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Nanninga, Pieter

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Branding a Caliphate in Decline: The Islamic State's Video Output (2015-2018)

Authors: Pieter Nanninga¹

Although video releases have been central to the Islamic State's efforts to represent itself to its audiences, an extensive quantitative and qualitative study of these sources over a longer period of time is still lacking. This paper therefore provides an overview and analysis of the entire corpus of official videos released by the Islamic State between 1 July 2015 and 30 June 2018. It particularly focuses on how the Islamic State's decline in Iraq and Syria during this period is reflected in its video output and how the group has responded to its setbacks. The paper demonstrates a strong correlation between the group's mounting troubles and its video production: the numbers of videos decreased dramatically and their content reflects the Islamic State's (re)transformation from a territory-based 'state' to an insurgent group relying on guerrilla tactics and terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the Islamic State's multi-faceted response to its setbacks might ensure the groups' appeal to its target audience in the years to come.

Keywords: The Islamic State; propaganda; recruitment; state-building; videos; violence

Introduction

Since its inception, media releases have been central to the Islamic State's efforts to establish a successful caliphate. The group's conquests in Iraq and Syria were accompanied by the establishment of a massive media apparatus, consisting of several media producers each with their own specialties and target audiences. Since the Islamic State announced the establishment of its caliphate on 29 June 2014, these media groups have, at times, issued more than 700 media communications per month, including videos, audio statements, radio bulletins, magazines, news reports, photo series, *anashid* (hymns) and Qur'an recitations.² These media releases have been carefully choreographed.³ For example, internal documents indicate that media teams were instructed that fighters "should appear in a very suitable appearance".⁴ When showing the application of sharia punishments, the faces of Muslims receiving the penalty should not be shown, while the executioners should show no "signs of happiness for the killing".⁵ Camera operators were also instructed not to record any flags other than the Islamic State's official black banner, which further illustrates the group's high awareness of the importance of media in establishing its brand across the world.⁶

Of all the Islamic State's media releases, videos have arguably been the most important to its branding efforts. Although videos have constituted a relatively minor part of the group's total media output,⁷ they have been the costliest for the group in terms of resource investment. Moreover, they have been highly influential. It has been the group's videos, in particular, that have horrified the world by blatantly displaying brutal acts of violence, including beheadings, immolations, executions by teenagers and mass killings. Yet, releases like these have also been celebrated by tens of thousands of the group's supporters. These videos, along with those featuring utopian portrayals of life inside the Islamic State, are often considered a crucial element in explaining why thousands of men and women from all over the world have migrated to the group's caliphate to live and fight under the black banner.⁸

The centrality of videos in the Islamic State's branding efforts underlines the necessity of examining these sources in a comprehensive way. Such an examination might deliver valuable insights into the group's messaging and the possible appeal thereof. However, although research on the Islamic State's media output in general has made significant progress over the last few years, the group's video releases have remained understudied. Several publications provide 'snapshots' of the Islamic State's total media output during

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² Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unravelling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016): 21, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/milton-d-communication-breakdown-unraveling-islamic-states-media-efforts>.

³ See, for example, Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, "Inside the Surreal World of the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine," *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html?tid=a_inl.

⁴ Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: an Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018): 6, <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization>.

⁵ Milton, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ See Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: an Updated Examination of the Islamic State's Visual Propaganda* (West Point, NY: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2018): 9-12, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/07/Down-But-Not-Out.pdf>.

⁸ See, for example, Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), Ch. 9; Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), Ch. 11; Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), Ch. 4 and 5.

a short period of time.⁹ Others offer comprehensive quantitative overviews of the Islamic State's total media output or total visual media output over the last few years, in some cases including an analysis of their major themes.¹⁰ In addition, several articles and reports focus on specific types of videos, such as execution videos.¹¹ However, a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Islamic State's total video output over a longer time period is still lacking.

This research paper therefore examines the entire corpus of the Islamic State's official videos over a three-year period: from 1 July 2015 until 30 June 2018, which roughly equals the second, third and fourth year of the group's caliphate. This period is particularly interesting, as it was characterised by the decline of the group in Iraq and Syria. This included the loss of most of its territories and operatives, as well as the collapse of its governance structure in the region. This raises two questions: 1) to what extent are the Islamic State's mounting troubles reflected in the quantity and content of its video output, and 2) how has the Islamic State responded to its setbacks in its video releases?

This paper addresses these questions by presenting the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Islamic State's official videos, identifying the major changes in the number and central themes of the videos, as well as the ways in which the group has attempted to brand itself during this period of decline. Such an analysis not only provides an empirical contribution to the study of the Islamic State's media usage and the historiography of the group, but it also enables a better understanding of the relationship between jihadist media output and on-the-ground developments. Moreover, by identifying major trends in the Islamic State's video output and, particularly, the ways in which it has framed its setbacks, this paper provides insight into the group's enduring appeal, as well as into the near future of the so-called 'virtual caliphate' that allegedly remains once its territories have vanished.¹²

Before examining the Islamic State's videos themselves, the paper will briefly discuss the Islamic State's media structure during the research period. Some background on the group's various media producers is necessary to be able to identify and interpret the role of these producers in the Islamic State's video output over the three-year period in the second part of the paper.

⁹ Jamie Tarabay et al., "To Its Citizens, ISIS Shows a Softer Side," *Vocativ*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/to-its-citizens-isis-also-shows-a-softer-side>; Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015), <http://www.quilliaminternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture or It Didn't Happen: a Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 85-97.

¹⁰ Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," Quilliam Foundation (2015), <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr, and Bridget Moreng, "The Islamic State's Global Propaganda Strategy," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 1 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/the-islamic-states-global-propaganda-strategy>; Milton, "Communication Breakdown"; Milton, "Down, but Not Out," 5; Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, Later: a Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 1 (2018): 103-121. See also the overviews published by BBC Monitoring at <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk>.

¹¹ See, for example, Andrew Barr and Alexandra Herfroy-Mischler, "ISIL's Execution Videos: Audience Segmentation and Terrorist Communication in the Digital Age," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2017), DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2017.1361282](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1361282).

¹² See, for example, Mia Bloom and Chelsea Daymon, "Assessing the Future Threat: ISIS's Virtual Caliphate," *Orbis* 62, no. 3 (2018): 372-388.

The Islamic State's Media Structure

The roots of the Islamic State's media structure can be traced to al-Qaeda in Iraq and its Jordanian leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi.¹³ Al-Zarqawi, who is generally acknowledged as the Islamic State's historical and ideological "founding father",¹⁴ gained worldwide attention by releasing a number of brutal videos between 2004 and 2006, among which were the beheadings of several foreign hostages in Iraq. Although these videos were harshly criticised by al-Qaeda's leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan,¹⁵ they proved to be successful in putting al-Zarqawi and his group on the map. The gruesome nature of media releases under al-Zarqawi, as well as the remarkable productivity of the group and its method of online dissemination through 'viral jihad', paved the way for the Islamic State's media campaign almost a decade later.¹⁶

After al-Zarqawi's death in 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq merged into the newly founded Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI subsequently created its own media outlet, al-Furqan Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Furqan*), to produce and distribute its releases. This media group continued to be the principal media producer when ISI became the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in April 2013, and simply Islamic State from June 2014 onwards. Yet it was not the only media division within the organisation. Together with its territorial expansion in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State also bolstered the size of its media department.¹⁷

Whereas jihadist groups had hitherto relied on a single media group to create and disseminate their releases, the Islamic State complemented al-Furqan with several other outlets, each specializing in specific topics, and targeting specific audiences. Two prominent media units were created: al-Hayat Media Centre (*Markaz al-Hayat li-l-I'lam*), founded in May 2014, which addressed the group's non-Arabic speaking audiences, and al-I'tisam Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-I'tisam*), which primarily produced Arabic-language releases from inside Islamic State controlled territory from 2013 to 2015. In addition to these three main media groups, specialised media units were also established. Examples of these include Ajnad Foundation for Media Production (*Mu'assasat al-Ajnad li-l-Intaj al-I'lami*), which produced *anashid* and Qur'an recitations, al-Bayan Radio (*Idha'at al-Bayan*), which broadcasted news bulletins, and the publishing house al-Himma Library (*Maktabat al-Himma*), which distributed books and pamphlets. Al-Furqan, however, continued to publish the group's most important releases, in particular, video and audio statements of its leadership.

Throughout the course of 2014 and early 2015, these central media groups were additionally complemented by local media units connected to the Islamic State's 'provinces' (*wilayat*).¹⁸ Provincial media offices emerged both in Iraq and Syria as well as

¹³ On the history of the Islamic State's media department, see Milton, "Communication Breakdown"; Craig A. Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State's Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/lighting-the-path-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-media-enterprise-2003-2016>.

¹⁴ See Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World: Analysis Paper*, no. 19 (2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>; Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, 1-39.

¹⁵ See "Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi," Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, July 9, 2005, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2>.

¹⁶ In some periods, al-Qaeda in Iraq issued nine online communications a day on average. See Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al-Qa'ida* (London: Abacus, 2007), 124.

¹⁷ See Atwan, *Islamic State*, 15-31; Stern, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 101-125; Charlie Winter, "Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'".

¹⁸ According to an al-Furqan video from July 2016, the Islamic State was divided into 35 provinces: nineteen in Iraq and Syria and sixteen in other regions where groups had pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Notably, these provinces were not all (fully) under the Islamic State's control. Al-Furqan Foundation, *Sarh al-khilafa* ["The Structure of

in other regions where provinces had been established, covering the group's activities in their respective regions in audio-visual and textual releases. Over the years, these provincial media offices became increasingly important to the group's media production, to such an extent that they have become responsible for the large majority of the Islamic State's media releases.

During its rise in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State developed an extensive and complex media structure, while gradually increasing the quantity as well as the production quality of its media releases. During the period under research in this paper, the Islamic State's Central Media Department or 'Ministry' (*Diwan al-'Ilam al-Markazi*) was at the core of this media structure.¹⁹ This department controlled the group's central media producers as well as instructed, coordinated, and evaluated the activities of the provincial media offices.²⁰ The Central Media Department was further assisted by several so-called 'auxiliary agencies' (*al-wikalat al-mu'assasat al-radifa*), which were attached to the Islamic State's media department, but were presented as independent from the group for strategic reasons.

The most prominent of these auxiliary groups has been A'maq News Agency (*A'maq al-Ikhbariyya*), a 'press agency' that has primarily produced short updates from inside the Islamic State's territories in both written and audio-visual form. Internal documents confirm that A'maq was a central component of the Islamic State's media organisation; however, it has never been formally presented as part of the group. This is likely in order to provide A'maq's reporting with a sense of autonomy and, therefore, objectivity.²¹ Another media group connected to the Islamic State while not being officially presented as such was al-Furat Media Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Furat al-I'lamiyya*), which has mainly released Russian-language videos since 2015.

Finally, the Islamic State's media department has been extremely dependent on the assistance from thousands of supporters online. Several (unofficial) supporting media groups have emerged over the last few years, which distribute and translate official releases and regularly produce their own materials.²² Moreover, supporters on platforms such as Twitter and, since the summer of 2015, Telegram, have been a crucial link in the distribution of the group's media products. They have been essential for spreading and publicising the releases by copying and re-uploading them to other platforms and sharing the links on social media. Whereas this has become an increasingly difficult task due to removal of jihadist content by hosting sites such as YouTube, Archive.org and JustPaste.it, as well as the regular suspension of supporters' social media accounts, they have remained indispensable for the Islamic State's media activities.²³

the Caliphate"], July 6, 2016, 3:12-4:08", downloaded from https://ia601507.us.archive.org/4/items/StructureOfTheKhilafahEN/Structure%20of%20the%20Khilafah_AR.mp4.

¹⁹ On the Islamic State's media structure, see chapter 10 of the internal document "Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State", which is available at "The Isis Papers: a Masterplan for Consolidation Power," *The Guardian*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/islamic-state-document-masterplan-for-power>. See also Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State," *Jihadology* (2017), <https://jihadology.net/2017/09/28/the-archivist-media-fitna-in-the-islamic-state>.

²⁰ Milton, "Pulling Back the Curtain".

²¹ Rukmini Callimachi, "A News Agency which Scoops Directly from ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/world/middleeast/a-news-agency-with-scoops-directly-from-isis-and-a-veneer-of-objectivity.html?_r=2; Milton, "Pulling Back the Curtain," 3-5.

²² Prominent examples have been al-Battar Media Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Battar al-I'lamiyya*), al-Sumud Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Sumud*) and al-Wafa' Foundation (*Mu'assasat al-Wafa'*).

²³ The importance of supporters is acknowledged by the Islamic State itself in documents such as 'Media Operative: You Are a Mujahid, Too'; see Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare* (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf>. The impact of suspensions is implicitly acknowledged by the Islamic State itself in various messages and videos, in which it calls upon its supporters to remain active online. See, for example, Wilayat Halab Media Office, *Mujahid*

Methodology

This study focuses on the video output of those producers that are acknowledged as official media groups by the Islamic State itself: al-Furqan, al-Hayat and the provincial media offices.²⁴ To collect the videos released by these groups, the author has systematically monitored the Islamic State's official media accounts, as well as supporting accounts, between 1 July 2015 and 30 June 2018. On a daily basis, leading Arabic and English-language accounts on Twitter and Telegram have been checked, after which new video releases have been immediately downloaded and archived.²⁵ The video collection obtained in this way was then cross-referenced with other overviews and databases, including daily overviews and monthly and annual media production statistics of the Islamic State itself, as well as extensive databases created by both supporters of the group as well as academics, such as Aaron Y. Zelin's Jihadology.net. Through this method, the author has created a database of the Islamic State's (online released) official video productions that is as complete as possible.

After the dataset had been established and the videos had been coded on date, producer, region, title, and length, the videos were categorised. In the existing literature, categorisations of Islamic State media typically focus on the main themes of the releases (e.g. religion, jurisprudence, victimhood, and utopia). For the purpose of this paper, however, the author has instead chosen to focus on the different kinds of activities undertaken by the Islamic State, as shown in the videos. This focus enables a better examination of the transformation of the group throughout the period under research.

Based on the materials, five categories have been identified that are central to the Islamic State's videos:

1. **Warfare:** videos focusing on varying aspects of the Islamic State's military activities, such as training camps, the performance of *ribat* (guarding the frontlines), and combatting the enemies by means of suicide attacks, snipers, as well as conventional warfare. Most videos in this category show battles between the Islamic State and its enemies, typically including footage of preparations, actual fights, and killed fighters, as well as war booty (*ghanima*).
2. **Recruitment:** videos focusing on the Islamic State's explicit calls for support and mobilisation. These videos typically feature people from inside the caliphate calling upon others to support and join the group, either by migrating to its caliphate or by committing attacks on its behalf in other regions.
3. **Governance:** videos focusing on the Islamic State's state-building programme. These videos focus on activities in areas such as finances, agriculture, education,

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 anta ["You Are a Mujahid"], March 12, 2015, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97mhL9Mk4wo>. See also J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World: Analysis Paper 20 (2015), http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf; J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters," *George Washington University Program on Extremism* (February 2016): 1-20, https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

²⁴ These media units are presented official media groups by the Islamic State itself, for example in al-Furqan, *Sarh al-khilafa*, 8:33-8:43". The dataset thus excludes videos released by the 'auxiliary agencies' A'maq and al-Furat, as well as videos by the official producers that entirely consist of compilations of old materials, trailers announcing upcoming videos and the monthly statistics on military operations that were released by the al-Janub and Sina' provinces of the Islamic State. Finally, al-l'tisam is not listed here because it has not released any videos during the research period.

²⁵ Due to regular removal of videos by their hosting sites, most videos referred to in this paper cannot be accessed through the links provided in the footnotes. Researchers interested in the materials can contact the author, who owns copies of all official videos released by the Islamic State during the period under study in this paper.

infrastructure, public safety, public welfare and social affairs. Another major theme in this category is the application of law in the Islamic State, for example in videos featuring sharia courts, activities of the 'religious police' (*al-Hisba*) and the execution of sharia penalties. Finally, this category includes activities that could be labelled as religious, such as *da'wa* outreach, sermons or the celebration of religious feasts.²⁶

4. *Executions*: videos focusing on the killing of alleged spies and enemy fighters. The execution videos usually follow a standardised pattern consisting of a short introduction, confession(s) of the victim(s), and the execution itself, often including a statement by the executioner.
5. *Overseas attacks*: videos focusing on terrorist attacks outside of the territories under the Islamic State's control. Some of these videos feature visuals of the attacks and their perpetrators while others show people in the Islamic State's provinces celebrating the attacks.

The author has coded the videos himself, in order to produce results as reliable as possible. However, it must be noted that the above categories are not exhaustive and that the entire corpus of videos does not fall neatly into these five categories.²⁷ The categories have a tentative nature, aimed at facilitating an exploratory study of the major trends in the Islamic State's video releases over the last few years.

After composing and categorising the dataset, the sources were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to examine the changes in video output over time in the context of the Islamic State's transformation during the period under study. This has been accomplished in three steps. First, the quantity of the video output by the Islamic State's media producers was explored by means of the database containing all releases between July 2015 and June 2018. Both the numbers and total hours of videos released per month by the Islamic State, as well as by its particular media producers and from particular regions were examined to provide insight into the major trends in the video output over the course of the three-year research period. Second, a three-level categorisation of all the videos (central to which are the five aforementioned categories) was used to identify and analyse the main themes of the videos. The relative importance of the categories and subcategories was assessed over time, which offered insight into the general messages of the Islamic State and the changes therein. Third, the author conducted an exploratory study of the Islamic State's most prominent responses to its setbacks. To this purpose, noteworthy changes in the relative importance of the subcategories of the videos have been identified (e.g. an increasing number of sniper videos within the category of warfare videos). In addition, a selection of high profile videos released, particularly those from 2017 and 2018, was studied in order to identify some of the major ways in which the Islamic State has framed its setbacks. The following sections present the results of these three steps in successive order.

²⁶ These videos have not been categorized separately in as 'religious activities', because the decision as to what counts as religious and what not is highly subjective. To provide a concrete example, a video focusing on *zakat* (alms-giving) could be included in a category of religious activities, as paying *zakat* is seen as a central Islamic obligation. However, the videos on *zakat* often particularly focus on the distribution of alms to the poor and needy in the territories under IS control. Hence, they could just as convincingly be seen as focusing on social welfare, and therefore as part of the category of 'governance'. This example illustrates that the theme of religion is interspersed with all the above categories and cannot be consistently separated.

²⁷ For example, a number of videos include elements from several of the abovementioned categories in a single release. In these cases, the videos have been categorised according to the main theme, which has been determined by examining both the length featuring the respective elements as well as their prominence in the narrative. The relatively small number of videos that provide wide-ranging overviews of different kinds of activities in a particular region have been categorised as recruitment videos.

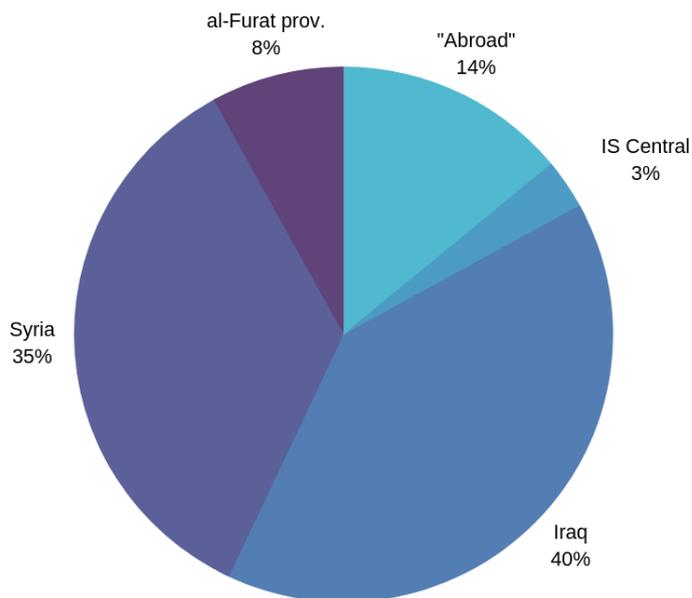
The Islamic State’s Video Output, 2015 – 2018

Total video output

When examining the video output of the Islamic State’s official media producers, the dataset shows that these units released 772 videos between 1 July 2015 and 30 June 2018. This equals 0.66 videos a day on average. The average length of these videos comprises just over 12 minutes, which results in approximately 156 hours of video materials produced by the group in the three-year period. These numbers are unprecedented for jihadist groups. Quantitative data on the media output of other jihadist groups are limited, but the fact that al-Qaeda’s media producer al-Sahab released only 97 videos in one year during its heyday in 2007 illustrates the Islamic State’s enormous efforts to reach its audience.²⁸

Breaking down the total amount of videos into their particular producers shows that the Islamic State’s central media groups only produced 2.8% of the group’s total video output over the entire research period: one video by al-Furqan and 21 videos by al-Hayat (*Figure 1*). The remaining 97.2% of the videos were produced by the group’s provincial media outlets, 35 of which released at least one video during the research period (*Table 1*, see Annex). Of these media offices, the ones located in Iraq and Syria were by far the most productive. In Iraq, eleven provinces released 309 videos together, which constitutes 40.0% of the Islamic State’s total video production between July 2015 and June 2018. Seven provinces in Syria released 269 videos in total, which is 34.8% of the group’s video output. Combined with the 62 videos by wilayat al-Furat, which is located in both Iraq and Syria and has therefore not been included in the above numbers, the Islamic State’s media offices in Iraq and Syria were responsible for 82.8% of the group’s total video output.

Figure 1: IS video output per region (July 2015 – June 2018)



²⁸ Craig Whitlock, "Al-Qaeda's Growing Online Offensive," *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/23/AR2008062302135.html>.

The provinces outside Iraq and Syria produced only a minor part of the Islamic State's videos. The media offices in Libya, Afghanistan/Pakistan, Egypt, Yemen, and Nigeria were the most active of those not located in Syria and Iraq, whereas the provinces in countries such as Algeria and Saudi Arabia only released a single video. In total, the Islamic State's provinces outside Iraq and Syria released 107 videos in the period under study. In addition, the group produced one official video in the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Somalia each, where no official provinces were established during the research period. Taken together, the 110 videos from outside Iraq and Syria constitute 14.2% of the Islamic State's total video output during the period under research.

Above all, these findings suggest that the Islamic State's media production strongly relied on its provincial media offices in Iraq and Syria during the second, third and fourth year of the group's caliphate. The central media producers were much less active than in previous years, including the first year after its declaration of the caliphate.²⁹ This points to a (limited) decentralisation of the group's media efforts: after its expansion in Iraq and Syria, the central media department increasingly delegated aspects of the media production and dissemination to local offices. Nevertheless, internal documents obtained by the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point indicate that the Islamic State's central media department largely continued to instruct, coordinate, and evaluate the activities of the local media offices.³⁰ Furthermore, it is significant that the quantity of videos does not equate their impact or appeal. For example, al-Furqan and al-Hayat videos tended to be relatively more influential than provincial videos.

The findings also suggest a strong correlation between the Islamic State's territorial presence and its video output. The most productive provinces were the group's strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa, closely followed by its heartlands in the Iraqi-Syrian border area: wilayat al-Khayr and wilayat al-Furat. In contrast, provinces where the Islamic State controlled little territory, such as those around the city of Baghdad, only released a handful of videos. The limited video output from outside Iraq and Syria illustrates the Islamic State's relatively weak position here.

Major trends in the total video output

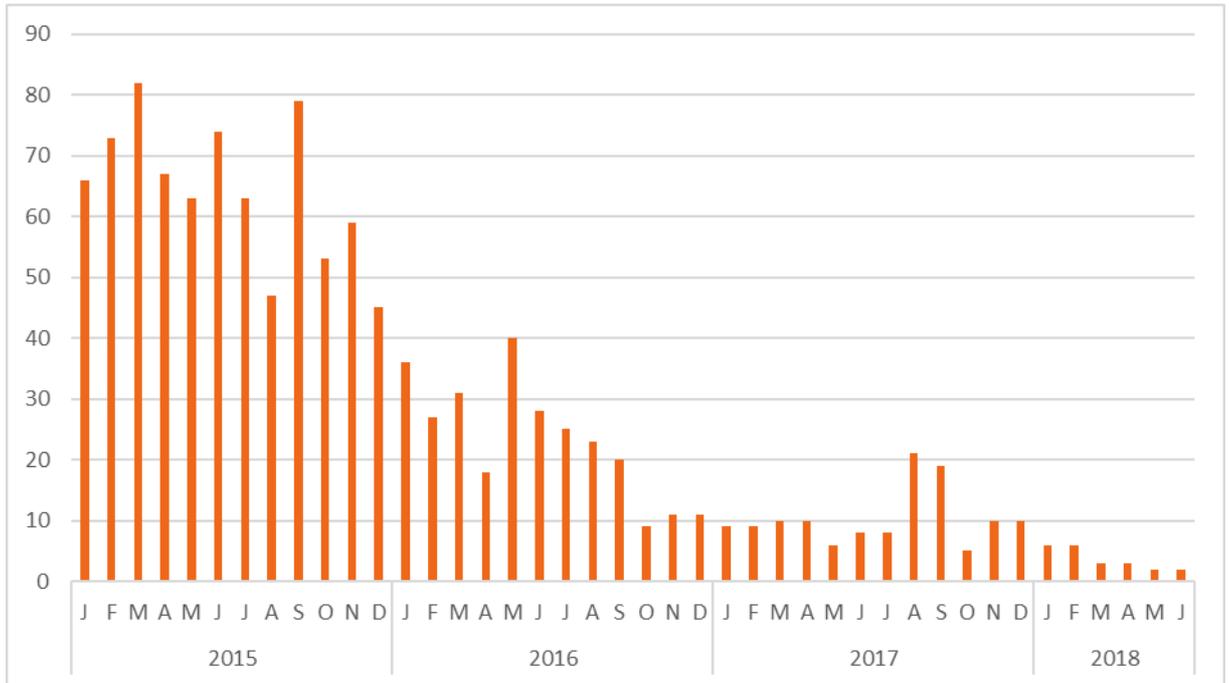
A diachronic examination of the Islamic State's video output shows that significant changes took place over the course of the research period. Most importantly, the dataset illustrates how the productivity of the group's official media producers decreased significantly between 2015 and 2018. *Figure 2* shows a clear downward trend in the group's monthly video output, interrupted by some peaks in 2015 and early 2016, which indicate the several media campaigns launched by the Islamic State in this period.³¹ A further peak, in August-September 2017 was related to the Battle for Raqqa, which occurred during these months. Nevertheless, the downward trend is evident in the number of official video releases declining from 526 to 151 to 95 videos in the first, second, and third year of the research period respectively. The average number of videos released per month decreased from more than 70 in the first half of 2015 to less than four in the first half of 2018.

²⁹ Al-Furqan, al-Hayat and al-I'tisam together produced twenty videos in the first half of 2015 alone.

³⁰ Milton, "Pulling Back the Curtain."

³¹ For example, in September 2015, the Islamic State launched media campaigns on the introduction of the golden dinar, refugees and 'Eid al-Adha celebrations (33 videos in total), in November 2015 on Yemen and the Paris attacks (fifteen videos in total), and in May 2016 on the Sinai Peninsula (fourteen videos).

Figure 2: Total official video output (numbers of videos released per month; Jan. 2015-June 2018)³²



It should be noted, however, that the average length of videos actually increased over the course of the research period. Between July 2015 and June 2016, videos averaged 10:16 minutes. In the following year, the average increased to 18:20 minutes. In the third year of the research period, it declined somewhat to an average of 12:11 minutes. Accordingly, particularly between July 2016 and June 2017, the Islamic State released more comprehensive videos. Nevertheless, when looking at the total hours of video released by the group, a significant downfall is observable: from approximately 90 hours between July 2015 and June 2016, to 46 hours in the following year, to only 19 hours in the final year of the research period, respectively. Moreover, the videos increasingly included reused footage and computer-generated imagery. These findings thus confirm the notion that the Islamic State’s official video output strongly declined.

The available data suggests that this decline in the Islamic State’s official video output was not compensated for by any increase in other kinds of media productions. For example, the production of online magazines and newsletters also strongly declined during the research period: from more than 800 magazine and newsletter pages in total in the first half of 2016 to approximately 300 in the first half of 2018.³³ The video production of A’maq decreased significantly since October 2016³⁴ and several reports have shown that a comparable decline is observable in the total visual media output of the group.³⁵ The data regarding the Islamic State’s most time and resource-consuming media products (i.e. official videos) thus support findings of a general decline in the

³² Whereas the first half of 2015 falls outside the scope of this research, this period has been included in this graph to further illustrate the trend in the Islamic State’s video output.
³³ In the first half of 2016, the Islamic State produced four magazines in different languages: *Dabiq* (English), *Dar al-Islam* (French), *Konstantiniyye* (Turkish) and *Istok* (Russian). These four magazines were replaced by the multi-language magazine *Rumiyah* in September 2016, which ceased publication after the fall of Raqqa in October 2017. Only the Islamic State’s weekly newsletter *al-Naba’* was published throughout the research period, although the number of pages has decreased from sixteen to twelve pages per issue since November 2017.
³⁴ Milton, “Down, but Not Out,” 5.
³⁵ Milton, “Communication Breakdown”; Milton, “Down, but Not Out.” See also the overviews published by BBC Monitoring at <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk>.

Islamic State's media activities over the last few years, contradicting other reports and articles which questioned such a decline.³⁶

By examining particular producers, it is clear that the decline in video production was caused by the decreased productivity of the provincial media offices, both inside and outside of Iraq and Syria. The productivity of each individual provincial media office strongly declined over the course of the three-year period. Fourteen out of the 35 provinces did not issue a single video in the third year. When comparing the relative video output of the group's media offices per region, two additional trends are visible (*Table 2*).

Table 2: IS video output per region (percentage of total video output per year, 2015-2018)

Region	July 2015 - June 2016	July 2016 - June 2017	July 2017 - June 2018
IS Central	2%	2%	9%
Iraq	43%	42%	22%
Syria	34%	33%	43%
Al-Furat prov.	6%	11%	13%
"Abroad"	15%	12%	13%

The first of these trends is that, although the differences between the first two years of the research period are minimal, the third year shows a relative increase in the video production from Syria as compared to other regions. Between July 2017 and June 2018, the Islamic State's Syrian provinces released almost twice as many videos (41) as the Iraqi ones (21). This is especially remarkable given the traditional dominance of Iraq in the group's media production. These changes can be explained by, first, the Battle of Raqqa, which resulted in an increasing number of videos from Syria in the summer of 2017 and, second, the fact that the Islamic State had nearly lost all its territories in Iraq in July 2017, while still controlling some areas in Syria for several months. These territorial changes also explain the relative increase of videos produced by wilayat al-Furat, as this province was one of the group's last strongholds in the Iraqi-Syrian border region. Hence, the relative increase in video output from Syria and wilayat al-Furat is likely not a structural trend.

The second trend, which is evident when comparing relative video output of the media offices per region, is that in the third year of the research period video output by the Islamic State's central media producers increased from 2% to 9%. This increase was mainly due to al-Hayat, which increased its production from two videos between July 2016 and June 2017 to nine videos in the following year. This points to a structural trend: an increasing (re)centralisation of the Islamic State's media production instigated by the gradual collapse of its provincial governance structure. This trend was reconfirmed in the months following the researched period, when the Islamic State restructured its provincial media offices in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, merging the various provinces in these regions into just four: wilayat al-Iraq, wilayat al-Sham, wilayat Libya and wilayat al-Yaman.

³⁶ See, for example, Martyn Frampton, Ali Fisher, and Nico Prucha, *The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online* (London: Policy Exchange, 2017), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-New-Netwar-2.pdf>; "ISIS: Sunset on the 'Decline Narrative,'" *Online Jihad: Monitoring Jihadist Online Communities*, June 1, 2018, <https://onlinejihad.net/2018/06/01/isis-sunset-on-the-decline-narrative>.

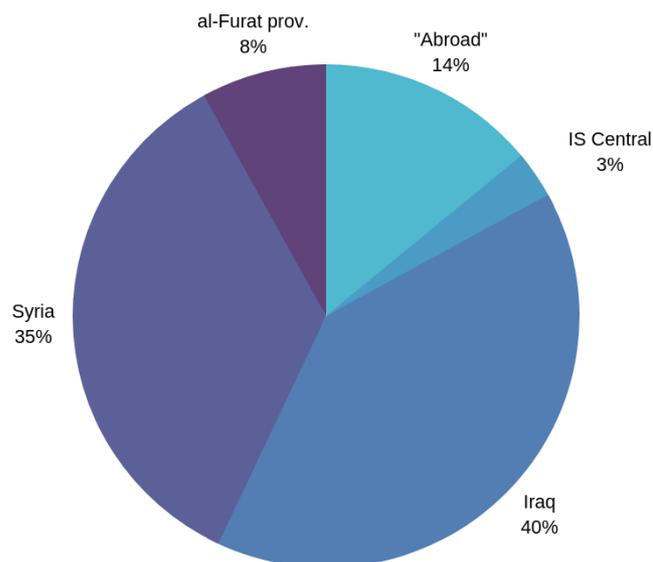
The example of wilayat Ninawa further illustrates the strong correlation between the loss of territories in Iraq and Syria and the decline in video production. In other words, the findings suggest that the Islamic State's video production was largely dependent on territorial control. With regard to the near future, this suggests that, although the group will continue to release media productions as it had done before its territorial conquests, it is highly unlikely that the output will ever again reach the level of early 2015.

Main themes of the Islamic State's videos

General overview and major trends

The relationship between the Islamic State's video output and developments on the ground is also evident in the contents of the group's videos. Thematically, the largest group of videos (42.5%) concentrates on the Islamic State's military activities (*Figure 4*). The second and third largest clusters of videos are those focusing on the group's calls for support (23.4%) and its state building activities (19.3%), respectively. The Islamic State's most attention-grabbing releases, those focusing on executions and on terrorist attacks outside the territories under its control, only constitute a minor part of the group's total output: 14.7% in total. Thus, although the Islamic State has become infamous for its graphic display of brutal violence, these findings show that 43% of its videos (i.e. categories 2 and 3 combined) do not focus on violence at all. This illustrates how, between 2015 and 2018, a combination of violence and statehood became central to the Islamic State's brand. This will be further examined below.

Figure 4: IS videos per category (percentage of total video output, 2015-2018)



Some noteworthy differences exist between the various regions from which the Islamic State released videos. Foremost, the videos produced in Iraq generally focus more on military activities (52%) than those from Syria (35%) and other regions (31%). These numbers underline earlier findings that the majority of the group's military activities took

place in Iraq.³⁹ Additionally, the videos from outside Iraq and Syria include relatively few videos focusing on the Islamic State's state-building project (15%), the majority of which is from the provinces of Tarabulus (Libya) and Gharb Ifriqiyya (Nigeria). Combined with the relatively large number of videos from outside Iraq and Syria showing smaller-scale military operations, executions (13%), and attacks (8%), these findings illustrate that the Islamic State had difficulties in presenting itself as a genuine state, rather than an insurgency, outside of Iraq and Syria.

Finally, significant changes are noticeable when looking at the prominence of the different categories over time (*Table 3*). Most striking is the significant increase in the relative number of warfare videos over the last few years: from 36.5% of the total video output between July 2015 and June 2016 to 64.2% between July 2017 and June 2018. This increase was a result of videos produced in Iraq and Syria between July 2017 and June 2018, of which, more than 70% focused on warfare activities. The percentage of videos focusing on governance activities, in contrast, strongly declined: from 114 videos in the first year to only 11 videos in the third year, a decrease from 21.7% to 11.6% of the total video output in these years. These numbers show that, over the course of the research period, the Islamic State was increasingly less able to present itself as a well-functioning state.

Table 3: IS videos per category (percentage of total video output per year, 2015-2018)

Category	July 2015 - June 2016	July 2016 - June 2017	July 2017 - June 2018
1. Warfare	36%	50%	64%
2. Recruitment	25%	19%	19%
3. Governance	22%	16%	12%
4. Executions	11%	8%	3%
5. Attacks	6%	7%	2%

These general observations about the content of the Islamic State's videos and the major trends therein can be further specified by taking a closer look at the videos in specific categories and how they have changed over time.

Overview and trends per category

1. Warfare

The videos in the category of warfare, which comprise 42.5% of all the videos released during the research period, emphasise the Islamic State's ruthless, efficient, and successful war machine. They suggest that, despite its limited military means compared to its many enemies, the Islamic State is able to strike its opponents by being highly motivated, courageous and, above all, supported by God. Throughout the research period, these videos were aimed at empowering the group's fighters and supporters. However, serious battlefield setbacks and extensive losses of territory made it increasingly difficult for the Islamic State to portray itself as a successful war machine. Since the Islamic State had hardly any major battlefield successes to celebrate during the period researched, the most prominent warfare videos featured the group's defensive battles in cities such as Fallujah, Deir ez-Zor, Mosul, and Raqqa. In addition, warfare

³⁹ See, for example, Zelin, "Picture or It Didn't Happen".

videos increasingly showed small-scale attacks on, for example, army posts and checkpoints, as well as hit-and-run attacks in both urban and rural areas. Unconventional forms of warfare, such as suicide operations, sniper attacks, and attacks by unmanned drones featured more prominently over the last years. The percentage of videos focusing exclusively on snipers, for example, increased from 0.02% of the total video output in the first year to 5.3% in the third year of the research period. Empowerment remained the most significant aim of the videos; however, these trends do reflect the Islamic State's transformation into a group that relies predominantly on insurgency and guerrilla tactics. The Islamic State's framing of these setbacks will be further discussed in the final section of this paper.

2. Recruitment

The second largest category, comprising 23.4% of the total video output between July 2015 and June 2018, explicitly aims at mobilising the group's supporters. Initially, the theme of migration (*hijra*) to the 'abode of Islam' (*dar al-islam*), that is, the caliphate, was central to the videos. In particular, through a number of video campaigns between September 2015 and May 2016, the Islamic State targeted specific audiences in several regions in their recruitment attempts (Table 4). These campaigns, comprising 80 videos in total, consisted of synchronised releases of clusters of videos on a specific theme and within a short time span.⁴⁰ The campaigns each addressed a specific target audience, such as Muslims in Palestine, Somalia, or Yemen, who are called upon to fulfil their (alleged) religious obligation to "migrate" to the caliphate. Usually, the protagonists of the videos are "migrants" (*muhajirun*) from the region they address, urging their (former) compatriots to make *hijrah* and join them in the Islamic State. The videos contrast life in the targeted regions to life inside the group's territories, presenting the Islamic State as superior to the regimes of the Muslim world, as well as to its competitors, such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabab. The Islamic State presented itself as the ideal place for (Sunni) Muslims to live, as it is within this caliphate that the glorious times of the first centuries of Islam are restored.

Table 4: Video campaigns launched by the Islamic State⁴¹

Period	Main Theme	Videos
Sept. 2015	Refugees	13
Oct. 2015	Somalia	8
Oct. – Nov. 2015	Palestine	15
Nov. 2015	Yemen ⁴²	3
Dec. 2015	Saudi Arabia	15
Jan. 2016	The Maghreb	12
May. 2016	The Sinai	14

However, once the Islamic State's territories had shrunk, and joining the group in Iraq and Syria had become increasingly difficult, the theme of migration became less prominent. The number of recruitment videos declined, as did the Islamic State's efforts to urge people to physically join the group. However, the group continued to publish

⁴⁰ Alberto M. Fernandez, "Opportunity or Necessity? The Islamic State's Cluster Video Strategy," The Middle East Media Research Institute, May 13, 2016, http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/9191.htm#_ednref3.

⁴¹ This table only lists video campaigns in the category of recruitment, thus excluding the video series on, among other things, the introduction of the gold dinar and the Paris and Brussels attacks.

⁴² The campaign on Yemen consists of only three videos, probably because it was interrupted by the Paris attacks in Nov. 2015, to which the Islamic State's media departments immediately shifted their attention.

videos attempting to rally supporters for its cause, including by calling for attacks abroad. Discrediting enemies, varying from the West and Shia Muslims to the ‘apostate’ Muslim regimes and Syrian rebels, remained a prominent theme in this respect. Along these lines, the Islamic State attempted to keep presenting itself as the sole defender of (Sunni) Muslims.

3. Governance

Videos focusing on the Islamic State’s state-building efforts comprise 19.3% of the total video output. These videos attempted to convey the image that the Islamic State not merely constitutes a rebel movement or organisation, but a genuine state. Hence, it continually emphasised its allegedly sophisticated governance structures, such as the fourteen departments or ‘ministries’ (*dawawin*), whose activities were all featured in various videos.⁴³ The videos particularly emphasised the Islamic nature of the state. Accordingly, videos on education underlined the importance of sharia courses, videos on social welfare emphasised the religious obligation of *zakat*⁴⁴, and videos on jurisprudence underlined the application of God’s law.

By presenting itself as a well-functioning state based on a strict reading of scripture, the Islamic State attempts to distinguish itself from its predecessors and competitors. For example, it presents itself as an alternative to the Iraqi government and its deficient infrastructure and ill-functioning social services since the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, as well as to the House of Sa’ud and the Taliban and their allegedly half-hearted application of God’s law.⁴⁵ The videos are intended to convey a stark contrast with such competitors, and to show the Islamic State as having a government centred on dignity and justice, and one where (Sunni) Muslims can live their lives according to God’s guidelines.

Nevertheless, the Islamic State has found it increasingly difficult to present itself as a well-functioning state. The total number of governance videos from Iraq and Syria declined from 101 in the first year of the research period to only seven in the third year. The total absence of videos on areas such as agriculture, education, infrastructure, public safety, and jurisprudence during the final year of the research period reflects the breakdown of the Islamic State’s governing structure.

4. Executions

The Islamic State’s notorious execution videos comprised 9.3% of the group’s total video output between July 2015 and June 2018. In these 72 execution videos, 343 people, all male, are executed.⁴⁶ Most of them were accused of being enemy spies, working for the U.S.-led coalition, Russia, the Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, and Afghan armies, Kurdish forces, and others. The other victims allegedly consist of captured enemy fighters, mostly from the Syrian Arab Army. Of all these people, 172 are killed by gunfire, 118 by beheading, 26 by explosive devices, fifteen by hanging, six by being burned alive, four by mortar fire,

⁴³ See al-Furqan, *Sarh al-khilafa*, 4:08-11:22". See also Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in the Islamic State Administration: the Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/447/html>.

⁴⁴ *Zakat* (lit. "that which purifies") is a form of alms-giving or a religious tax that is considered an obligation according to the *shari'a*.

⁴⁵ On Saudi Arabia, see, for example, Wilayat al-Khayr Media Office, *Hamil al-misk wa-nafikh al-kir* ["The Carriers of Musk and the Blowers of Bellows"], June 18, 2016, downloaded from https://ia801509.us.archive.org/19/items/67WEhes/Hesba_1080.mp4. On the Taliban, see, for example, Wilayat Salah al-Din Media Office, *Al-jisd al-wahid 3* ["One body 3"], August 21, 2015, downloaded from <https://archive.org/details/salahuddn>.

⁴⁶ One video is excluded from these numbers: Wilayat Salah al-Din, *Wa-aqtuluhum haythu thaqiftumuhum*, since this video focuses on the Speicher massacre and shows the execution of countless of Iraqi prisoners at Camp Speicher near Tikrit in June 2014.

one by being crushed with a tank, and one by being dragged to death behind a pickup truck.⁴⁷

The overarching theme of these videos is retaliation. In almost all cases, the executions are presented as reprisals for the actions of the victim and the army or group he represents, often by referring to the legal concept of *qisas* (retaliation in kind). The theme of retaliation is also emphasised visually. For example, executions of coalition spies typically include graphic footage allegedly showing the bodies of civilians killed by coalition bombings. In addition, the executions themselves are often symbolic. For instance, by executing alleged coalition spies at sites ruined by airstrikes. In other cases, symbolic means are used to kill the victims, such as a tank driver of the Syrian Arab Army who is killed when crushed with a tank.⁴⁸ Consequently, these videos are not merely aimed at terrorising the enemy by signalling that the Islamic State is a brutal, fearsome organisation. They also intend to show that the group is the defender of (Sunni) Muslims and punishes the crimes of its enemies against the Muslim community (*umma*) in kind.

Although the relative numbers of execution videos declined somewhat over the three-year period, the standardised structure and themes of the videos has remained stable. The major difference over the course of time is that the numbers of executions of captured enemy fighters strongly declined after 2015, whereas the killing of alleged spies increased. This further illustrates the Islamic State's problems on the battlefield, as well as an increasing occupation with alleged traitors within its own ranks.

5. Overseas attacks

The smallest category, 5.4% of the total video output, focuses on attacks outside the Islamic State. These videos feature attacks in the West (e.g. in Paris, Brussels, Orlando, Nice, and Barcelona) and other regions (e.g. in Dhaka, Grozny, and Tehran), as well as some operations in regions where the Islamic State is active, such as the downing of a Russian plane above the Sinai in October 2015. Just like the execution videos discussed above, these attacks are presented as revenge for the targeted countries' policies regarding Muslims in general and the Islamic State in particular. Although the Islamic State's level of involvement in each of these attacks is debatable, the violence is presented as retaliation against Western anti-Muslim policies and the repression favoured by 'infidel' or 'apostate' Middle Eastern regimes. The videos present the attacks as legitimate self-defence and claim that, whereas the Arab states have betrayed their people, the Islamic State stands up for the *umma* against those who have humiliated it for decades. The videos in this category have not changed significantly over the course of the three-year period, although their relative number has declined significantly. This is probably due to both a decreasing number of attacks abroad as well as reduced media production capacity to celebrate these attacks.

In sum, the five categories together provide a good overview of the Islamic State's messaging and the changes therein. In 2015, the Islamic State typically propagandised its brand as a powerful and successful caliphate that is based upon the 'Prophetic methodology' and delivers dignity and justice to the (Sunni) Muslims while retaliating against their enemies. Over the course of the research period, however, the Islamic State's mounting problems on the ground made it increasingly difficult to present itself

⁴⁷ For more data on the Islamic State's executions, see Judith Tinnes, "Counting Lives Lost: Monitoring Camera-Recorded Extrajudicial Executions by the 'Islamic State'", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 1 (2016): 78-82, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/483>.

⁴⁸ See Wilayat Hims Media Office, *Wa-in 'aqabtum fa-'aqibu bi-mithli ma 'uqibtum bi-hi* ["And if You Punish, Punish with an Equivalent of That with which You Were Harmed"], October 24, 2015, downloaded from https://archive.org/details/draiuoui_moakt_Klak.

as a well-governed state and a successful war machine. The group continued its attempt to empower supporters by showing (smaller-scale) battlefield successes, executions, and attacks abroad, however, the content of the group's video releases reflect its transformation from a territory-based (proto-)state to an insurgent group relying on guerrilla warfare and insurgency operations.

Branding a caliphate in decline

The interrelatedness between the Islamic State's transformation and the changes in its video output has been examined; however, the question remains, how has the Islamic State dealt with its mounting troubles? Has the organisation adapted its message in order to explain and provide meaning to its setbacks?

On the one hand, the Islamic State's videos initially largely overlooked the battlefield setbacks, including the loss of cities such as Tikrit, Ramadi, and Palmyra.⁴⁹ Furthermore, throughout the research period, the Islamic State continued to emphasise its enduring power. However, instead of claiming large-scale battlefield victories, it increasingly did so by celebrating different kinds of successes, such as smaller-scale raids throughout Iraq and Syria, suicide bombings, attacks by unmanned drones, sniper operations, and attacks outside its territories. Along these lines, the Islamic State attempted to uphold its self-proclaimed status as the defender of Muslims as a way of empowering its sympathisers worldwide.

On the other hand, especially since the Spring of 2016, the Islamic State increasingly acknowledged its mounting problems, at least implicitly. Changes in the key themes of the videos indicate that it has framed its setbacks in three principle ways, characterized by a focus on the past, on the present, and on the future, respectively.

Caliphate nostalgia

The Islamic State's videos increasingly look back at the group's recent history, celebrating the past successes of its caliphate project, while providing implicit explanations for its decline. For instance, many recent battlefield videos start with an historical overview of the Islamic State's achievements in a particular region over recent years, portraying successes in the fields of governance and warfare. In addition, the Islamic State has released several videos celebrating military victories from the past, such as the conquests of Mosul and Palmyra.⁵⁰ By means of historical footage the Islamic State capitalises on successes from the past, thus fostering a sense of what has been labelled "caliphate nostalgia".⁵¹ By reminding the audience of the (alleged) prosperous times under the Islamic State's rule, it aims at nurturing the wish for returning glory.

⁴⁹ See also Charlie Winter, "How the Islamic State is Spinning the Mosul Battle," *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/isis-mosul-propaganda-iraq-kurds-peshmerga/504854>.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office, 'Am 'ala al-fath ["A Year upon the Conquest"], June 11, 2015, downloaded from <http://www.mediafire.com/watch/b4evv2wl748n65q>; Wilayat Halab Media Office, 'Aman 'ala al-khilafa ["Two Years since the Caliphate"], June 27, 2016, downloaded from <https://ia601508.us.archive.org/0/items/3amain/3amain.mp4>; Al-Hayat Media Centre, *Lahib al-harb 2: ila qiyam al-sa'a* ["Flames of War 2: until the Final Hour"], November 29, 2017, downloaded from https://ia601501.us.archive.org/26/items/werwerall_tmpmail_AR_AR.mp4.

⁵¹ Andrew Anthony, "The Art of Making a Jihadist" (interview with Thomas Hegghammer), *The Guardian*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/23/the-culture-that-makes-a-jihadi-thomas-hegghammer-interview-poetry-militancy>; Colin P. Clarke and Haroro J. Ingram, "Defeating the ISIS Nostalgia Narrative," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/defeating-the-isis-nostalgia-narrative>.

In addition, these reminders aim at encouraging feelings of revenge against the enemies that hindered the Islamic State's glorious project. The videos repeatedly point at the large numbers of enemies that the group faces, including the West, Shia Muslims, and 'apostate' Sunni rulers. The image evoked in these releases is that of a worldwide war that is being waged not just against the Islamic State, but against Islam in general.⁵² These enemies, the narrative runs, oppose a state in which Muslims can live in dignity and justice, which is why they wage war against it – with devastating results. This is emphasised by the dozens of videos (allegedly) show the horrifying results of bombings on schools, hospitals, and infrastructure. According to the videos, these bombings have not only been the main obstacle of building a well-functioning state, but they have also killed thousands of innocent Muslims along the way.⁵³ The theme of victimhood has thus become more prominent.⁵⁴ Along these lines, the videos offer implicit explanations for the Islamic state's setbacks, meanwhile inciting mobilisation against the enemies that deny (Sunni) Muslims their own state and contribute to their ongoing humiliation.

Tribulation, purification and sacrifice

In addition to reconstructing the group's recent history, the Islamic State's videos attempt to ascribe meaning to the troubles the group currently faces. A recurring theme in this respect is that the present hardships are shown as part of God's project.⁵⁵ The current situation is framed as a trial from God that is meant to purify the ranks of the Islamic State, thus separating the dedicated fighters from the 'hypocrites' who joined for personal gain and success.⁵⁶ As the video *Flames of War 2* expresses: "[God is] purifying the camp of the believers with a severe shake and removing the masks of the pretenders, the blamers and the abandoners", adding that the truly dedicated mujahidin are "persevering patiently in their endeavour to establish God's order to the earth".⁵⁷

By presenting the group's current situation as a trial from God, the videos underline the perseverance of Islamic State fighters, evoking an image of the faithful few defending truth against evil. The Islamic State frequently underscores this perspective by drawing from Islamic traditions, and particularly from traditions about the battles fought by the

⁵² See, for example, al-Hayat Media Centre, *No Respite*, November 24, 2015, downloaded from [https://ia801507.us.archive.org/35/items/NoRespiteEN/No%20Respite%20\(EN\).mp4](https://ia801507.us.archive.org/35/items/NoRespiteEN/No%20Respite%20(EN).mp4); Al-Hayat Media Centre, *The Religion of Kufr is One*, May 30, 2016, downloaded from <https://archive.org/download/TheReligionOfKufriOneAR/Wilayat-al-Raqqqa-Media-Office-Wa-sadaqa-Allahu-wa-rusuluhu-And-God-and-His-Messenger-Spoke-the-Truth/>, April 21, 2017, downloaded from <https://youtu.be/jqwEZxc5ZzQ>.

⁵³ See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office, *Al-qasf al-safawi al-salibi 'ala al-diyar al-muslimin* ["The Safavid-Crusader Bombing upon the Homes of Muslims"], November 25, 2015, downloaded from https://archive.org/details/qasf_nin; Wilayat Ninawa Media Office, *Al-thabat al-muslimin raghma qasf al-salibiyyin* ["The Perseverance of the Muslims despite the Crusader Bombings"], January 31, 2016, downloaded from <https://ia801509.us.archive.org/22/items/werfewf-Qasf/qasf.mp4>; Wilayat al-Raqqqa Media Office, *Qul mutu bi-ghayzikum* ["Say, 'Die in Your Rage'"], May 28, 2016, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g-G2Swumco>; Wilayat al-Raqqqa Media Office, *Umma walud 2* ["The fertile umma 2"], July 3, 2017, downloaded from <https://ia801503.us.archive.org/1/items/umma22/llllllllllwalllod.mp4>; Wilayat al-Raqqqa Media Office, *Umma walud 4* ["The fertile umma 4"], August 23, 2017, downloaded from <https://ia801507.us.archive.org/18/items/umah4/umah4.mp4>; Wilayat al-Raqqqa Media Office, *Innahum mughraquna* ["Indeed They Are to Be Drowned"], September 5, 2017, downloaded from <https://ia601504.us.archive.org/33/items/mgrakon/mgrakon.mp4>.

⁵⁴ On victimhood, see Winter, "Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'," 22-24.

⁵⁵ See also Winter, "How the Islamic State is Spinning the Mosul Battle"; Haroro J. Ingram, "Rumiyah, Issue 2 (English): Rallying the 'True Believers' as Hardship Purifies the Ranks," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 10, 2016, <https://icct.nl/publication/rumiyah-issue-2-english-rallying-the-true-believers-as-hardship-purifies-the-ranks>; Cole Bunzel, "Allah Wants ISIS to Retreat," *Foreign Policy*, October 25, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/25/allah-wants-isis-to-retreat-iraq-mosulallah-wantsAllah-Wants-ISIS-to-Retreat>.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Wilayat al-Jazira Media Office, *Wa-liyubli al-mu'minin minhu bila'an hasaban* ["That He Might Test the Believers with a Good Test:"], August 28, 2016, downloaded from <https://ia801500.us.archive.org/7/items/gazera>; Wilayat al-Raqqqa Media Office, *Tazkiyat al-nufus* ["Purification of the Souls"], June 19, 2016, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbOnXxoZPqY&feature=youtu.be>; Al-Hayat Media Centre, *Inside the Khilafah 5*, December 17, 2017, downloaded from http://uploadfilesforfree.eu/files/v/AlHayat_Inside_05.mp4.

⁵⁷ Al-Hayat, *Lahib al-harb 2*, 6:31-7:32".

prophet Muhammad. The Battle of the Trench, also known as the Battle of the Confederates, has often been used in this way. This battle in 627 CE consisted of a 27-day-long siege of the city of Medina by a coalition of Arab and Jewish tribes: the confederates (*al-Ahzab*). Although the enemy fielded an overwhelming majority of 10,000 fighters against only 3,000 defenders, Muhammad and his companions withstood the siege by digging a trench around the city. The coalition fell apart and the siege failed, after which the Muslims were eventually able to defeat their enemies and conquer the city of Mecca approximately three years later.

This event is repeatedly re-enacted in the Islamic State's videos by means of computer-generated imagery and modern film footage in order to emphasise that perseverance in faith ultimately leads to victory. Moreover, the videos directly relate the situation of the Muslims in Medina to the situation of the Islamic State being besieged by a coalition of enemies, thus indicating that, by persevering through hardships and trials, the Islamic State will be victorious in the end, just as Muhammad and his companions were about fourteen centuries ago.⁵⁸

Along these lines, the Islamic State presents its fighters as the pure and dedicated 'faithful few' who keep defending the caliphate against its many enemies. This is vividly illustrated by several videos from 2017 and 2018 focusing on injured and handicapped fighters. Despite their wounds and handicaps, these men are shown in battle, embodying dedication and perseverance in the battle against unbelief.⁵⁹ Other videos praise men taking oaths to defend the caliphate until their death,⁶⁰ and more still display the heroism and skills of *inghimasiyyun*⁶¹, that is, participating in operations so dangerous as to be almost suicidal.⁶²

Relatedly, the theme of martyrdom, which has always been present in the group's media releases, has become increasingly important in recent years. In addition to battlefield martyrs, the Islamic State particularly celebrated its 'martyrdom seekers' (*istishhadiyyun*), commonly known as suicide bombers. Statistics released by A'maq News Agency indicate that, throughout the research period, the Islamic State increasingly relied on suicide attacks to defend its territories.⁶³ The group's videos support this view, as is illustrated by videos such as *The Caravan of Light* from Mosul,

⁵⁸ See, for example, Wilayat Ninawa Media Office, *Rijal al-khanadiq* ["Men of the Trenches"], August 5, 2016, downloaded from https://ia801503.us.archive.org/1/items/rejal_201608; Wilayat Halab Media Office, *Bayna al-dawlatayn: mahan waminah* ["Between the Two States: Tribulations and Gifts"], January 20, 2017, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uoBmdWVsjA>; Wilayat Halab Media Office, *Baqun ila qiyam al-sa'a* ["Remaining until the Final Hour"], April 16, 2017, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekYaXKWrlQk&feature=youtu.be>; Wilayat al-Baraka Media Office, *Wa-Allah 'ayndahu husn al-ma'ab* ["But God Has with Him the Best Return"], November 8, 2017, downloaded from <https://ia601505.us.archive.org/8/items/hoenalmaab/hoenalmaab.mp4>.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Wilayat al-Raqqa Media Office, *Umma walud 5* ["The Fertile Umma 5"], August 31, 2017, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pJokT4hxkk>; Al-Hayat Media Centre, *Inside the Khilafah 6*, December 27, 2017, downloaded from https://up.uploadfilesforfree.org/files/v/ALHayat_Inside_06.mp4; Wilayat al-Furat Media Office, *Al-maklumun fi sabil Allah* ["The Wounded in the Way of God"], January 23, 2018, downloaded from <http://uz.uploadfilesforfree.eu/files/v/maklumun.mp4>; Al-Hayat Media Centre, *Inside the Khilafah 7*, February 8, 2018, downloaded from https://archive.org/details/ALHAYAT_INSIDE_07_ENG-linkn1.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Wilayat al-Anbar Media Office, *'Azm al-kumat 2* ["Determination of the Brave 2"], December 30, 2015, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hszHF1QKhF8&feature=youtu.be>; Wilayat Salah al-Din Media Office, *Al-karrarun 2* ["The 'Braves 2'"], June 23, 2016, downloaded from <https://sendvid.com/g422exhl>.

⁶¹ Traditionally, the concept of *inghimas* was used for Muhammad's companions who plunged themselves into the enemies ranks, thus fighting themselves to death.

⁶² See, for example, Wilayat al-Baraka Media Office, *Al-Inghimasiyyun: fakhr al-umma* ["The *Inghimasiyyun*: the Pride of the *Umma*"], August 2, 2015, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YobhJ1R2vul&app=desktop>.

⁶³ Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's Prolific 'Martyrdom' Machine," *The Long War Journal*, June 8, 2016, accessed Sept. 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/the-islamic-states-prolific-martyrdom-machine.php>; Charlie Winter, "War by Suicide: A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State's Martyrdom Industry," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 3 (2017), <https://icct.nl/publication/war-by-suicide-a-statistical-analysis-of-the-islamic-states-martyrdom-industry>.



which shows 38 suicide attacks in just over 40 minutes.⁶⁴ Self-sacrifice became a defining feature of the Islamic State's fighters as their invincibility was increasingly challenged. Along these lines, the Islamic State frames its setbacks as triumphs. It thus aims at empowering its supporters, inciting them to persevere in their struggle as sanctioned warriors that will be victorious in the end, either in this life or in the next.

The imminent victory

Following on from the previous point, the Islamic State frequently frames the current situation as a mere episode in a long-term struggle, thus expressing hope for the future. The hope for a better future is expressed in two ways. Firstly, the Islamic State has frequently drawn from the group's own pre-caliphate history for this purpose. In a number of videos, the Islamic State refers back to the years of al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq and the succeeding Islamic State of Iraq.⁶⁵ These were times of hardship and tribulation too, the videos indicate, referring to the mujahidin's underground activities, imprisonment, and harsh lives in the desert during this period. Yet they persevered in their faith and struggle, the videos imply, and were eventually able to conquer large territories, re-establish the caliphate, and create provinces across the world.

According to these videos, this history will repeat itself. Over the last few years, the Islamic State has prepared its audience for the group's retreat to the desert, for example, by showing footage of men camouflaging their cars and constructing hide-outs in the desert for the next phase of the struggle.⁶⁶ Yet, once again, this is merely a phase, the videos emphasise, for the Islamic State will re-emerge from the desert even stronger than before.

The second method used by the Islamic State to express hope has drawn from Islamic tradition to offer hope for the future. As became clear from discussing the Islamic State's references to the Battle of the Trench, the group presents itself as continuing the battles of Muhammad. Along these lines, it portrays its fights as part of an eternal war between good and evil, which was once fought by Muhammad and will continue until the end of times. Accordingly, the apocalypse has always been a significant theme in the Islamic State's media releases, yet over the last two years it has become more prominent than ever before.⁶⁷ "Some signs of the final Hour have emerged", the group claims in a French-language *nashid*-video, and "when the Mahdi appears, justice will return; The believer will rejoice; The unbeliever will be destroyed."⁶⁸

Conclusion

The 772 official videos released by the Islamic State between July 2015 and June 2018 reflect a group in decline. The capacity of the Islamic State's media offices has diminished significantly, as is illustrated by the dramatic decline in video production during the period under research. Moreover, the Islamic State has encountered increasing difficulties in promoting its brand as a successful and well-organised state that delivers

⁶⁴ Wilayat Ninawa Media Office, *Mawkib al-nur* ["The Caravan of Light"], January 3, 2017, downloaded from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VZO5SMEwv8&feature=youtu.be>.

⁶⁵ An illustrative example is provided by Wilayat Halab, *Bayna al-dawlatayn*.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Wilayat al-Furat Media Office, 'Arin al-mujahidin' ["Den of the Mujahidin"], June 29, 2016, downloaded from <https://ia801505.us.archive.org/24/items/fqnvbnz/furatv.mp4>.

⁶⁷ See also William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Winter, "How the Islamic State Is Spinning the Mosul Battle."

⁶⁸ Al-Hayat Media Centre, *Mécréants de l'Humanité* ["Oh disbelievers of the world"], December 31, 2017, downloaded from https://up.uploadfilesforfree.org/files/v/M%C3%A9cr%C3%A9ants_de_l'humanit%C3%A9.mp4

dignity to (Sunni) Muslims, while reckoning with the enemies who humiliated them for decades. It could no longer celebrate major victories on the battlefield and the numbers of videos portraying its successes in the field of governance strongly declined, especially from its heartlands in Iraq and Syria. Instead, the Islamic State's videos increasingly showed smaller-scale insurgency and guerrilla operations while celebrating the heroism, perseverance, and self-sacrifice of its fighters.

These findings indicate that the Islamic State's video output strongly corresponds to the transformation of the group itself. The Islamic State's rise in Iraq and Syria had coincided with the development of an extensive media structure and the release of an unprecedented number of videos from these regions. However, the mounting troubles since the second year of the group's caliphate strongly affected its media output both in terms of quantity and content, particularly in Iraq and Syria. As a result, successes in warfare and governance were increasingly replaced by the portrayal of unconventional forms of warfare, such as "hit-and-run" actions, suicide attacks, and snipers. The videos thus reflect the Islamic State's (re)transformation from a territory-based state to an insurgent group relying on guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics.

This conclusion has several implications. In general terms, it illustrates that the media output of jihadist groups can be considered as an indication of the general condition and capabilities of these groups themselves. Relatively few scholars have undertaken the time-consuming task to closely monitor jihadist propaganda over a longer time period. However, this research shows that thoroughly examining the media output of jihadist groups not only provides insights into the message, and therefore the possible attraction of these groups for certain audiences, but also into their strengths, weaknesses, and transformations over time.

Additionally, with regard to the Islamic State, this paper suggests that the group's online representations are inherently intertwined with offline realities. This finding questions concepts such as 'virtual caliphate' and 'digital caliphate', which are often found in academic publications, as well as CVE-policies.⁶⁹ More importantly, this finding has consequences for countering the Islamic State and its message, as it also implies that countering the Islamic State's message cannot be seen as separate from events on the ground. The group's diminishing territories and media output over the last couple of years might suggest that both the offline and online battles against the Islamic State have been successful, a view that is illustrated by repeated claims about the group's defeat and frequently encountered terms such as 'post-caliphate era'. However, it is crucial to realise that the current situations in Iraq, Syria and other war-torn regions, as well as in the West in which debates on Islam and immigration are increasingly polarising, might still provide a fertile ground for the group in the years to come.

The Islamic State has shown itself to be resilient, as is illustrated not only by its own history, but also by the multi-faceted responses it has provided to its recent setbacks. These responses draw from appealing sources, rationalise the group's decline, and appeal to powerful emotions of victimhood, nostalgia and revenge. Whereas the Islamic State's brand is evidently not as attractive as it was several years ago, this message, in

⁶⁹ See, for example, Atwan, *Islamic State*; Harleen Gambhir, *The Virtual Caliphate: ISIS's Information Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2016), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20The%20Virtual%20Caliphate%20Gambhir%202016.pdf>; Seamus Hughes, "Countering the Virtual Caliphate – Written Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee," Program on Extremism – the George Washington University, June 23, 2016, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20160623/105128/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-HughesS-20160623.pdf>.



the current context, will still be able to provide a sense of belonging, hope, and empowerment to youngsters searching for meaning, justice, and dignity.

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Annex

Table 1: IS video output per producer (July 2015 – June 2018)

IS Central	al-Hayat al-Furqan	21 1
Iraq	Ninawa Salah al-Din Kirkuk al-Jazira ⁷⁰ Dijla al-Falluja al-Anbar al-Janub Diyala Shamal Baghdad Baghdad	73 38 34 34 31 27 28 17 11 7 9
Syria	al-Raqqa al-Khayr Halab Hims al-Baraka Dimashq Hama	63 62 43 38 25 24 14
Iraq/Syria	al-Furat	62
Libya	Tarabulus al-Barqa	16 15
Afgh./Pak.	Khurasan	22
Egypt	Sina' Misr	19 1
Yemen	Adan Abyan Hadramawt Al-Bayda Shabwa	5 5 5 1
Nigeria	Gharb Ifriqiyya	12
Caucasus	al-Qawqaz	4
Algeria	al-Jaza'ir	1
Saudi-Arabia	Najd	1
Philippines	al-Filibin	1
Bangladesh	al-Binghal	1
Somalia	al-Sumal	1

⁷⁰ Wilayat al-Jazira was renamed wilayat al-Badiya in September 2017.

About the Authors

Pieter Nanninga

Pieter Nanninga is a historian and a religious studies scholar who currently occupies a position as Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. After completing his PhD on the representations of suicide attacks in al-Qaeda's martyr videos in 2014, his research has primarily focused on the Islamic State. He is particularly interested in the relationship between culture, religion and violence, as well as in jihadist propaganda, on which he has frequently spoken on academic conferences, in public talks and in media interviews. Some recent publications include chapters on al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the *Cambridge Companion to Religion and Violence* (2017), an article on the Islamic State's martyr biographies in *NUMEN* (2018) and a book on Islam and suicide attacks in the Cambridge Elements series on religion and violence (forthcoming).

Branding a Caliphate in Decline: The Islamic State's Official Video Output (2015 – 2018)

Pieter Nanninga

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Contact ICCT

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: info@icct.nl