

Article

## Mediated Public Diplomacy of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: The Synergistic Use of Terrorism, Social Media and Branding

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### Abstract

This study aims to provide an initial theoretical model for understanding and analyzing the mediated public diplomacy strategy of virtual states. It examines the mediated public diplomacy strategy of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its ability to synchronize terrorism tactics with communication strategies to gain media access and exposure, push news frames that serve its interests, and target stakeholders with a dual message using sophisticated branding strategies that resonate with cultural values and help it ultimately recruit supporters and deter foes.

### Keywords

Arab media; framing terrorism; ISIS; mediated public diplomacy; mediated terrorism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Few public diplomacy researchers have contextualized their studies within rigorous theoretical frameworks (Entman, 2008), and most of the research has largely focused on governments as the sole agents of public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008). With few exceptions, scholars have mainly examined US public diplomacy efforts, excluded non-state actors from the discussions, and ignored communication theories and models, such as framing and branding, which can help explain public diplomacy strategies (Gilboa, 2008). However, thanks largely to the ubiquity of formerly inaccessible public diplomacy communication tools—particularly digital, mobile and social media—mounting evidence points to non-state political actors using public diplomacy methods and sophisticated communication strategies to achieve their goals of targeting foreign publics. This is especially true for what Seib (2011) refers to as “virtual

states” that aspire to establish real states. A case in point is the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

ISIS’s terrorism and communication strategies have lately seized the attention of analysts and researchers, particularly western scholars and journalists who are startled by the group’s ability to globally recruit thousands of Muslim women and men from western states, as well as some recent converts to Islam (Hagopian, 2015; Franz, 2015; Neumann, 2015; Schmitt & Sengupta, 2015; Vidino, 2014). International news media routinely report on “ISIS’s ‘slick’ propaganda apparatus, western recruits becoming radicalized through social media, and the U.S. government’s sluggishness—or outright ineptitude—in fighting back on the Internet” (Gilsinan, 2015). Long multimedia feature stories with catchy headlines, such as “Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls,” (Bennhold, 2015) have become commonplace in the daily news digest. Even

western intelligence organizations are worried about ISIS's "extraordinary command of seemingly less lethal weapons: cutting-edge videos, videos shot from drones and multilingual Twitter messages" (The Straits Times, 2014). According to Gartensteing-Ross (2015), key to ISIS's success is its "production of tightly choreographed and slickly produced videos..., its apparently deep understanding of how to catch the Western media's attention, and [its] exceptionally skilled coordinated distribution of its content on platforms like Twitter" (p. 2). The consensus seems to be that ISIS is "winning its propaganda war against the United States and other Western powers" (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015).

However, many of these reports may have missed the point and inadvertently served ISIS's goals of capturing international media attention to further strengthen its brand and reach more recruits. Moreover, the focused attention on ISIS's terrorism and brutality has helped it gain further ground, a characteristic dilemma of covering terrorism acts that highlights the symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism (Viera, 1991; Wilkinson, 1997). Terrorism, unlike other war strategies and criminal acts, is primarily a "means to win media attention and news coverage" (Nacos, 2002), especially by fledgling non-state actors with limited access to dominant or legacy mass media and desperate for publicity, recognition and legitimacy. At the same time, terrorism, as a combat strategy, is essentially a psychological warfare tactic (Ganor, 2004; Schmid, 2005). While ISIS has been using terrorism simultaneously as a psychological warfare method and as part of its innovative public diplomacy mechanism—the latter being the focus of this study—it is difficult to analytically separate the two when it comes ISIS's overall public diplomacy objectives, especially the recruitment of supporters. In fact, ISIS's brutal terrorism images ensure spectacular international media coverage while simultaneously carrying threatening messages that aim to deter its enemies. Meanwhile, ISIS also disseminates messages of recruitment, justification and calls for action. For example, less than 24 hours after ISIS attacked Paris on November 13, 2015, an ISIS-produced recruitment video (released originally in November 2014) resurfaced and circulated widely online. The video featured three French citizens burning their passports and calling on French Muslims to join the fight in Syria/Iraq or conduct attacks inside France (Bora, 2014). ISIS's extremely violent spectacles are also often embedded with recruitment messages specifically targeting nationals attracted by the terrorism act. For instance, videos of ISIS's mass beheadings disproportionately emphasize the diversity of the executioners, "ensuring that the foreign fighters [are] clearly visible and sparking a rush [by the media] to identify them" (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 76). This indicates that, through these beheadings, ISIS primarily aims to recruit foreign supporters, even as it strengthens its ominous and terrifying image.

To be sure, public beheadings have been used by many groups in the past (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 2), but ISIS has raised this heinous act to a new level by integrating it within its propaganda machine, dramatizing it with cutting edge production and storytelling techniques, disseminating it widely using social and mass media, and aligning it effectively with its brand to serve its public diplomacy goals of converting and recruiting foreign supporters—all while simultaneously using it as a psychological warfare tactic to deter enemies. Through this strategy, ISIS has not only taken advantage of the global reach of social media, but has also forced mass media frames that serve its narrative and goals.

For example, when ISIS executed a captured Jordanian Air Force pilot by burning him alive, international news, especially pan-Arab satellite news, widely broadcasted the 22-minute video in which the group used cutting-edge production and video editing techniques and powerful storytelling routines to parade the savage act. But throughout the video were ideological messages promoting ISIS's cause, glorifying and justifying its brutality, and sending chilling threats to those who oppose it. Inadvertently maximizing the reach of ISIS's intended message, news channels—including Al-Jazeera and Fox News (2015)—incessantly played these images but focused primarily on the gruesomeness and brutality of the murderous act and on the group's ability to produce high quality videos. However, the relentless coverage served ISIS's goals by spreading its terror and carrying its intended threats. More importantly, the media attention reconfirmed ISIS's grand "jihadist" narrative and bolstered its justifications.

Seib and Janbek (2011) emphasized that "the modern communication model used by terrorist organizations is audience based, meaning centered, culture dependent and always tied into an ongoing narrative stream that is part of the socio-political context in which these organizations operate" (p. 1). In fact, ISIS's unrestrained cruelty has almost always carried justifications and subscribed to a grand "jihadist" narrative, and its violent messages are balanced with more positive content that shows life as normal and abundant in the newly established Caliphate (or Khilafah)—a state that transcends modern day borders and is ruled by a single political and religious leader according to Islamic law. Those baffled by ISIS's recruitment abilities should realize that the group carefully contextualizes all its acts within widely accepted and legitimized grievances that millions of Arabs and Muslims share (Zafar, 2014), including decades of injustice in Palestine, the brutality of Arab authoritarian puppet regimes propped up by western powers, and the western colonial legacy that has left the region weak, impoverished, underdeveloped and divided, as well as a history of discrimination against minorities living in western countries.

ISIS misses no opportunity to manipulate these grievances and sensationalize symbolic victories

against this western colonial legacy. Take for example the video that dramatized the removing of a small section of the Iraqi-Syrian border, a symbolic act that signaled the re-unification of Muslim lands. Dubbed “the breaking of the borders,” the ISIS-produced video captured dramatic moments of military vehicles crossing the borders and saluting teary-eyed local men waving the ISIS flag. Similar messages emphasized the dissolution of the Sykes-Picot borders—a reference to the secret 1916 British-French agreement to divide the Levant into spheres of influence, which led to the modern borders of Middle Eastern states. This act even resonates with many anti-ISIS individuals in the region—including seculars and non-Muslims. Such symbolic victories against deeply rooted historical grievances are further wrapped in a cloak of religious legitimacy, imbuing them with an aura of divine righteousness and a sense of inevitable expansion and victory. During the same campaign, ISIS promised to “break the borders” of Jordan and Lebanon and to free Palestine. It demanded that all Muslims swear allegiance to its leader and help it establish the Caliphate.

Beyond these grand symbolic acts, ISIS uses branding strategies to differentiate itself from the many other extremist Islamic groups and to maximize its political interests and instill its brand values into audiences around the world. Branding and marketing strategies are not only used by corporations and political parties, but also employed by terrorist groups—a matter vastly understudied (Gilboa, 2008). While it might sound absurd that any group would aim to brand itself as a gang of ruthless, thuggish murderers, it is precisely these characteristics combined with the duality of the ISIS brand message that provide the group with immense resources to reach global audiences, recruit foreign citizens, promote its ideology and achievements, inspire fear, and establish legitimacy.

Although seemingly similar to other extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS has differentiated itself as a brand using several key strategies. It provided itself as a solution and an alternative—yet familiar and glorified—response to the aforementioned grievances that resonate with young Muslims around the world, particularly through the idea of a strong Caliphate, and it embodied consistent media messages through real-world actions and achievements, and therefore created the illusion of authenticity and unity (Atwan, 2015). Its branding apparatus has worked both at the micro and macro levels: From minute details, such as the notorious Guantanamo orange jumpsuits that many geographically disconnected ISIS subsidiaries force on their captives to create the illusion of a unified group and cohesive action, to the simultaneous waves of social media messages synchronized with waves of military actions on the ground that aim to dictate news frames and command the attention of global news agendas. As a result, ISIS has managed to rapidly beat its competi-

tion and recruit an unprecedented number of foreign fighters and supporters, arguably its most startling success (Atwan, 2015; Franz, 2015; Neumann, 2015; Trofimov, 2015; Vidino, 2014).

In totality, ISIS’s brutal practices and terrorism strategies synchronized with elaborately produced media content, carefully managed social media campaigns, and a consistent brand strategy have resulted in global media spectacles and omnipresent news coverage of the group. This, in turn, has allowed it to achieve international notoriety within a few years of its debut on the international arena. Undoubtedly, ISIS today is the most infamous terrorist movement of our time and has “instituted transformative changes in strategy messaging, and recruitment” (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 7). Regardless of ISIS’s fate, these tactics will probably be utilized by emerging groups, which makes examining such a phenomenon worthwhile.

But this study goes beyond the description of ISIS’s “innovative propaganda and unprecedented manipulation of social media, and its recruitment of foreign fighters” (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 7) and aims to offer an initial theoretical model that captures the intricacies of this phenomenon and helps delineate innovative public diplomacy strategies of non-state actors or virtual states (Seib, 2011) by building on Entman’s (2008) cascading network activation model and Wolfsfeld’s (1997) political contest model and a host of modern branding strategies and digital and social media tactics. More specifically, it proposes a preliminary theoretical model of public diplomacy that takes into consideration the characteristics of virtual states that are willing to use terrorism and are capable of mastering branding strategies, storytelling techniques, and social media methods to effectively achieve their public diplomacy goals, especially the recruitment of foreign publics.

The study claims that ISIS’s synergistic use of terrorism, social media, effective storytelling, and branding achieves at least five public diplomacy aims: Gain mainstream media exposure and push advantageous news frames; create the illusion of a powerful unified group; project a favorable image to target global audiences; recruit supporters in foreign states; and portray life under the Caliphate as a sustainable alternative lifestyle to the West and as a response to deeply rooted grievances. While this model simultaneously achieves psychological warfare aims, these are not the main focus of this study.

Therefore, this article attempts to answer the question: What are the characteristics of ISIS’s public diplomacy strategy that make it so successful in gaining media exposure, pushing advantageous news frames, reaching global publics and subsequently recruiting foreigners? The exploratory study uses a purposive sample of videos, Tweets, news releases and other social media activities that coincided with major ISIS-instigated events, such as high profile executions and

major military achievements, including the “breaking of the borders” between Syria and Iraq. Most of the analyzed content is produced by Al-Hayat Media Center (2015), ISIS’s official media arm, but the analysis also includes nongraphic videos and content produced by other ISIS subsidiaries. While the analysis examined the content of these texts, the focus was also on their timing and synchronous release. The analysis also included the news media coverage of such events and examined original ideological documents produced by ISIS and other Islamist leaders.

## 2. Mediated Public Diplomacy and Upward Cascading Frames of Terror

Scholars have yet to agree on a unified definition for public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008). Seib (2012) offered a simple initial definition: the “element of diplomacy that involves a government reaching out to a public, rather than to another government” (p. 64). Wang (2005) noted that public diplomacy aims “to communicate and cultivate on behalf of a nation-state a desired image and reputation, and to build common ground and understanding among nations and peoples” (p. 32). However, most scholars today concede that non-state actors also utilize public diplomacy for their own aims, which may or may not be for “common grounds or understanding” (Gilboa, 2008; Rasmussen, 2009; Seib, 2012). Gilboa (2008) offered an extensive critique of the conflicting, contradictory and confusing definitions of public diplomacy in the literature and attempted to differentiate between public diplomacy and other forms (such as media diplomacy) by focusing on the act of using “the media and other channels of communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies” (p. 58). Gilboa also expanded the list of public diplomacy tools to include “media framing, information management, PR, nation branding,” among others (p. 58). Consistently but more parsimoniously, Entman (2008) differentiated his theoretical construction of mediated public diplomacy from other public diplomacy theories by focusing on specifically targeted and short-term aims that utilize mass media and the internet “to increase support of a country’s specific foreign policies among audiences beyond that country’s borders” (p. 88). Entman defined mediated public diplomacy “as the organized attempts by a president and his foreign policy apparatus to exert as much control as possible over the framing of U.S. policy in foreign media.” This transparently U.S.-centric definition also assumes a developed democratic state that offers some press freedoms and internal contests over news frames. In this context, Entman extends his cascading network activation model—which explains the manner in which U.S. foreign policy frames are contested and/or accepted in U.S. news coverage—to a mediated public diplomacy model. In the latter model, the likelihood of U.S.

frames attaining parity or at least a realistic chance to compete with news frames in foreign countries depends on the degree of cultural congruence between the U.S. and the target country, which makes the model applicable to other states.

But what if the framing originates from a virtual state? Seib (2011) notes that “virtual states are increasingly significant factors for foreign policy strategists who address issues ranging from public diplomacy to counterterrorism” (p. 17). He defines three levels of virtual states: recognized virtual states or the extension of a state through its globally dispersed diaspora; de facto nations or quasi-states that have yet to gain legal recognition, such as Palestine and Kurdistan; and finally “non-state actors such as terrorist organizations that use media-reliant networks to establish themselves as quasi-states” (p. 18). Viewing extremist non-state actors as virtual states helps us better to understand these resilient organizations’ military, political, financial, and communication efforts (Seib, 2011). This approach also repositions these groups as more capable actors with the potential to achieve their goals. It circumvents the stereotypical depiction of these extremists as backward psychopaths living in caves and commanding rag-tag gangs of incompetent fanatics, when in reality many of them have achieved military, political and economic feats that surpass the accomplishments of many existing states (Atwan, 2015). More importantly, viewing a group like ISIS as a virtual state allows for a more rational and objective assessment of its mediated public diplomacy strategy, especially in regards to its goals to reach and recruit foreign citizens through intentional news framing efforts that position it as a credible remedy for real grievances that resonate with thousands of potential recruits dispersed around the globe.

However, how can we place these virtual states within Entman’s mediated public diplomacy model, especially when their cultures are diametrically incongruent with most state cultures around the world, let alone western democracies? According to Entman’s degree of cultural congruence conception, ISIS’s initiated news frames will have no chance of competing in this uphill battle with cultures that fundamentally contrast with the essence of such virtual states. But what if the intended news frames are so vivid, dramatic and powerful (Moeller, 2000) that many news institutions have no choice but to include them, at least partially?

Terrorism spectacles can often create such powerful news frames. Scholars have noted the centrality of publicity as the defining characteristic of terrorism (Nacos, 2002) and have metaphorically described media as “terrorism’s oxygen” (Seib & Janbek, 2011). What’s more, those who use terrorism as a propaganda tactic are well aware of the media’s ability to instill fear and anger among a widely distributed audience (Seib & Janbek, 2011). Non-state actors typically cut off from

access to dominant mass media and desperate for publicity and the recognition of their cause often use terrorism to force themselves onto the news agenda and gain such publicity (Nacos, 2002). Given this symbiotic relationship between terrorism and media (Wilkinson, 1997), news coverage of terrorist attacks creates a dilemma for journalists (Viera, 1991). When news institutions cover terrorist attacks, they are simultaneously serving the terrorist attackers by offering them publicity, recognition and legitimacy. And 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. Even if they manage to ignore covering such highly newsworthy events, this often forces the terrorist group to escalate its attacks even further to a point where it's impossible to ignore (Seib & Janbek, 2011).

In this sense, terrorism turns Entman's model on its head by pushing news frames up the cascading network, and the matter becomes more complicated in a media ecology where anyone can produce and disseminate information at a global scale (Hoskins, Awan, & O'Loughlin, 2012).

### **3. Political Contest over News Frames and the Duality of the Terror Message in a Networked Arena**

Terrorism may ensure temporary media exposure, but it does not necessarily guarantee the perpetrator will win continuous media access, reach the intended audiences, or receive the intended framing, especially for a fledgling virtual state. In his attempt to understand the influence of two unequal sides competing for media exposure, Wolfsfeld (1997) advanced a political contest model to explain how media coverage is shaped and in turn shapes the struggle for control over outcomes. He differentiated between the "struggle over access" and the "struggle over meaning."

When it comes to struggle of over access, Wolfsfeld (1997) noted that political power could be translated into power over the media by increasing a player's "value to the media" and decreasing its "dependence on the media." The value to the media construct is measured by four variables: political/social status, organization/resources, exceptional behavior, and control over political environment—four matters that ISIS has succeeded in elevating, as discussed below. Dependence on the media is measured through political access and need for external support—both matters that seem less important in the current era of social media networks and easy access to communication and production technologies, as delineated in the next section.

On the other hand, shaping the context of the message or the "struggle over meaning" relates to the ability of political antagonists to better understand the media's construction of news frames in order to influence such framing (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Although

Wolfsfeld gave the strong political player an advantage over the weak challenger in promoting its own news frames, he attributed part of the latter group's success to its ability to construct an effective message that reverberates with existing news frames. In the post-9/11 era, ISIS has surprisingly 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. Wolfsfeld noted that although it is the political player that tries to promote advantageous news frames, the media play an important role in adopting these news frames. Consistently with Entman (2008), Wolfsfeld (1997) explains, "The construction of media frames of conflict is an interactive process in which the press attempts to find a narrative fit between incoming information and existing media frames."

Applying this model to ISIS, it is obvious that the group was able to quickly build political and social status by winning military battles and, as mentioned earlier, playing on the grievances of many Arabs and Muslims (Atwan, 2015). It was also able to bolster its organizational and communication mechanisms and build immense military and financial resources while simultaneously gaining control over its political environment by occupying large swaths of land and controlling lucrative natural resources in Syria and Iraq (Atwan, 2015; Stern & Berger, 2015). ISIS has shown dexterity for propaganda as a means of building credibility and establishing legitimacy, using social media and cyber technology for both recruitment and intimidation purposes (Farwell, 2014). Moreover, ISIS's engagement in exceptional behavior has been unsurpassed recently. Its brutal tactics, including spectacular terrorism, mass killings, public beheadings of soldiers, journalists, and aid workers, and the abduction, rape and selling of women of religious and ethnic minorities are only matched by their willingness to showcase such criminal acts through online videos and social media. ISIS's extreme brutality has even appalled Al-Qaeda's leadership (Mohammed, 2014).

The above has helped ISIS win the struggle over access, but what about the struggle over meaning? For a weaker contender to be in a position to impose even a few news frames, it must be able to initiate the frames and push them up the cascading network, an onerous challenge for a group that does not have any control over dominant mass media. However, online social networks and advances in digital media production tools have offered such weaker groups immense opportunities to craft sophisticated messages and disseminate them (Seib & Janbek, 2011).

In the past, extremist groups that used terrorism to achieve media coverage relied almost completely on mass media gatekeepers to initiate the dissemination of news about their attacks. Today, these groups have the ability to craft, initiate and widely disseminate their information through social media without facing cen-

sorship from mass media. “Most mainstream news organizations impose standards that rule out graphic images from terror attacks, but the perpetrators of such attacks might disseminate those images throughout the Internet... to audiences that are smaller but are considered high-value such as potential recruits” (Seib & Janbek, 2011, p. 11). Although most mainstream media censor and filter content produced by ISIS, even the slightest coverage of ISIS terrorism offers it immense advantage over other competing extremist groups in this networked media arena. Even negative mass media coverage offers ISIS credibility and name-recognition and tips select audiences to seek independent and unfiltered information about it—the first step toward building a relationship with the group, buying into its brand, and falling victim to its recruitment.

What’s more, online social networks are highly compatible with terrorist groups’ decentralized loose network and horizontal rather than hierarchal structuring, especially for recruitment and radicalization purposes (Seib & Janbek, 2011, p. 20). In this way, ISIS’s decentralization has proven to be an asset for its propaganda efforts too. Since thousands of individuals are peddling ISIS’s propaganda, it is much harder to counter (Melchior, 2014). Still, for ISIS to be able to push its news frames and content online, it also needs to circumvent the social media filters.

For more than a decade, many extremist groups have engaged in a cyber war in which they’ve struggled to keep their online content and social media accounts afloat. Each time social media companies find a way to track and eliminate terrorists’ content and accounts, the terrorist groups’ tactics evolve. Stern and Berger (2015) chronicled the progression of terrorist organizations’ early use of individual and official social media accounts, to the use of bots and mobile phone apps that automate the spread of messages, and the most recent leveraging of crowdsourcing strategies. At first, social media services were able to easily dismantle the official accounts that promoted terrorism by banning them. Despite the ability of many organizations to recreate other accounts, it took considerable time for them to rebuild credibility. In some cases, such as al-Shabab—the terrorist organization that attacked Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, in September 2013, Twitter kept eliminating their accounts until al-Shabab eventually gave up (Farwell, 2014; Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 144). However, ISIS innovated a reliable strategy. Instead of relying on centralized accounts that could be easily identified and “wacked,” ISIS opted for decentralized crowdsourcing, in-house designed apps and bots, and hashtag hacking. In a memo sent to supporters, ISIS described its Twitter crowdsourcing strategy as based on a system of four tiers of supporters: head supporters, diligent supporters, general supporters, and silent supporters (Al-Hamad, n.d.). Each tweeting campaign follows a consistent and predictable pattern:

“After being posted and authenticated by official ISIS members, a second-tier group of several dozen online activists would retweet the link with a hashtag, then retweet each other’s tweets and write new tweets, all using the same hashtag. Other activists would upload the release to multiple platforms, so that it could be found even when Internet providers pulled the content down. [A] third tier...would repeat the process on a larger scale.” (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 155)

The strategy creates what is called a Twitter storm, where hundreds of tweets with consistent hashtags at coordinated times “cross the threshold that would trigger trending alerts,” thereby exposing such tweet to a wider audience and generating more activity (p. 155).

These Twitter storms are coordinated with spectacular terrorist acts that ensure at least brief mass media attention, but more importantly create a synergy with the online communication campaign. The overall outcome is not only optimal reach and exposure guaranteed by the terrorism spectacles, but also consistent frames reaching various ISIS stakeholders.

With regards to these intended news frames, it is important to recognize that ISIS’s global media operation has two key narratives: one for recruitment purposes and to keep 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. For the latter group, ISIS uses terrorism as a psychological warfare tactic. It wants to frighten its foes, deter counterattacks, demoralize enemy fighters, and coerce conversions (Melchior, 2014), an outcome that spectacularly worked during ISIS’s invasion of several major Iraqi cities in June 2015 (Beck, 2015). But for its domestic/recruitment audience, ISIS uses terrorism to initiate and push propaganda that in turn reaches recruits and supporters. This is not to say that the messages that target recruits are devoid of blood and violence or that somehow the supporters ignore the violent imagery. On the contrary, much of it contains horrific bloody content, and shows beheadings and mass killings (Trianni & Katz, 2014). However, their violent videos—even the most gruesome executions—offer careful and often lengthy justifications for such acts. For example, the notorious 22-minute video that showcased the execution of a captured Jordanian pilot contained over 15 minutes of content that justified the climactic act of burning him alive, including several minutes showing the captured pilot walking through the rubble of an area he supposedly assaulted, interspersed—through parallel editing techniques—with shots of killed civilians being pulled out from under the leveled buildings.

Therefore, from a communication perspective, ISIS’s propagation of terror—its psychological warfare—and the recruitment of supporters to its vision of

building a new society go hand-in-hand, and both sides of this image are often simultaneously propagated (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 113). What's more, ISIS is intentional in its effort to display its own atrocities and violence "to awaken potential recruits to the reality of the jihadis' war and to intimidate enemies by showing the price they would pay for their involvement" (p. 115). In the *Management of Savagery*, a blueprint for jihadists to establish the Caliphate, the pseudonymous author Abu Bakr Naji (2004) advocated the escalation of violence in order to attract supporters and effect polarization between enemies and advocates (p. 46). The second section of the document, entitled *Path to Empowerment*, explicitly explained how to "attract new youth through...conducting operations that attract people's attention" (p. 17). Stern and Berger (2015) noted that the vast distribution of such "violence porn" over the internet has led to:

"the birth of a media model that has been transformed, expanded, and refined to a science....ISIS has made its name on the marketing of savagery, evolving its message to sell a strange but potent new blend of utopianism and appalling carnage to a worldwide audience.... ISIS is using beheadings as a form of marketing, manipulation, and recruitment, determined to bring the public display of savagery into our lives, trying to instill in us a state of terror." (p. 3)

This "media model" seems to be working efficiently, as the number of western recruits by an extremist Islamic group has been the highest ever recorded in modern history, while the notoriety of ISIS has reached epic proportions on a global scale. The estimated number of global recruits who had joined the fight in Syria and Iraq by early 2015 has exceeded the estimated 20,000 foreigners recruited in the 1980s to fight in the Afghanistan war (Hagopian, 2015; Neumann, 2015). Some reports have indicated that up to 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries have joined ISIS in Syria/Iraq since 2011 (Schmitt & Sengupta, 2015). Especially disturbing is that many recruited women and men are relative newcomers to Islamic observance (Trofimov, 2015) and about a quarter are recent converts to Islam (Barrett, 2014). This indicates that the group is gaining appeal well beyond its fundamentalist roots. And the more foreigners it recruits, the broader its recruitment apparatus becomes. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence found that a surprisingly high number of western citizens fighting with ISIS are using social media to recruit even more westerners (Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014).

The dual narrative strategy of ISIS means that the struggle over meaning is achieved for both opponents and supporters simultaneously. ISIS's messages can be described as following a winner's narrative that "de-

pends on the group projecting an image of strength and momentum" (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015, p. 3; Stern & Berger, 2015). While most audiences who receive the ISIS news frames via the mass media will be horrified, a select curious minority will pursue further information about the group online. For the opposing audience, ISIS inspires fear, demonstrates strength, and sustains a credible threat. For the curious minority, ISIS activates interest and potential fascination, while social media reframing provides the opportunity to initiate and build a relationship in the hopes of ultimate recruitment.

But in addition to scaring foes, justifying brutal violence, and reaching recruits, ISIS also wants to make "jihad" seem like a sustainable lifestyle. ISIS fighters not only publish grim pictures of themselves with guns and tanks, but also of everyday life—fighters playing football, swimming and enjoying feasts (The Straits Times, 2014). They want to "show that they are the sexiest jihadi group on the block" (Trianni & Katz, 2014). Through effective branding, ISIS has produced high quality promotional material that brands its efforts as manly, cool and rebellious (Breslow, 2014; Melchior, 2014).

#### **4. The Rebellious ISIS Brand: A Response to a Global Existential Crisis**

There is little doubt that ISIS possesses a deft command of social media and is more skilled at using it for recruitment than any other group (Atwan, 2015), but ISIS is not the first group of Islamic extremists to use social media to propagate its messages. However, no group thus far has succeeded in marketing itself the way ISIS has, and none have made social media such a central (and public) part of their recruitment efforts (Stern & Berger, 2015). While in the past extremist groups operated in secretive online forums, ISIS has spread its message—in many languages—through tens of thousands of publicly accessible Twitter and Facebook accounts (Melchior, 2014). Using professionally produced videos and propaganda, ISIS reaches young, alienated and disenfranchised Muslims with a cause that they perceive is worthwhile (Trianni & Katz, 2014). Its' media content competes with high quality TV programs and news material produced in the West. ISIS so far has demonstrated that it deeply understands branding and marketing, has first class media producers, and is adept at using the latest technology (Melchior, 2014).

However, no amount of activity on social media would ordinarily make someone leave everything behind and take such radical positions without a compelling narrative. ISIS's strength also comes from its success in branding itself and differentiating its story.

Branding entails imbuing products with an emotional dimension with which people can identify (Gilboa, 2008, p. 67). The contemporary concept of a

product brand, or a consumer's mental image of a product, has widely been implemented for "state brands," with the aim of creating emotional resonance for global publics with the image of a place (Van Ham, 2001). What's more, state-branding strategies could easily be utilized by non-states, including extremist groups (Gilboa, 2008; Wang, 2005). It may seem counterintuitive to think of ISIS as a brand, as most brands we think of have positive associative networks, but what is a modern brand if not a community of "people driven by a common belief system"? People adhere to such brands and attract others who share common beliefs (Hanlon, 2015). Deconstructing the ISIS social code that fuels its brand community helps explain how, even as it creates terror, ISIS also captures imaginations of its target audiences. Perceiving ISIS as a brand reveals that it has all the makings of a successful one: it responds to an ideal, provides a fascinating rebellious and adventurous story, offers a distinct position, and is grounded in real action and proven success.

The most successful brands target powerful ideological contradictions produced by society. People tend to value brands primarily for their cultural and identity-building values: "Through popular culture, society paints a picture of its ideals....People strive for these ideals and experience tensions when how they understand themselves differs from the standards society has set" (Lagace, 2002). Such contradictions create a deep need for new identities and world views that help reconcile these tensions.

Imagine the tensions millions of observant Muslims face on a daily basis, especially those with a conservative religious upbringing living in western societies in a post-9/11 world of rampant discrimination and prejudice against Muslims. From dress codes and customs, to food and worship traditions, to proper relationships and beyond, many struggle to reconcile their ideals with the existing social realities and standards. But regardless of religion, globally many disenfranchised youth today struggle with modernity's moral, economic and social tensions. Giddens (1991) referred to this phenomenon as "personal meaninglessness" or a sense that "life has nothing worthwhile to offer," a fundamental symptom of modernity explained as the "repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers" (p. 9). Emancipatory politics often emerge as responses to such existential crises, and this provides opportunities for new social movements to capitalize on such tensions and provide radical and rebellious alternative world views.

But can we pinpoint the characteristics of such potential recruits? Decades of research on the psychological characteristics and social-economic statuses of those who become terrorists have reached no simple answers and have certainly not offered singular identifying characteristics. According to Stern and Berger (2015), what is required is a combination of internal

needs—including perceived benefits of becoming an extremist group member or potential psychological and material benefits—and external factors, which deal with perceptions of momentous world events, especially injustices. In other words, a "mix of political sentiment, religious belief, and personal circumstances is required" (p. 83). The power vacuum that was brought about by the second Iraq war and the Syrian civil war has provided much of the external factors, especially within the greater global "jihadist" narrative, which ISIS has deftly manipulated (Atwan, 2015). But while the internal religious motivations may have provided the necessary attraction to ISIS's cause, these were not sufficient for a person to uproot himself and risk his life to fight for that group. Other internal and external factors would have played an important role, factors such as acceptance and reinforcement from specific recruiters or a person's social network and longstanding grievances and a sense of alienation (Stern & Berger, 2015, p. 82). This study does not argue that online videos and social media have magically somehow persuaded some people to join ISIS, but instead it emphasizes that the capabilities that social media offer—especially the two-way one-on-one interpersonal communication capacity—have played a major role in such recruitments. For example, according to Stern and Berger (2015), the growing number of foreign fighters on social media has helped with the recruitment effort by providing commentary on the conflict and detailed logistical information for potential recruits on how to travel to Syria/Iraq.

It becomes less surprising, therefore, to fathom why some young Muslim westerners, especially women, have been lured by the ultra-conservative ISIS brand—albeit a rebellious brand that responds to their many grievances and reconciles the moral contradictions between their ideals and their current circumstances. Attempting to explain how three young British teenagers left their comfortable middle-class lives in the UK to join ISIS, Bennhold (2015) notes that the young recruits came "from a world in which teenage rebellion is expressed through a radical religiosity that questions everything around them. In this world, the counterculture is conservative. Islam is punk rock. The headscarf is liberating. Beards are sexy." Indeed, the ISIS brand has cleverly responded to their "vulnerabilities, frustrations and dreams, and fill[ed] a void the West has so far failed to address" (Bennhold, 2015) by capitalizing on what Gartenstein-Ross (2015) referred to as the narrative of the broader "jihadist movement." Although Gartenstein-Ross noted that conflating this broader narrative with ISIS's appeal causes observers to overlook important vulnerabilities in ISIS's propaganda strategy, we would argue that ISIS's keen efforts to conflate its propaganda with that of the broader "jihadist movement" itself makes its narrative attractive and persuasive by offering it legitimacy among a broad target audience, even beyond Muslims. Indeed, its nar-

rative serves as the basis of a counterculture for alienated and disenchanting youth of various backgrounds, as evidenced by the converts joining the ranks. What's more, although ISIS's extremist, selective and distorted interpretation of Islam offers the ideological basis of its claims, Islam itself is not the main appeal and drive for such recruits, especially considering most of those who join ISIS are not very knowledgeable about Islam (Barrett & Myers, 2014). "[T]he religion really is a gloss over a much deeper desire for a sense of identity and purpose and belonging, and they want to participate in something....They want some sort of definite direction to take, which can lead, at the same time, to a very personal internal sense of fulfillment" (p. 3).

At the core of ISIS's brand ideal is the Caliphate, 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. In the absence of the alternatives, fundamentalist ideologies offered a quintessential fit to satisfy just such cravings: "They want to remake the world, and find only jihadism as an alternative ideology because there is nothing else left out there...it is the most obvious counterpoint to the west" (Trofimov, 2015). Beyond closure and coherence, ISIS's ideology also offers a form of significance. By joining the fight, recruits believe they can earn a larger-than-life status as heroes and martyrs and win a place in history. Finally, the Caliphate is meant to represent a world where, in theory, Muslims are re-empowered—politically and economically—and where they will no longer be wronged. They are given back their agency, their power, and their glory. "Like the Communists, [ISIS] promises universal welfare, free medicine and social justice....A lot of young people have the same idea that the capitalism-centric western system is not for them, and that another society is being set up" (Trofimov, 2015). Furthermore, the Caliphate is an alternative world where the Muslim is desired and successful, rather than being alienated and considered a nuisance, a message perpetuated by many rightwing western politicians and the practices of western states in dealing with Muslims, such as the Abu Ghraib scandal, which re-confirmed the notion that the West is hostile not only to Al-Qaeda but to Muslims in general (Spens, 2014).

The ISIS brand strategy is consistent with Sachs's (2012) theory that successful brands have to actually live their story and take action rather than just tell it. However, for that story to stand out in a world of media fatigue and cynicism, it has to also be distinct (Moon, 2010). ISIS offers both real action and a distinct story. For decades, al-Qaeda talked about re-establishing the Caliphate, but it never took action towards that goal, focusing instead on attacking the West. ISIS, on the other hand, did: "By capturing expansive territory and heavy weaponry, and flush with wealth..., ISIS claims to have taken a major first step

toward righting what it sees as this ancient wrong, creating a unified Muslim state that will subsume existing nations" (Shane & Hubbard, 2014). This differentiates it from any other extremist Islamic group, and more recruits are lured by its success in creating an Islamic state (Yan, 2015). "Young people look at ISIS and say, 'By gosh, they're doing it!'," and ISIS continues to portray itself as "restoring idealized eras of earlier Islamic history," an idea that resonates with some Muslims around the globe (Shane & Hubbard, 2014).

Beyond that, the ISIS brand offers the promise of extreme adventure and conquest. ISIS has mastered the art of empowering its adherents and making them the heroes of the story, acting as mentor and guide to them, a crucial step in building a successful following (Sachs, 2012). It seems that the exciting desire to participate in a battle prophesied a century and a half ago is a strong motivator to join ISIS's ranks (Barrett, 2014). Some foreign fighters are youth who are mainly looking for adventure, purpose, and outlets for their violence, and ISIS provides them with just that (Trofimov, 2015). "The group attracts followers yearning for not only religious righteousness but also adventure....And, of course, some people just want to kill—and ISIS welcomes them, too....ISIS operates in urban settings and offers recruits immediate opportunities to fight" (Cronin, 2015). But it does not stop there. ISIS also offers the opportunity for sexual conquest, yet another distinguishing aspect of its brand. In al-Qaeda, there is no place for sex. Subsequently, al-Qaeda's brand is unappealing for young western recruits seeking sexual thrills. For the al-Qaeda recruit, sex comes after marriage (Cronin, 2015). ISIS's sales pitch encourages all forms of conquest, including sexual slavery and rape, and even justifies such horrendous acts as religious duty (Callimachi, 2015).

Stengel (2011) found that the ideals that drive the most successful brands could be grouped into at least one of five fields he calls "fundamental human values" that improve people's lives. These fields are: eliciting joy, enabling connection, evoking pride, inspiring exploration, and impacting society. Analyzing a sample of videos produced by Al-Hayat Media Center (2015) demonstrates how the ISIS brand messages contain all five of these fields. Images that activate experiences of happiness are abundant, from scenes of children running around, laughing and eating cotton candy and ice cream, to adult men in public goofing around and enjoying the outdoors. The videos use common plain folk characters and settings that aim to enable connection, such as local business owners and shoppers in bustling marketplaces. Also common are messages that instill a sense of pride and confidence, including images of markets flowing with abundant produce, businesses operating as usual, running electricity and water, and people going about their daily lives in peace and tranquility. Other messages insinuate support and harmo-

ny, as demonstrated by united shouts that the Caliphate is here to stay. Several shots that emphasize normalcy and exclude any images of death and destruction—accompanied by sound bites confirming that barely any planes are flying above their heads—reconfirm that the Caliphate is not a war zone but a normal livable place. Even western cultural references play a part in the group’s brand messages. Take for example some popular hashtags, such as #JihadiFitness and #LittleMujahid (McCoy, 2014). ISIS has even posted pictures of its fighters playing with kittens and eating Nutella. These images communicate the message that, despite it being Islamic, ISIS promotes its people’s welfare (Farwell, 2014). This brand image is important in ISIS’s recruiting strategy, especially in relation to its potential foreign audiences and supporters who may never actually come into physical contact with fighters or the Caliphate (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015). They will instead judge the group through “the image it has cultivated through social media and online strategic messaging, and on the mainstream media’s reporting” about its victories and overall standing (Gartenstein-Ross, 2015).

Despite containing diverse content, the analyzed videos produced by Al-Hayat Media Center had the same ultimate objective: to portray the Caliphate as a functioning, better, and viable alternative to the West. Through that message, ISIS seeks to illustrate “jihad” as a sustainable lifestyle. Indeed, in most videos, life in the Caliphate seems to be completely normal, abundant, prosperous and secure, an image that could be pursued as the public diplomacy goal of any country.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the mediated public diplomacy strategies of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It highlighted the group’s ability to implement sophisticated public diplomacy methods through a combination of terrorism tactics synchronized with communication strategies to gain media access and exposure, push news frames that serve its interests, and continually produce and disseminate a consistent brand and target defined stakeholders with a dual message using advanced branding strategies that resonate with cultural values and help it ultimately recruit supporters and deter opponents. By viewing ISIS as a virtual state (Seib, 2011) and building on the theoretical models of Entman (2008) and Wolfsfeld (1997) to understand how the group is able to gain media exposure and push news frames up the cascading network through the synchronized use of terrorism and a sophisticated branding and social media marketing strategy built on a dual message that simultaneously deters perceived opponents and attracts potential supporters, one can better examine and understand its powerful and successful mediated public diplomacy strategy. While this

study was an initial step towards advancing a theoretical model for mediated public diplomacy of virtual states, future research will require deeper empirical examination and a more complex methodological design in order to build an elaborate theoretical model to address this matter.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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