

WISEUP

Knowledge Ends Extremism

Edited by Daisy Khan

60 Contributors

Reza Aslan Ph.D., Eboo Patel Ph.D., Congressman Keith Ellison, Imam Mohamed Magid, Dr. Ibrahim Negm, Arsalan Iftikhar, Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Jonathan AC Brown, Dr. Mehnaz Afridi, Salam Al-Marayati, MPAC, Imam Talib M. Shareef, Syed-Mohsin Naquvi... (continued)

Countering Daesh Media Strategies: The Role of Community Leaders

DR. HOUDA ABADI explains that Daesh relies greatly on social media to disseminate its message. They tailor their online presence to attract vulnerable and disenfranchised youth. This demands that Muslim leaders develop productive ways to engage Muslim youth in order to counteract Daesh's extremist appeal.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Driven by a deep discontent and estrangement from their own societies, thousands of young people have joined Daesh in search of an ideal society.
- Daesh uses highly professional, skillfully produced social media messaging to appeal to youth.
- Religious leaders must use the same mediums and techniques to reach young people that Daesh uses to recruit them to counteract Daesh's claims.

Daesh has capitalized on the political vacuum created by failed states and the failure of national governments to address core sociopolitical grievances, more specifically, the disenfranchisement of youth and marginalization of particular segments of the population. Driven by a deep discontent and estrangement from their own societies, thousands of youth have joined Daesh in search of an idealistic society. Daesh has taken advantage of these feelings of disenfranchisement in its recruitment by emphasizing the idyllic notion of a utopian "Islamic state" that addresses Muslim grievances across the globe.

Driven by a deep discontent and estrangement from their own societies, thousands of youth have joined Daesh in search of an idealistic society.

Daesh's systematic misrepresentation of religious doctrines and manipulation of political grievances serve as tactics to legitimize violence and attract new recruits. Since their barbaric practices violate every Islamic law, they take religious texts out of context to establish their authority and justify jihad as a morally and Islamically justifiable act. By re-

contextualizing Qur'anic references, Daesh taps into the Muslim imagination to reminisce about the glory days of Muslim power. Apocalyptic in style, Daesh asks its target audience to relive Islamic history, the times of persecution, and the times of glory that God promised if they remained steadfast. This sympathetic figuration revives a nostalgic Muslim collective memory of Islam's golden days and banks on its affective depository of cultural referents in their call for a transnational membership. The extreme violence becomes a temporary method of self-preservation to the otherwise good-natured, honest, and humble servant of God.

DAESH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

To create an appealing Daesh brand, the recruiters main online propaganda narratives revolve around seven primary themes:

1. The humiliation and transgression of the ummah;
2. Humiliating the West;
3. Military jihad;
4. Providing social services within Daesh-controlled territory;
5. Hypocrisy of Muslim, Middle East, and North African leaders;
6. Ability to administer territory by providing security, law, and order; and last,
7. Espousing purely theological motivations.

Their narrative is heavily dependent on their target audience and media channel. Daesh uses tech-savvy



online campaigns and sophisticated video production techniques in its propaganda strategy to recruit and attract young foreign fighters. Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda Central, said in 2005, “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the heart and minds of our ummah.”

Using social media to draw on vulnerable and disenfranchised youth, Daesh attempts to propagate its ideology and build identification with its target audience

Daesh digital propaganda videos are of high production value and stylistic similarities with Hollywood action movies. For Daesh, being seen is as important as being heard in its branding of its caliphate project. Using social media to draw in vulnerable and disenfranchised youth, Daesh attempts to propagate its ideology and build identification with its target audience. Their use of various languages in stories of converts and foreign Muslim fighters projects an image of acceptance in which everyone is seemingly united under the banner of Islam regardless of race, socioeconomic status, physical disability, and country of origin. In one of his sermons, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi states, “[The Islamic State] is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.” These types of propaganda videos tap into the socio-economic grievances of the potential recruits and provide an alternative to their respective communities.

THE ROLE OF MUSLIM COMMUNITY LEADERS IN COUNTERING DAESH

Muslim religious and community leaders have an important role to play in discrediting and preventing violent extremism as they hold unique positions of

authority, credibility, and communal ties. Our religious and community leaders must be proactive and identify the problems and solutions and recognize the particular role that they can play in providing alternative avenues for expressing grievances, while promoting community-based activities that respond to local needs. This will foster greater inclusion and sense of belonging in vulnerable youth.

Muslim religious leaders have been condemning violence, but seldom do they discredit the religious militant ideology propagated by Daesh using diverse online social tools. Many of the responses from religious leaders have relied on traditional forms of communication that are neither engaging nor attractive to the youth. The primary focus has been on Qur’anic verses and long sermons (many times in classical Arabic). Some religious leaders also have published long manifestos to condemn Daesh. While these actions are all important in sending a clear message that Daesh does not represent Islam, they do not directly engage with the most vulnerable population—the disenfranchised Muslim youth.

The Muslim religious and community leaders must understand Daesh’s communication strategies so that they can identify productive ways of engaging Muslim youth. First, religious and community leaders

Muslim religious leaders have been condemning violence, but seldom do they discredit the religious militant ideology propagated by Daesh using diverse online social tools.

must understand and identify the emotional appeals and various narratives Daesh employs. For example, how does Daesh propaganda differ in the United States from its counterpart in the Middle East and

North Africa? Does Daesh target men and women differently? Effective solutions must be localized and grassroots in nature. In parallel, the apocalyptic out-of-context interpretation of Qur'anic verses must be examined and refuted. One main recurring theme that is found in all Daesh media propaganda is the concept of the caliphate and the abolition of the nation-state, which is directly tied to issues of Muslim identity. We should encourage and not shy away from critical discussion. Second, Daesh's heavy reliance on sophisticated digital media to recruit young Muslims makes it even more imperative for religious leaders to use the same mediums effectively when creating localized alternative online narratives.

One helpful approach to address this challenge is for religious leaders to enhance their media capabilities and communication strategies so that they can effectively discredit Daesh's propaganda. Third, their disconnect with the youth has presented a major challenge to the Muslim religious leaders' attempts to guide and engage the youth. Community leaders must be able to communicate in a language that the youth can understand and identify with. This can be done through the use of local dialects, shorter and interactive sermons, safe spaces for women, and local initiatives for youth. It is of the utmost importance that our youth feel empowered and listened to.

