

THE CARTER CENTER

Research Brief

The Evolution of Daesh Recruitment Propaganda in Light of Territorial Loss

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Executive Summary

By the end of 2016, Daesh had lost 43% of its total territory, including key cities in Iraq (Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit) and Syria (Kobani, Tal Abyad, and Manbij).¹ Given recent advances by Iraqi security forces, it appears that the final ouster of Daesh forces from Mosul is also inevitable. Such significant territorial losses pose a test of adaptability to Daesh recruitment strategies.

In response to its territorial losses, Daesh has evolved its communication strategies in three important and interrelated ways: theologically, strategically, and tactically. The Carter Center (TCC) analysis concludes that Daesh's ideology will likely survive significant territorial loss;

analysis of Daesh's primary sources, including videos, audio speeches, and online magazines *Dabiq*² and *Rumiyah*.

Theological Reinterpretation: Constructing the Sacred Canopy

Daesh propaganda materials consistently rely on theological claims, including the misinterpretation of core Muslim religious texts, to both construct religious authority and morally justify terrorist violence in the service of a larger political project.³ Theological claims buoy Daesh's narrative and reinforce its propaganda. However, theological interpretations of events by Daesh are not static; they evolve to frame the latest developments in ways that reinforce Daesh's political and recruitment goals. In an audio speech released on 2 November 2016 by al-Furqan Media, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Daesh, addressed the theological understandings of *fitna* (trial), casting a sacred canopy over battlefield losses: "And if we are afflicted with killing, and our wounds become many, and the storms rage against us, and our adversities become great, then it would also be of no surprise. It is Allah's promise to us. Rather, affliction is an inevitable decree."⁴ Extensive theological re-framing to explain recent setbacks as a divinely-ordained antecedent to ultimate victory is also prevalent in recent articles in *Rumiyah*. Many cite historical anecdotes and Quranic verses that emphasize how initial defeat or unequal force is a sign that God will intervene and save His soldiers. The attempt to reinterpret its theological positions indicates the recognition of territorial loss and the evolution of Daesh communication strategy.

This shift is most evident in Daesh's reinterpretation of its core prophecy regarding the apocalyptic battlefield of Dabiq. Daesh recognizes that its military loss in the region of Dabiq, which it celebrates as the site for its guaranteed victory over infidels, could have negative repercussions on

Zarqawi,⁵ pronouncing that the struggle of Jihad will continue “until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”⁶ *Rumiyah*, however, draws distinctions between minor battles in Dabiq and the final, apocalyptic battle. The “final hour” in Dabiq is imminent, but delayed. Military losses are reinterpreted as mere setbacks on the path to inevitable victory: “This war of attack and withdrawal occurring in Dabiq and its surrounding areas – the minor battle of Dabiq – will inevitably lead to the Major Malhamah of Dabiq, even if a withdrawal were to precede it by Allah’s decree.”⁷ Daesh provides theological cover for its losses while warning its enemies and reassuring its supporters.

armed jihad was quite prevalent in *Dabiq*, its persistent invocation as a central theme in most articles in *Rumiyah* also indicates an overall intensification of the military narrative. This indicates that strategic communications from Daesh's provincial media centers and online magazines increasingly seek, especially in the aftermath of its recent military failure, to present a

need a territorial base to Tweet (or Telegram, or post on JustPaste.it). Military intervention alone is insufficient to preventing violent extremism. This is not to say that military defeat will not constitute a serious blow to Daesh's claim of having established the prophesized "*khilafah*," one that was supposed to be "*baqiyah*" (here to remain). However, it is unlikely to completely eradicate the organization's rhetorical credibility and recruitment expertise.

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