libyans.

The city of Derna has fallen to ISIS and its affiliate terrorist group Ansar Al-Sharia. In both Derna and Benghazi, Sabrata, and now in Sirt and Sukna, these organizations are committing atrocities on my fellow citizens: public beheadings, floggings and other deprivations. Yet the leader of the Libya Dawn faction that seized control of Tripoli by force of arms and is seeking legitimacy recently announced that Ansar Al-Sharia, a UN designated terrorist organization, “is a simple, beautiful, amiable idea, if we just sit with them for dialogue or negotiation we can win them over”.

Did the videos we screened look like dialogue or negotiation? Not at all, and yet they have a perverse appeal that is attracting poor misguided souls from all over the world.

* This paper is based on a lecture given at the Countering Violence and Extremism (CVE) conference organised by The Hedayah Center in Abu Dhabi on 11th December 2014.

Within a period of thirty days in September and October of 2014 ISIS in Syria and Iraq recruited 6,000 young people, including about 1,300 volunteer jihadis who arrived from foreign countries to join their forces. And I can guarantee that the clips we screened and other ISIS media efforts played a major role in leading these gullible and ignorant conscripts down the murderous path they've set themselves upon.

Why is it that these videos have the power to attract young people? The production values are straight out of Hollywood—cloyingly sentimental, warm and fuzzy (with much brotherly hugging), romantic and swashbuckling. The principals in the productions are presented as attractive heroic men of action who are also humble, soft-spoken and kind-hearted—your average boys next door, but packing AK47s and rocket launchers.

There is a romantic, almost aphrodisiac quality to these productions that has seduced many gormless schoolgirls to join the young fighters. Hundreds of teenage girls from western countries have “self-radicalized” through ISIS social media propaganda and videocasts. According to Hans-Georg Maassen, president of Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, underage girls are leaving Germany for ISIS territory “with the romantic idea of jihad and jihad marriage and are marrying young male fighters who they've gotten to know via the internet.” The youngest of these girls is 13 years old.

Shaista Gohir of the UK Muslim Women's Network explained: “Some of these girls are very young and naive, they don't understand the conflict or their faith, and they are easily manipulated. Some of them are taking young children with them; some may believe they are taking part in a humanitarian mission.”

Well, let's have a closer look at the humanitarian mission the naive young girls—and heavily armed young men—have flocked to participate in: The sentimentality—a hallmark of Hollywood movie-making—takes on an incredibly sinister turn in another clip we reviewed: of an ISIS recruiter in a neighborhood enlisting suicide bombers from among the young men—with their families sitting round a square on folding chairs, looking on with pride, applauding each volunteer as they pledged to blow themselves—and other hapless bystanders—to bloody fragments. One young man signs up with his baby daughter in his arms! All the while the recruiter and the volunteers are hugging each other—there really is a lot of hugging going on—and invoking verses of the Qur'an and the Muslim affirmation of faith—in order to commit two ultra-violent acts that are explicitly forbidden in Islam: suicide and the indiscriminate murder of innocents.

It is a moral inversion as stark and disquieting as one is likely to see.

In addition to movies, Hayat Media Center releases a glossy online English magazine called *Dabiq* and a series of in-depth online newsletters called Islamic State Report that detail ISIS strategy and updates on its “successes”. The high-quality nature of these publications, all written in English, is reminiscent of Al-Qaeda's infamous online magazine, *Inspire*.

Security blogger John Little observed: “it was obvious very early on that ISIS launched their offensive with a social media campaign well-planned in advance. This wasn't an afterthought. This wasn't something that they made up as they went along.” CBS correspondent Alexander Trowbridge commented that the social media campaign was disciplined and had what he called “top-down message control designed to stimulate grass roots activity. Complete with an app and highly orchestrated hashtag pushes, the ISIS social media strategy mirrors that of a marketing company building buzz around a new product.”

While not even remotely on the aesthetic level of the stunning propaganda movies

produced by Goebbels' media machine glorifying Hitler's Third Reich, the ISIS videos have a crude, visceral impact that is disturbingly seductive.

What we are witnessing is pure fascism using the vocabulary and trappings of Islam but without a scintilla of the profound knowledge and spirit of Islam. The ground has been well-prepared by secular fascism that took root in our region during the post-colonial independence period after the Second World War. Although fascism was eliminated as a force in Europe it emerged across the Middle East, in North Africa and the Levant, in the form of Baathist, Phalangist and Nasserist revolutionary ideologies that swept across the region during the 1950s and 60s.

These were secular nationalist movements that were fundamentally fascist. Read *Falsafa at-Thawra* (the "Philosophy of Revolution") by Gamel Abd Al-Nasser or Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb's highly influential *Ma'alim fi'l Tariq* ("Milestones"), and you will find that they have the same basic outlook and structure and fundamentally the same aim. Both books promote a theory about a righteous elite that has exclusive ownership of the truth, which gives the movement the right to impose this truth upon others.

If you compare these two books to Lenin's political pamphlet "What is to be done?" or the writings of Nazi leaders, you can see that they all share the same structure and have the same essential aims. You'll also find the same structure in speeches by Fidel Castro. These concepts have more to do with tyranny in the name of the State, in the name of the Reich, in the name of the Umma, in the name of Caliphate. It is the same inhumane tyranny that uses human beings as a mechanism to serve the state because they claim that they—the leaders—are the only true representatives of the state, the nation, the motherland, the Umma, the Caliphate, or of God Himself.

So how do Hollywood movies and video games play a part in fascist propaganda? First of all there is what I would call polarization: seeing the world as either black or white, good or evil, true or false—Darth Vader *vs.* Luke Skywalker. The white hats *vs.* the black hats. The two sides are absolutely dichotomized. Hollywood movies and television tend to reduce storytelling to simple, easy to swallow stereotypes to reach the widest possible audience. ISIS does precisely the same thing and for the same reasons. They represent their movement as the only true interpretation of Islam and those Muslims with differing points of view, along with the rest of the non-Muslim world, are infidels and in their apocalyptic world all infidels must be vanquished or enslaved.

The second feature is the illusion of absolute certainty. This illusion can only take root if the leaders are considered infallible. This is completely contrary to traditional Islam. The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, told his Companions, "If you did not sin, God would destroy you and replace you with a people who sinned so that they can ask for forgiveness and repent." Fallibility is fundamental to our faith. Only the Prophets can be considered to be infallible because they are protected by God. No others, not even saints, can be considered infallible. But the leaders of ISIS, as with their fascist forefathers, need to cultivate the notion of infallibility to convince their witless legions to commit atrocities in the name of "the truth".

The third feature is the imposition of will. If you look at ISIS propaganda, it is all about imposing its will. Hitler's infamous propaganda masterpiece glorifying the Nazi Party Congress at Nuremberg was called Triumph of the Will. For ISIS, they reduce God to will, even though Allah has 99 Names and Attributes. And Allah has said, "My Mercy precedes My Wrath." God is Compassion. But Compassion is completely absent from anything that

ISIS does. It is as if all of these attributes and names of Allah had disappeared—except for those describing Power and the force of Will. They forget about *Al-Rahman* (the Compassionate), *Al-Rahim* (the Most Merciful), *Al-Rauf* (the Most Lenient), *Al-Wudud* (the Most Loving), all of these names that describe compassion and love. Indeed, they simplify theology to a single attribute. They are no different from the Nazis and they are drawing the region and the world into a holocaust—a perfect bloody storm.

How can we deal with this horrendous state of affairs? First of all, we have to recognize it for what it is. It is a mistake to think that these are the misguided ideas of a few young people. This is a cancer, a deep mass psychosis that has taken root and metastasized across the Islamic world. It is a virus that has spread rapidly via social media.

The extremist groups we are talking about are using the most sophisticated digital media to spread their ideology. They are using Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, videocasts, podcasts and every emerging form of digital communications to propagate their message. They have graphic designers, animators, composers and filmmakers working at a reasonably high level. So did Goebbels, Hitler's Information Minister. His propaganda machine used the most advanced tools of the time. The ISIS true believers do the same. I think it is a kind of Manicheism—a heretical synthetic religious confrontation between the forces of light and darkness. But, why is it happening? Why in the Middle East? Why in Islamic cultures?

In traditional societies, there have always existed frameworks that give people meaning. Our civilization has experienced a loss of meaning. I believe that over the last few decades, we have been losing our framework of meaning. Traditional community meanings, religious meanings, family meanings are disintegrating. Frameworks of meaning are breaking down under the influence of globalization, the internet, satellite television, movies. People are losing traditional frameworks that give meaning to their lives.

There are consequences to this collapse. When meanings break down there is a powerful and pervasive sense of insecurity and fear. One becomes terrified of not knowing who one is and where one is going. In post-modern societies young people are cut adrift. They've lost the meaning. Those who experience this disconcerting fear often look for a quick fix. When deep, abiding meanings are lost, one can be vulnerable to an easy way out.

There was a time when young people understood that the pursuit of knowledge and salvation took a lifetime. Today, mass media and consumer societies have sold us an instant culture. Overnight success, fast results, upward mobility, shortcuts, fifteen minutes of fame, weekend enlightenment sessions and all the hype consumer society promotes, has distorted mass perceptions. This breeds laziness. Laziness leads to a search for an easy way out. People suffering from poverty, helplessness and hopelessness are particularly vulnerable to fast solutions. Over 60 percent of the population in the Middle East is under 25 years of age. The Middle East also has the highest unemployment rate in the world, with a rate of 25% in North Africa and 28% in the Middle East.

The uprisings across the Arab world gave young people high hopes. These hopes have not been realized. So, when someone comes and tells you that they can offer you both a Utopia and Paradise, and you're unemployed, underemployed or frustrated in one way or another, what are you likely to do? They tell you that you are going to go to Paradise and, on top of that, you can have everything you want in this world. Your vices become virtues. If you are a killer you can now kill and feel virtuous and empowered. If you have sexual desires you can go and take Yazidi women as sex slaves and sell or buy them as objects. And if you do get killed you go straight to Heaven. It's a win-win. It's a no-brainer, and I do mean a no-brainer.

They are basically delivering base desires and vices in a cheap package that makes a frustrated and gullible young man or woman feel self-righteous without feeling guilty. In fact, you can feel so self-righteous that you can effectively annihilate anybody who disagrees with you.

Let's face it, for most young people who have only a tentative grasp of their religion—and, sadly, this is the case across the Islamic world—this can be an incredibly attractive proposition. But when we talk about building counter-narratives we must also deliver counter-meanings—real meanings, and examples to young people, because whatever is out there is not working. How can we give them real meaning—something that is accessible and explained in a language they understand? We have no shortage of traditional scholars who know the traditional discourse on compassion, love, and helping others; who can explain how the centres of Islam deal with others and how you have to be kind, even to dogs and cats, let alone human beings. But the real world, even in the developed countries, appears to be unjust, inequitable, cruel, and ruled by a corrupt, power-hungry elite.

We have no shortage of scholars. The problem is that they don't know how to communicate with young people in a language they can understand. There is a need for the doctrines and the jurisprudence of Islam to be re-articulated or, to be blunt, rebranded. The religious establishment needs to come down from its ivory towers and learn how to speak to young people in their own language. Scholars urgently need to learn how to use media and communications technologies to reach their young constituents. If this doesn't happen we're in danger of losing our youth. It is happening right now.

It is staggering how many young people are attracted by these things and how many are killing themselves and others, destroying the world around them simply because these psychotic criminals that profess to have all the answers are giving them the illusion of a meaning that is in fact nihilist and the antithesis of Islam but couched in the vocabulary of our faith. Our scholars are failing miserably. We are not giving our young people what they need. We are even in denial that we are failing.

There are exceptions of course. The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute in Jordan has done incredible work through the Amman Message and Common Word. This week, Al-Azhar took a strong stance with a very clear declaration that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam and that the religion is filled with tolerance, compassion and mercy. Another major effort is the work of Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah and the conference that was organized in Abu Dhabi on Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. Another example is The Council of Elders that is now being built up of great sages like Abdullah Bin Bayyah, Sheikh Al-Azhar, and the great scholars of Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The collective wisdom these learned men bring transform the public understanding of our faith, like a perfumed essence. These scholars need help from media professionals on how to deliver these critical messages of Islam.

Our faith teaches us not to kill others, these people glorify killing. Our faith teaches us not to hate, these people promote hatred. Our faith teaches us to respect women, these people debase women. Our faith teaches us to help one another, these people oppress others. ISIS is the antithesis of Islam. It is the enemy of Islam in the guise of Islam.

These people are murderous criminals and what are we doing to counter this abased and aberrant ideology?

Our efforts in counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism must focus at the root causes and not just at superficialities. In biology, there is a distinction between phenotype and genotype. For example, the color and taste of fruits are called phenotypes,

physical representations of genetic material. But the genetic material or the seeds of beings are the genotypes. Violent extremism as a behavior is like a bad tree, as is mentioned in the Qur'an. We need to know about the seeds, the genotype, of this evil tree.

The seeds are undoubtedly connected to the corrosion of modern Islamic theology. The glorification of the demonic becomes an anti-God equivalent to God; infallible certainty becomes a form of idolatry, the association of others with God. These criminal heretics make their ideology, and by extension, themselves into gods through self-worship. These are theological mutations and the roots of so much ignorance and bad preaching that has pervaded the Muslim world.

My country is under dire threat from ISIS and its Islamist agents. Civilizations throughout the Middle East that are hundreds of years old are being wiped out. Villagers are being forced to leave their communities based on extremist propaganda. ISIS is in Derna, Benghazi and Sabrata. In these cities our Army, the Libyan National Army, is fighting ISIS and its affiliates, like Ansar al-Sharia and other terrorist factions.

ISIS is not only a direct threat to the people of Libya, who are overwhelmingly moderate and peace-loving citizens, it is also a direct threat to our neighbors in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Chad, and Niger. More than this, the violent anarchy and terrorist action in Libya being glorified on video is taking place an hour and half from Rome by air, an hour from Athens, and three hours from London.

Our neighbors in the North, in Spain, Italy, Greece, France, and the UK should be worried—very worried. The Dutch government recently released a statement that Libya is now the biggest threat to Europe. We have airports that are under the control of ISIS and its affiliates and these airports have aircraft that can be easily used to attack Europe. These videos are of direct relevance to our lives and our safety and security.

As I look at my own country teetering on the edge of anarchy or collapse, I see an urgency now for authoritative scholars to ally themselves with masters of digital technology and with honest, expert communicators and learn how to communicate with young people in languages they can understand. This has to be a long-term, sustained effort. Men and women of knowledge have to step down from their ivory towers and techies have to step up. They need to work hand-in-hand together to stop the next wave of criminal heresy that is sweeping across our Muslim lands. ❁



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