

# THE CARTER CENTER

## *Religious Appeals in Daesh's Recruitment Propaganda*

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### **Executive Summary**

The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh) employs a complex online media strategy to recruit targeted demographics. Its success has exacerbated conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere, and has become a concern for the international community. The C(c)4n community.

## Master Narratives and the Role of Religious Appeals

Daesh recruitment propaganda strategies center on the deployment of multiple narratives designed to heighten the socio-political grievances of its target audience. Master narratives employed by Daesh include, but are not limited to, the humiliation of the transnational Muslim community (*ummah*), the desire to humiliate the West, reification and celebration of military *jihād*<sup>4</sup>, providing social services and effectively administering territory, and the hypocrisy of Muslim and Middle Eastern political and religious leaders. Whatever the narrative, Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on the misinterpretation and decontextualization of core Muslim religious texts, including the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*<sup>5</sup> literature, in an attempt to both (1) claim religious authority for their establishment of a Caliphate, and (2) morally justify violence and terror in the service of that larger political project. It is important to emphasize that Daesh is primarily a political group serving political aims (including the establishment of a modern state and the elimination of political rivals), even if those aims are framed in terms of religious discourse and theological appeals. This is clearly evidenced by the frequency of different narratives employed by Daesh narratives predicated primarily on the glory of warfare (*jihād*), modern notions of political legitimacy (such as the ability to provide social services or administer territory), or historical and political grievances (Sykes-Picot or Western transgression), appear much more frequently in their propaganda than purely religious or theological narratives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of *jihād* is often misunderstood as a religious obligation to engage in armed conflict. In fact, it is a broader concept that encompasses both spiritual and physical struggle. The physical struggle is only one aspect of the concept, and it is not always necessary. The spiritual struggle is the primary focus of the concept, and it is a continuous process that every Muslim is required to engage in. The physical struggle is only undertaken when it is necessary to defend the Muslim community or to spread the message of Islam.

<sup>5</sup> *Hadith*

## The Rhetoric of Religious Justification

Regardless of the narrative, highly emotive religious justifications for violent action are employed. This approach is particularly effective among foreign recruits who, in addition to holding local political grievances, are shown to lack religious literacy. In the recent past, al-Sayid's available recruitment manual stresses recruitment outreach to targets with low religious literacy.<sup>7</sup> Daesh recruit intake forms indicate that the vast majority (70%) of foreign fighters who arrived in the Islamic State throughout 2014 self-reported their *shari'a* knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In 2015 in the United States, 40 percent of individuals arrested with ties to Daesh were recent converts.<sup>10</sup> Lack of religious knowledge among vulnerable groups provides an opening for Daesh recruitment propaganda. Beyond a lack of religious education, these examples also suggest a clear communication gap between disaffected youth and Muslim religious leaders. While Muslim recruits' reliance on

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<sup>7</sup> Abu Amr al-Sayid, "A Course in the Art of Recruiting - Revised July 2010," [https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A\\_Course\\_in\\_the\\_Art\\_of\\_Recruiting\\_-\\_Revised\\_July2010\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ACourseInTheArtOfRecruiting-RevisedJuly2010/A_Course_in_the_Art_of_Recruiting_-_Revised_July2010_djvu.txt); accessed Aug. 23, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> *Shari'a* has its primary range of meaning

traditional forms of communication fails to connect with the demographic groups most susceptible to religious appeals.

The rhetoric of religious justification employed by Daesh in their online recruitment propaganda is also multifaceted. Persistent themes of their religious message include a rigid *takfiri* (infidel) ideology, a bipolar view of the world, and a fetishizing of military jihad and martyrdom. The practice of pronouncing another Muslim an infidel (*kafir*) or apostate (*murtadd*) was sidelined very early in the Islamic tradition. Daesh recruitment propaganda employs takfir regularly, dividing the world into two opposing camps: the Abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) and the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*). These classifications are legal categories not fully elaborated in the *Qur'an*.<sup>12</sup> Muslims are divided into those who live in *Dar al-Islam*, and those who live in *Dar al-Harb*, and used as examples in their propaganda. This includes both Western Muslims (such as

revealed.<sup>15</sup> The Center also took note of the repetition of particular *ayahs* which verses are favorites in Daesh propaganda and whether an *ayah* was quoted whole or only in part.

Daesh recruitment propaganda relies heavily on *Madani surahs*. Generally, *Madani surahs*, those

<b>Ayahs Used with High Frequency in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda</b>				
Classification	Surah Title	Surah Number	Ayah Number	Number of Times Repeated
Madani	<b>At-Tawbah</b>	9	14	7
			111	4
	<b>Al-Hajj</b>	22	3	4

Daesh rhetorically employs the *Qur'anic* text to adopt the mantle of prophethood, speaking through the text in the persona of Muslim prophets. In the December 2015 video *No Respite*, a Daesh fighter recites a selection of *Surat Yunus* (10:71) adopting the persona of Noah, coopting and speaking through the text to challenge those who mock and disbelieve. By recontextualizing

marginalized Muslim cgo o wplku" cpf "hggf u" f k'gevf "k'p'q" F cguj a" tgetwko gpv" p'cttcv'k'x'gu" cu"  
g'x'k'f g'peg" h'q't" j' g'k' y' q't'r f' x'k'gy 3 tgetwko gpv" p'c t'c'v'k'x'gu" cu