



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT



FROM BATTLEFRONT TO CYBERSPACE

DEMYSTIFYING THE ISLAMIC STATE'S
PROPAGANDA MACHINE

Asaad Almohammad and Charlie Winter | June 2019

From Battlefield to Cyberspace: Demystifying the Islamic State's Propaganda Machine

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Executive Summary

This report offers a unique contribution to the literature by examining the Islamic State's production, dissemination, and evaluation of propaganda in the months running up to its territorial collapse. Utilizing a range of materials collected in eastern Syria during the first nine months of 2018, namely audio-visual records and interviews, the authors inspected the administrative structure undergirding the group's Central Media Directorate.

Key responsibilities of this entity included interdepartmental oversight and monitoring, as well as media production and distribution. Focusing primarily on infrastructure concerning security and production, the study examines how the Islamic State cultivated a high degree of operational security, fluidity, and effectiveness. By assessing these trends during a period of existential external and internal pressure, the report demonstrates how the group ensured the continuance of its influence operations.

Beyond highlighting the utility of its guiding methodology and the operational value of its findings, this investigation enabled the authors to outline how the Islamic State might traverse the post-protostate phase of its history. Among other things, the report draws attention to the increasing ascendancy of *diwan al-amn al-'am* (Directorate of General Security), especially regarding its role in instilling operational opacity, maintaining archives, and managing personnel.

Taken altogether, the findings show how the Islamic State sought to navigate through critical trade-offs, such as efficiency and security, particularly in the context of its media operations.

Introduction

In the wake of its rise to global notoriety in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State transformed the jihadi communication space. Having captured Mosul and declared its caliphate, the group consolidated its already formidable propaganda apparatus to create a sophisticated and centralized media production network capable of churning out nearly 1,000 unique pieces of propaganda a month.¹ In the years that followed that tumultuous summer, its official media output came to define public perceptions the world over, seamlessly—and damagingly—popularizing an image of the proto-state that was crafted on its terms and its terms alone.

To be sure, jihadi media operations existed long before the Islamic State emerged in its current iteration, but they pale in comparison to what this group showed itself to be capable of doing. Propaganda production and distribution were—and continue to be—instrumental to its strategic and tactical understanding of insurgency.² Consequently, not only did the Islamic State remunerate its media workers more generously than it did its rank-and-file, it spent a huge amount of time and energy to conceal their day-to-day activities, something that left the sphere of propaganda as one of its most enigmatic operational facets.³

This report attempts to lay bare the logistics of the Islamic State's media production cycle, exploring its structural intricacies as well as how they were sustained and facilitated across 2018, the last year before the caliphate's territorial demise. In doing so, the authors build directly on Milton's 2018 report for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point *Pulling Back the curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization*, which went far to expose some of the inner workings of its influence apparatus.⁴ Basing this investigation on data collected during the first nine months of 2018 in what was then Islamic State-held eastern Syria, the report approaches the issue from two perspectives—security and production—with a view to shedding light on the lifecycle of its propaganda, from story-boarding to online distribution.

By tracking these aspects at this most crucial juncture in the group's recent history, a period that was characterized by unprecedented material duress and the seemingly inevitable prospect of territorial defeat, the report shows how the Islamic State managed to continue operating its influence infrastructure while under existential pressure. In so doing, the authors hint at how it might seek to navigate through this post-proto-state phase of its history, highlighting the increasingly ascendant role of its *diwan al-amn al-'am* (Directorate of General Security) in coordinating, monitoring, and moderating the operations of its media offices as part of a resilience-focused bureaucratic model similarly employed in the context of its other operational spheres.⁵ A clear understanding of this middle-management structure will afford a better understanding of the scale of the threat that this organization presents today.

The discussion proceeds as follows. In the second section, the report gives an overview of the bur-

1 Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016); Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7:11 (2016); Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 9 (2018).

2 Colin Clarke and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State May Be Failing, But Its Strategic Communications Legacy is Here to Stay," *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2017.

3 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-21-2a, b, and c; author interview, DC05, November 2018.

4 Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

5 Asaad Almoammad and Charlie Winter, "From Directorate of Intelligence to Directorate of Everything: The Islamic State's Emergent Amni-Media Nexus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019). See also Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State," *Jihadology*, September 2017.

geoning but imbalanced literature on Islamic State media activism. After that, it explains the data collection methodology. Readers who would like to skip straight to the substantive, analytical part of the report are advised to skim section three—which is necessarily detailed—and concentrate on the fourth section, in which the report outlines the group’s hierarchically organized propaganda production, distribution, and monitoring infrastructure. Next, it turns to the issue of operational secrecy, examining in particular the media-related activities of the Directorate of General Security. In the last section, the authors break the production cycle down into its five constituent phases, starting with pre-production and ending with distribution. In the conclusion, the report considers its three substantive sections in aggregate, identifying some important limitations to the dataset and suggesting possible directions for future research.

Literature Review

Much ink has been spilled about the Islamic State, especially in the context of its approach to outreach, which is perhaps the single most researched aspect of the organization. Scholars have tended to explore it from four angles: thematic analyses of its aggregate output; content analyses of individual texts or groups of texts; quantitative analyses of its social media support-base; and translation-based analyses of internal doctrine.

The first body of work is characterized by studies from the likes of Zelin, Milton, and Winter, whose respective efforts revolve around archives—built both in the short- and long-term—of official Islamic State media output.⁶ Generally speaking, their findings are consistent with one another: they each identify a net decline in the amount of propaganda being produced by the group, one that has roughly correlated with (but not necessarily been caused by) its territorial contraction since 2015. While a series of intuitive conclusions may be reached about this, there is no agreement as to what exactly caused this deceleration (as much as anything else because it was likely down to a composite of factors), and the Islamic State has remained entirely silent on the matter. It is worth noting that the consensus is not quite complete, with an account by Fisher contending that there has been no such decline in productivity.⁷

The next stream of research comprises mixed methods analyses of individual genres of Islamic State propaganda. There have been myriad explorations into its magazines, Dabiq and Rumiya, with some also turning their attention to the Arabic-language equivalent, Naba.⁸ Others, like Winkler et al. and Adelman, have focused on decrypting the hundreds of infographics the group has published since

6 Aaron Zelin, “Picture or It Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Media Output,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015); Milton, *Communication Breakdown*; Daniel Milton, *Down, but Not Out: An Updated Assessment of the Islamic State’s Visual Propaganda* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018); Charlie Winter, “Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35:1 (2018): pp. 103-121.

7 Ali Fisher, “ISIS: Sunset on the ‘decline narrative,’” Online Jihad, June 1, 2018. Figures on the net decline in the production of propaganda materials, or lack thereof, are assessed on the basis of the methodology of each study. Different methodologies—especially when it comes to making the distinction between what is “new” or “official” vs. what is “old” or “unofficial”—will inevitably yield different results.

8 Haroro Ingram, “An analysis of Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51:3 (2016): pp. 458-577; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, “Mapping the thematic landscape of Dabiq magazine,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 71:6 (2017): pp. 591-620; Haroro Ingram, “An analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s propaganda war,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40:5 (2016): pp. 357-375; Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Anina Kinzel, and Luke Walker, “Representing the West and ‘non-believers’ in the online jihadi magazines Dabiq and Inspire,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2018) [online only]; Carol Winkler, Kareem El Damanhoury, Aaron Dicker, and Anthony Lemieux, “The medium is terrorism: Transformation of the about to die trope in Dabiq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016) [online only]; Peter Wignell, Sabine Tan, and Kay L. O’Halloran, “Under the shade of AK47s: A multimodal approach to violent extremist recruitment strategies for foreign fighters,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10:3 (2017): pp. 429-452; Logan Macnair and Richard Frank, “Changes and stabilities in the language of Islamic state magazines: A sentiment analysis,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11:2 (2017): pp. 109-120; Orla Lehane, David Mair, Saffron Lee, and Jodie Parker, “Brides, black widows and baby-makers; or not: An analysis of the portrayal of women in English-language jihadi magazine image,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2018) [online only]; Dounia Mahlouly and Charlie Winter, “A tale of two caliphates: Comparing the Islamic State’s internal and external messaging priorities,” VOX-Pol, 2018.

2015, while scholars such as Nanninga and Dauber and Robinson have instead concentrated on its production of videos.⁹ El Damanhoury and Milton are among the very few to have examined its mass production of still images, about which much more can and should be said.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the diversity of their subject matter, these genre studies often reach similar conclusions regarding the presence of mainstream visual rhetoric in the Islamic State's propaganda—that is, motifs and tropes that are very much at home in contemporary Western media culture.

The third research trend focuses on the other side of the communication equation: it consists of explorations into Islamic State support-base dynamics on social networking and file-sharing platforms. Since 2014 in particular, jihadi activism on websites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube has attracted a lot of attention from scholars and policy analysts alike. Carter, Maher, and Neumann's investigation was one of the first such mapping efforts, and it was followed by similarly orientated explorations from the likes of Klausen and Berger and Morgan.¹¹ Later research on the same issue by Conway et al. and Alexander illustrates that the presence of jihadis on these mainstream platforms has declined since 2015, with new, privacy-maximizing services like Telegram, Wickr, and Pidgin taking their place as preferred communication hubs for jihadi extremists.¹² As these studies contend, there have been myriad reasons for this digital migration, which is as much opportunistic as it is driven by necessity.

The last research cluster, into which the present contribution feeds, revolves around the Islamic State's doctrinal literature on media warfare. Relatively few have approached the issue from this angle. Among them are Rogan, whose 2007 monograph on al-Qa`ida's approach to propaganda provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of jihadi outreach and is a crucial foundation on which to assess it today;¹³ Whiteside, whose historical exploration of Islamic State media operations is informed by documentary evidence dating as far back as 2003;¹⁴ Price and al-`Ubaydi, whose 2017 work documents emergent rifts in its central media offices;¹⁵ and Winter, whose analyses on Islamic State media strategy complement well the below examination of media strategy.¹⁶

While it is closest in form to the fourth research trend, the present study builds on all of the above areas. Focusing on how the Islamic State actually produced, distributed, and evaluated its propaganda in the months running up to its material collapse, the report offers a unique contribution to the

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- 9 Pieter Nanninga, "Meanings of savagery" in James Lewis ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 172-190; Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style," *Jihadology*, July 6, 2015.
- 10 Kareem El Damanhoury, Carol Winkler, Wojciech Kaczkowski, and Aaron Dicker, "Examining the military-media nexus in ISIS's provincial photography campaign," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11:2 (2017): pp. 89-108; Daniel Milton, "Fatal attraction: Explaining variation in the attractiveness of Islamic State propaganda," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 9 (2018) [online only].
- 11 Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, April 2014; Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the *Jihad*: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38:1 (2015): pp. 1-22; J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World* No. 20, March 2015.
- 12 Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weir, "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and its Impacts," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42 (2019); Audrey Alexander, "Digital Decay: Tracing Change over Time among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter," George Washington University Program on Extremism, October 2017.
- 13 Hanna Rogan, "From Abu Reuter to Irahabi 007: Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies," Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2007.
- 14 Whiteside, "Lighting the Path."
- 15 Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Media fitna in the Islamic State," aymennjawad.org, September 28, 2017; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Internal Conflicts in the Islamic State's Media Department: A Letter of Complaint," aymennjawad.org, December 21, 2018; Bryan Price and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "The Islamic State's Internal Rifts and Social Media Ban," CTC Perspectives, June 21, 2017.
- 16 Charlie Winter, "Media jihad: The Islamic State's doctrine for information warfare," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2017; Charlie Winter, "Understanding Jihadi Stratcom: The case of the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019): pp. 54-62.

literature. Especially when read alongside Milton's 2018 account—which is based on internal Islamic State documents captured, translated, and declassified by the United States Department of Defense (henceforth DoD)—the authors' exploration demystifies some of the most intricate details associated with the group's influence activism.¹⁷

Methodology

This investigation is based on semi-structured and unstructured interview data that was gathered from eastern Syria during the first nine months of 2018. The data were cross-checked against documentary evidence and propaganda materials collected in-theater and online during the same time period. Given the sensitivity and provenance of these materials, as well of the importance of research transparency, the authors thought it prudent to offer a detailed description of how they were compiled.

Thirteen data collectors— all of whom were known to the first author from prior research projects¹⁸— were contacted on October 17, 19, and 20, 2017, with a view to gauging their interest in participating in this study. The authors opted for convenience sampling in the selection process because of the exploratory nature of the study and the various difficulties associated with identifying accessible and willing participants who are skilled, capable, and have the resources to deal with risks. All were comprehensively briefed on the proposed research objectives, scope, and procedure. They were informed that their participation would be of an entirely voluntary nature and that they would have the ability to drop out of the study at any point and for any reason.

Seven data collectors agreed to participate on the condition of anonymity. All seven were individually briefed a second time; any foreseeable risks—both those that occurred to the first author and those that occurred to the participants themselves—were discussed in detail. After this, there was a third briefing in which the participants were once again advised about the research project and its foreseeable risks and provided with information on how best to mitigate these risks. Then and only then were they deemed to be fully informed and thus capable of providing consent.¹⁹

After completion of the selection stage, the first author carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with each of the participants in order to assess the extent of their prior knowledge about the Islamic State's media operations. Based on the information that emerged, the data collectors were then provided with a series of guiding questions, developed with the second author, to inform their individual explorations. These lines of inquiry were general at first but became more specific with time.

The data collection phase was fully initiated in January 2018. At this point, the seven collectors began gathering information on Islamic State media operations using naturalistic observations (e.g., covertly taken notes, pictures, and audio recordings) and unstructured interviews with active group members. In total, the data collectors produced 36 separate data entries between January 3 and September 23, 2018.²⁰ All were stored in consecutive order and coded according to form (i.e., text, audio,

17 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

18 Asaad H. Almoammad and Anne Speckhard, "Is ISIS Moving its Capital from Raqqa to Mayadin in Deir ez-Zor?" *ICSVE Brief Reports*, April 3, 2017; Asaad Almoammad and Anne Speckhard, "ISIS Drones: Evolution, Leadership, Bases, Operations and Logistics," *ICSVE Research Reports*, May 4, 2017; Asaad Almoammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training and Deployment," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8:14 (2018). This footnote was added in response to one of the reviewers' suggestions. It was added after the manuscript went through multiple rounds of blind review.

19 During the field work for this paper, all but two of the 13 individuals who were approached to participate in the study were based in Islamic State-held territories in Syria. The seven individuals who agreed to participate in this study knew and were trained by and worked with the first author in the past on a number of projects. Some of these projects included publications on the Islamic State. All seven individuals are based in Islamic States-held territories in Syria and are collecting information on Islamic State operations, leadership, and movement. None of the seven collectors agreed to list the names of their current employers in this publication. That said, all details describing the collectors and quotes used in this study were approved by them, including the information in this note.

20 Early and general data entries were not included. Such entries were very general and lacked relevance to the current effort.

and pictures), length, and relevance. Each entry was coded and anonymized; they were provided with date-tags and the data collector's unique alphanumeric code (DC01 through DC07). Due to repeated issues with validation—they were found to have provided misleading information and misattributed footage on multiple occasions—all data provided by DC07 were excluded from the sample.²¹

A total of 41 unstructured interviews with active members of the Islamic State were carried out by the six data collectors during the nine-month data collection period.²² The collectors did not seek consent from the Islamic State operatives with whom they spoke—this would have been impractical and dangerous.²³ All the materials they compiled were sent to the first author in the form of data entries, which included pictures of internal media documents, texts of unstructured interviews, interviewee responses to questions, and/or audio recordings. These were then catalogued, cross-checked, and, where relevant, translated by the first author and discussed with the second author. The collectors agreed to share the raw data in its entirety for review purposes, provided that it was not made public.²⁴

Efforts to maximize confidentiality while maintaining the integrity of the data were made. Anonymity is best understood as being a form of confidentiality. While the former refers to a set of measures that are taken to keep the identities of participants hidden, the latter outlines the decision to keep a set of information that is known only to members of the research team private.²⁵ Internal confidentiality deals with information that could increase the likelihood of project participants being identified by their subjects (active Islamic State members) or by other participants during the data collection process.²⁶ External confidentiality refers to efforts to minimize or eliminate readers' ability to identify the participants or their subjects and/or sources during and after data collection.²⁷

Regarding the former, all aliases, names, and titles of active or deceased Islamic State cadres were removed whenever excerpts from data entries are quoted in this report. Additionally, no text from the data collectors' unstructured interviews with active or deceased members of the Islamic State is quoted or displayed in its original form, except in the data files, which are not being published beyond the review process. Moreover, the data collectors were specifically instructed to avoid snowball sampling, including pursuing interviews with different members of the same media office, as it may have compromised internal confidentiality.

Regarding the latter, special attention was administered to hide the exact locations of the data collectors, as well as their cultural, religious, and professional backgrounds and any other identifying details. For instance, phrases and jargon that are tied to specific localities or professional specializations were removed from the data entries. These measures were taken with a view to preserving both internal and external confidentiality.²⁸ It is likely that most of the intended audience (e.g., practitioners and

21 This study will only rely on the data provided by six of the interviewed data collectors. In notes citing interviews, the names of the interviewed data collectors are replaced with six codes: DC01 to DC06.

22 The data collectors reported on their sources and unstructured interviews in the data file. Not all of the reported interviews were tagged clearly. Some of the data collectors' notes on their interviewees were received in audio messages. The data collectors did not provide their consent to share their audio messages even in the form of raw data. Raw data is only submitted for review purposes. On such occasions, notes were made within the data entry to outline information from the unstructured interviews.

23 It is noteworthy that the data collectors, during the phase of fieldwork, were actively involved in data gathering on other aspects of the Islamic State. This was not for the purpose of this research. They agreed to share data that did not conflict with their activities.

24 The raw data was submitted along with the manuscript to the editor. This included a Word file of the text of interviews, audio files, and pictures of Islamic State media-related documents.

25 Benjamin Saunders, Jenny Kitzinger, and Celia Kitzinger, "Anonymising interview data: Challenges and compromise in practice," *Qualitative Research* 15:5 (2015): pp. 616-632.

26 Martin Tolich, "Internal Confidentiality: When Confidentiality Assurances Fail Relational Informants," *Qualitative Sociology* 27:1 (2004): pp. 101-106.

27 Ibid.

28 Alexander Tsai, Brandon Kohrt, Lynn Matthews, Theresa Betancourt, Jooyoung Lee, Andrew Papachristos, Sheri Weiser, and Shari Dworkin, "Promises and pitfalls of data sharing in qualitative research," *Social Science & Medicine* 169 (2016): pp. 191-198.

academics) would not be able to recognize specific phrases and jargon and use them to deduce the identities of the data collectors. However, minor idiosyncratic details could result in deductive disclosure to and harm by an unintended audience (e.g., members of the Islamic State in eastern Syria). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the data collectors agreed to share their data entries but not their personal details with the editorial team and reviewers, provided that none of the raw data were made public. This was a small compromise to external confidentiality, but it was nevertheless individually approved by each of the data collectors.

The first author also conducted 13 supplementary interviews with each data collector, during which they were asked specific questions about past entries as well as for clarifications on certain issues.²⁹ At the end of each of these interviews, they were provided with a set of additional questions and limitations to direct their future reporting focus.

This report used various measures to optimize the validity of the data, including but not limited to triangulation, contradictory evidence analysis, and respondent validation.³⁰ To this end, the authors continually combined and cross-examined different sets of data (i.e., documents and propaganda materials collected in-theater and online during the same time period, among these those that were captured and declassified by the DoD and fed into Milton's 2018 report).³¹ Contradictory evidence or deviant cases were sought out rather than ignored, retained in the data entries, and accounted for in the interpretation of the findings. Moreover, because the data was not fragmented but instead considered as a unified whole, the authors were able to identify unanticipated/emerging themes as they appeared and from multiple sources. To this end, each of the authors individually assessed and collectively discussed new data. Whenever issues arose, additional information was requested of the data collectors who sent those entries. When additional information failed to resolve disagreements and mitigate doubts, other data collectors were asked to gather information to substantiate or disprove specific interpretations. If this proved impossible, the issue was excluded from the analysis. Besides all this, data entries and interviews with data collectors were systematically cross-examined against each other. Those that were incoherent, inaccurate, or based on subjective observations were excluded.

While, for the first nine months of the project, individual data collectors were not informed as to the findings of the other data collectors, in September 2018, they were briefed on the aggregated data along with a draft of this report and then asked for feedback. Due to security concerns and given the length of the data file and manuscript, a detailed review of the data and research analysis and findings was not possible. Nevertheless, all six data collectors approved the quotations and interpretations of their entries that appear in this report.

Three caveats are in order prior to the discursive section of the report. Firstly, the creation dates and publishing directorates for most of the internal documents are missing.³² In at least four of the documents, dates were deliberately erased.³³ Nevertheless, they were still included in the data. While it is not possible to state the dates of internal media-related documents with any level of certainty, the contents of at least seven internal memos substantiated the data collectors' accounts on recent deci-

29 The data collectors were interviewed to discuss their entries and were asked questions relevant to this paper. Not every interview yielded data. The data collectors were not pressured to answer any questions. Those who did not provide answers were told that they were free to opt out of the study at any time. None of them took this option. Collectors who left certain questions unanswered were inquired about operations the authors were interested in exploring or became aware of from data entries made by other data collectors.

30 Claire Anderson, "Presenting and Evaluating Qualitative Research," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 74:8 (2010): p. 141.

31 Whiteside, "Lighting the Path;" Milton, *Communication Breakdown*; Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*; Al-Tamimi, "Media fitna in the Islamic State;" Al-Tamimi, "Internal Conflicts in the Islamic State's Media Department;" Price and al-'Ubaydi.

32 Issues related to missing dates of authorship and difficulties in determining the timeframe of seized Islamic State documents is reported in Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

33 Author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-2.

sions regarding the relocation of media offices, launching of a new media office, and the aliases and roles of key media operatives.³⁴ The documents also offered a glimpse into the Islamic State's preparations regarding the imminent loss of operational bases in areas under siege or in anticipation of incursions. For instance, in the run-up to territorial defeat in Hajin, Deir ez-Zor, the Media Security Office issued an order to the media emir to launch a new media office in another location.³⁵ The photograph of this internal memo was received a few days before the battle to retake Hajin was announced.³⁶ The second caveat is that, while all six data collectors noted that it existed, detailed information regarding the Media Council came from just one data collector. (More details on the Media Council are discussed below.) The risks associated with gathering data on this body were especially high, so the authors did not push the other data collectors to investigate its roles and functions thoroughly. However, the authors still thought the details that were gleaned to be important enough to include. The third and most important caveat is that any findings derived from this data should be generalized with caution. They were collected in eastern Syria during the first nine months of 2018 and cannot be considered as a straightforward global blueprint, even though they may indicate the existence of one.

Administrative Hierarchy

In this section, the authors outline the administrative structure that undergirded the Islamic State's media production, evaluation, and distribution operations in eastern Syria in 2018, most if not all of which is likely to continue to exist at the time of writing. Its core elements comprised the Media Council, the Media Judiciary Committee, the Media Security Office, the Media Agencies and Offices, and the Information Bank. The following description is based on data collected in mid-2018 solely for the purposes of this study; in August 2018, this data was corroborated by internal Islamic State documents that had been captured and declassified by the DoD.³⁷ At this early stage of the report, the functional explanation of the network, which is visualized in Figure 1, is left deliberately superficial; a more detailed discussion of its various components is found throughout later sections.

34 Pictures of internal media-related documents were received during author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-07-1, PHOTO-2018-07-07-2, and PHOTO-2018-07-07-3; author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-21-1a, b, and c, PHOTO-2018-07-21-2a, b, and c, and PHOTO-2018-07-21-3a and b; author interview, DC01, September 2018: PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2; author interview, DC01, September 2018: PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-2. Materials that corroborate some of the memos' content were obtained during author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC04, April 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC04, September 2018; author interview, DC06, September 2018.

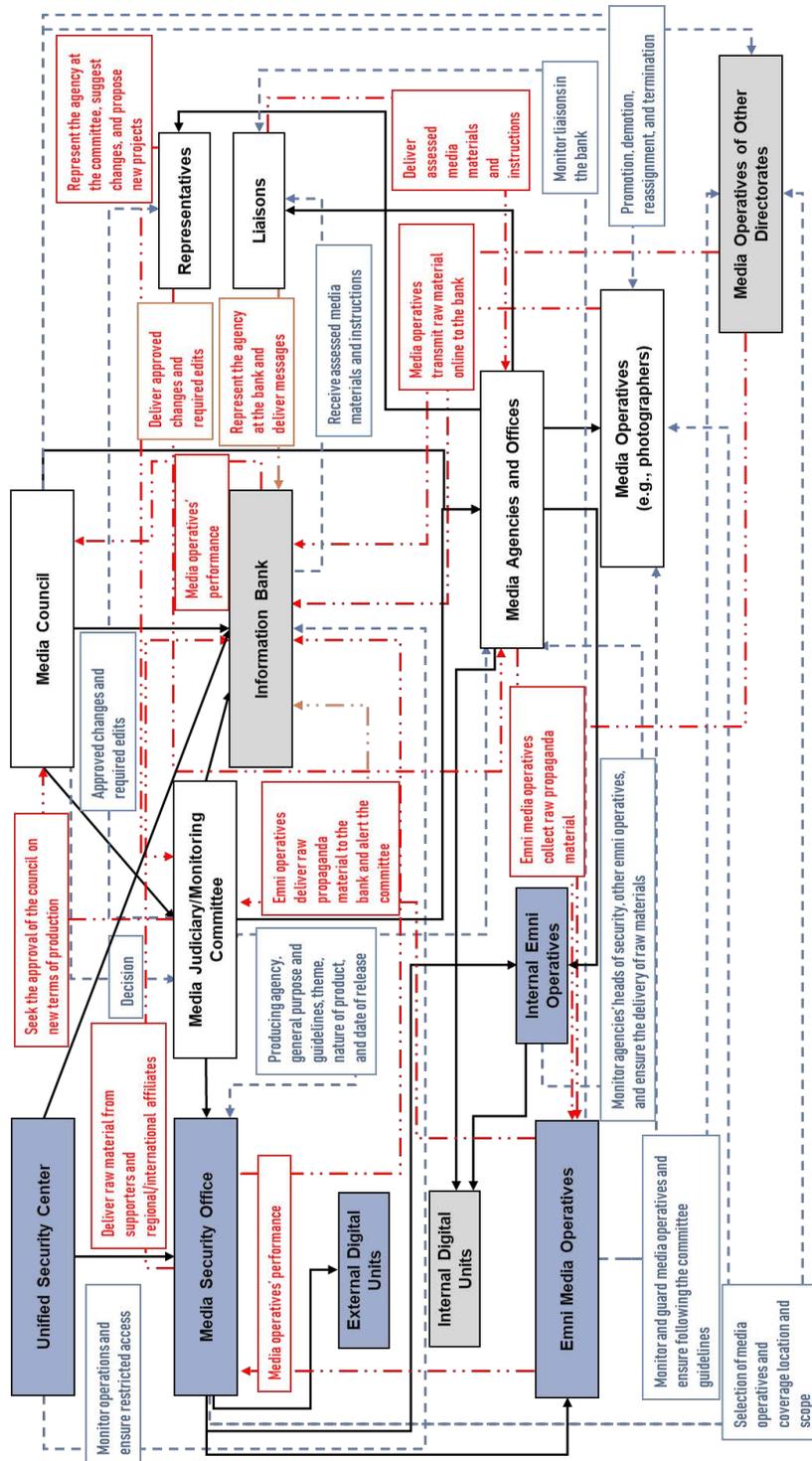
35 Author interview, DC01: PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2.

36 Rukmini Callimachi, "Fight to Retake Last ISIS Territory Begins," *New York Times*, September 11, 2018. The memo in question was obtained during an interview with a data collector in September 2018. Author interview, DC01: PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2.

37 Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

Figure 1. Central Media Directorate: Hierarchy and Flow of Information.

Notes: Solid arrows denote subordination; dashed blue arrows denote enforcement/orders/decisions made by superior entities/departments/level of management; and dashed red arrows denote flow of information and raw media material. Labels of blue and red arrows are on top of the labeled arrow(s). Media departments are in white boxes; security departments are in blue boxes; and jointly managed departments/units/operatives are in gray boxes.



Media Council

This body sat at the top of the Islamic State's information hierarchy.³⁸ Shrouded in secrecy, it was the most senior managerial office of the group's Central Media Directorate (aka its Central Media *Diwan*).³⁹ Based on data gathered for a more recent research project, the Media Council appears to have consisted of the upper echelon of the Central Media Directorate's leadership.⁴⁰ The Council also appears to have been charged with representing and speaking on behalf of the Islamic State's Central Media Directorate.⁴¹ Thus, it could be that the directing office of the "Diwan of Central Media," which was referred to in the internal Islamic State documents that were captured and declassified by the DoD in August 2018, is actually the same entity as the Media Council.⁴² As of 2018, the Council was comprised of eight officials—seven council members and one emir—who exercised oversight over the Media Judiciary Committee, all Media Offices, and the Information Bank. It was charged with monitoring all official output, which meant that it had the final say as to whether or not materials could be published internally and/or externally, and made, through various auxiliaries, strategic interventions at the operational level, too.⁴³ More detail on the Council is provided in the first, second, and fourth parts of Section 6.

Media Judiciary Committee

An immediate subordinate to the Media Council, the Media Judiciary Committee was more hands-on in terms of its day-to-day operational role. At the tactical level, it was charged with "determin[ing] the themes of [future] media products and their release dates" as well as their specific "nature"—i.e., whether they were published as images, videos, text or audio—and the production agency to which they were to be attributed.⁴⁴ At the strategic level, it established the "general purpose," "ideological theme," and "justification for the production of media products."⁴⁵

Based on nine separate data entries, the authors have been able to piece together a detailed understanding of the Committee and its interactions with other departments in the media nexus.⁴⁶ Formed of eight members,⁴⁷ it had oversight over all Media Offices—of which there was an undefined number—and jointly directed the operations of the Media Security Office alongside the Directorate of General Security's own leadership cadre.⁴⁸ It also supervised media-related activities at the Infor-

38 Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018.

39 Author interview, DC01, June 2018.

40 Author interview, DC04, November 2018.

41 Ibid.

42 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*. See also the documents released with Milton's report: "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State;" "General Guidance and Instructions;" "Organizational Structure of the Media Office;" "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media;" "Responsibilities of the Media Offices towards Al-Bayan Radio;" "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency;" and "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid." Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC04, November 2018.

43 Ibid.

44 Author interview, DC03, May 2018.

45 Ibid.

46 Author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, June 2018; Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

47 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018.

48 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

mation Bank.⁴⁹ This information is mostly corroborated by the Islamic State documents that appear in Milton's 2018 report. Importantly, the data also suggest that the Media Judiciary Committee was subordinate to the Media Council.⁵⁰ Based on this, it seems likely that the Media Monitoring Committee of which Milton writes was a counterpart of the Media Judiciary Committee: each appears to have handled a host of very similar tasks and functions.⁵¹ More detail on the Media Judiciary Committee is provided in second part of Section 5 and the first, second, third, and fourth parts of Section 6.

Media Security Office

This office, which featured prominently in all but eight of the data entries, was overseen by the Unified Security Center—a subordinate entity of the Directorate of General Security (DGS)—and the Media Judiciary Committee.⁵² The DGS managed a range of the Islamic State's insurgent activities, including anything from intelligence and special military operations to managerial and religious affairs.⁵³ Among other things, the Directorate of General Security was charged with keeping records on the leaders of the Islamic State's various departments, monitoring their internal communications, and reporting on their and their subordinates' performance.⁵⁴ The Unified Security Center, which operated out of the DGS, oversaw the operations of directorate-specific security offices (e.g., Media Security Office, War Security Office, etc.).⁵⁵

The Media Security Office was charged with communicating and ensuring the implementation of strategic and operational instructions from the Islamic State's leadership.⁵⁶ In doing so, it allowed the DGS to monitor elite communications and secure leaders against targeting while at the same time enabling it to issue directives. In this capacity, the Media Security Office interacted closely with both managerial authorities—i.e., the Media Judiciary Committee, media offices, and Information Bank—and operational units—i.e., photographers and videographers, internal and external distribution squads, and editing teams.⁵⁷ Its central functions revolved around enforcement and safeguarding: on the one hand, it was charged with making sure that media offices and their operatives followed Media Judiciary Committee directives and, on the other, it was responsible for ensuring that any and all data were shared securely.⁵⁸

It is worth noting that this entity was not mentioned in any of the internal documents that have been

49 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

50 Author interview, DC04, November 2018.

51 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*. See also the documents released with Milton's report: "Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State;" "General Guidance and Instructions;" "Organizational Structure of the Media Office;" "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media;" "Responsibilities of the Media Offices towards Al-Bayan Radio;" "Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency;" and "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid." Author interview, DC01, June 2018.

52 Author interview, DC03, May 2018.

53 For a thorough review of DGS and its significance for the Islamic State, see Almohammad and Winter.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, January 2018; author interview, DC04, April 2018; author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC02 and DC03, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC03, August 2018; author interview, DC02, August 2018; author interview, DC04, August 2018.

58 Ibid.

captured and declassified by the DoD to date.⁵⁹ More detail on the Media Security Office is provided in the first, second, and third parts of Section 5 and the first, second, and fifth parts of Section 6.

Media Offices

Operating with direct oversight from the Media Judiciary Committee and Media Security Office (and indirect oversight from the Media Council), the Islamic State's network of media offices in eastern Syria was structured according to a rigid set of guidelines. Presided over by a single emir, each had a security team and an administrative staff, along with media technicians (both field operatives and editors), digital units, and separate liaisons for the Media Judiciary Committee and Information Bank.⁶⁰ There were some nominal differences between the structure outlined in the media documents captured and declassified by the DoD and the picture that emerged from the data, but there are enough synchronicities to suggest that they are borne of roughly the same thinking.⁶¹ For instance, the description of the duties of exterior media teams in the captured documents matches the data collectors' portrayal of the roles and functions of internal digital units.⁶² More detail on this is provided in the first, second, and third parts of Section 5 and the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth parts of Section 6.

Information Bank

This highly secretive institution reported directly to the Media Judiciary Committee and was overseen by the Unified Security Center and Media Council.⁶³ It had at least nine permanent employees and one director and was charged with storing data on seemingly all facets of the Islamic State's operations. Alongside one team of operatives focusing exclusively on media-related operations, there were others "tasked with storing, managing, and retrieving other information on organizational operations including, but not limited to: security, military [matters], service provision, finances, intelligence, and personnel."⁶⁴ On a day-to-day basis, they liaised with the Islamic State's various bodies, keeping track of "every announcement, decree, form, purchase order, and any paper-based or electronic document;" as well as this, they archived "older documents," too.⁶⁵

In the context of its media workstream, the Bank focused on two things: validation and storage. The first involved operatives receiving raw content and assessing its credibility and quality before providing pre-validated materials to media offices for editorial processing and, ultimately, publication.⁶⁶ The second involved operatives working to store and maintain complete content archives pertaining

59 Ibid. A clue on the role of the Islamic State's security apparatus in safeguarding media operatives and materials appeared in Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, "Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State's propaganda machine," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2015. Miller and Mekhennet did not detail the roles and function of the Islamic State's security forces in terms of media-related operations. They only mentioned that one of the interviewees, who operated for the Islamic State's security forces, had to interact heavily with media operatives and institutions. More recently, the roles and functions of the security media office were examined in Almohammad and Winter.

60 For the review of the organizational hierarchy of media agency or office, see "Organizational Structure of the Media Office." The information on the organizational structure appears in multiple data entries and by all data collectors. Author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC03, August 2018; author interview, DC05, August 2018; author interview, DC04, August 2018.

61 Ibid.

62 For review, see "Organizational Structure of the Media Office," p. 5. Part v of section 5 outlines the roles and functions of internal digital units/teams.

63 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC01, June 2018.

64 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

65 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

66 Author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

to the Islamic State's various directorates (e.g., its *Hisbah*, Military, and Education Directorates) and regional affiliates.⁶⁷

The Information Bank, if it still functions as described (even though, post-territorial defeat, it will be bound to look different logistically), will be paramount to the Islamic State's capabilities in years to come. As an historic archive of past footage, it stands to offer its media offices a secure, centralized repository for the telling of the caliphate story and recasting its last few years as a period of divine success—the utopia-focused opening sequences of videos produced in early 2019 by Islamic State affiliates in West Africa and Yemen attest to its continued existence.⁶⁸ As Whiteside and others have noted in the past, this group has a demonstrated propensity for using old “evidence” to support current arguments—whether that is in the form of reframing setbacks, extolling the virtues of dead leaders, or documenting the excesses of its enemies—and the Information Bank factors straight into this remit.⁶⁹ Its significance, therefore, cannot be overstated.

Like the Media Security Office, the Information Bank was not mentioned in the captured Islamic State documents.⁷⁰ As will be seen below, though, its activities placed it at the operational heart of the Islamic State's communication nexus.

Before proceeding to the next section, it first serves to make a note as to how these institutions factor into the overarching organizational structure of the Islamic State. Evidence suggests that while the data upon which this report is based was collected in eastern Syria, it speaks to a broad organization-wide systematization of the media production cycle. In other words, none of what is described above exists in a vacuum.

Al-Tamimi's work, for one, holds that regional media offices were presided over by a *wali al-qati'* (district emir) who, working at the behest of a central leadership hierarchy, was charged with coordinating the operations of multiple provincial media units at any one time.⁷¹ Working in parallel with them were the DGS' Media Security Offices, which, as discussed, were charged with continuously reporting back to the central leadership.⁷² These two lines of effort fed into a labyrinthine structure that transcended the territories in which the Islamic State overtly operated and are something that the group will likely fall back on in months and years to come as it attempts to weather this post-*proto-state* storm.

Day-to-Day Operations

As noted in the literature review, much has been written about the Islamic State's propaganda strategy. However, little is known about the way in which its influence activities were executed on a day-to-day basis. To a large extent, this is a result of the secrecy within which its media infrastructure was shrouded. In this section, the authors lift the veil on how, in eastern Syria in 2018 at least, the group cultivated such a high degree of operational opacity. The account proceeds as follows: first, the report examines the rules and regulations surrounding the gathering and handling of raw media in the pre-editorial stage; second, it explores the validation and storage process that took place once newsgathering and production has been completed; and, third, the report looks to the institutional means by which official media activities were secured at the operational level.

Before proceeding any further, it serves to summarize the findings of the only three accounts written

67 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

68 Whiteside, “Lighting the Path.”

69 Ibid.

70 As discussed in Almohammad and Winter, the Islamic State's security apparatus deploys spatial and temporal security measures to safeguard this entity.

71 Al-Tamimi, “The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State.”

72 Almohammad and Winter.

on this issue. The first is Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet's 2015 report in *The Washington Post* in which they interviewed an imprisoned Islamic State defector from the Directorate of General Security, who documents for them the once-extensive interactions he had had with its media operations.⁷³ Describing what the production process looked like prior to his defection, he held that the group's Central Media Directorate would sanction specific operatives to cover a given event, simultaneously instructing them to store any raw materials that were produced on memory cards or flash drives before dropping them at a designated location.⁷⁴ He made clear that, throughout the process, operational security was paramount: physical access to media offices was always restricted; real names were never used; and bureaucratic bottlenecks were in place to keep interdepartmental interaction to a minimum.⁷⁵ Rukmini Callimachi's article on Mohammed Khalifa, the Al Hayat Media Center's Canadian narrator captured in eastern Syria in early 2019, is the second such account.⁷⁶ It briefly describes the pre-, during-, and post-production efforts the Islamic State went to in securely producing its foreign-language propaganda, detailing in particular the sophisticated editing infrastructure it had established by the time the coalition intervened in 2014.

Milton's 2018 report, which is based on the aforementioned DoD-declassified Islamic State documents, is the third and most detailed account of its media securitization. Based on an internal Islamic State leaflet on information and operational security, he identifies three core principles, namely "encryption, physical security of media information and locations, and the cautious use of social media by media operatives."⁷⁷ The leaflet in question, which dates back to roughly the same time as the *Washington Post* report, instructs media cadres to encrypt raw data to prevent rival forces from gaining access to it;⁷⁸ only access hard drives using specific, privacy-maximizing software;⁷⁹ use Local-Area Networks (LAN) in lieu of the internet such that working devices (i.e., computers on which are stored encrypted material and editing software, etc.) are never connected to the outside world;⁸⁰ stay off social media platforms at all times;⁸¹ and, lastly, refrain from ever revealing their connection to the Islamic State media apparatus with anyone, anywhere.⁸²

Below, the report corroborates and builds on the above, identifying prevailing information security trends in eastern Syria by exploring the newsgathering and editorial processes.⁸³ In so doing, the authors highlight the instrumental role of officials from the Directorate of General Security—henceforth referred to as *amnis* or *amni* operatives—with regard to information transfer, restriction, and

73 Miller and Mekhennet.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid. The report neither identifies the issuing source of the guidelines nor provides much details on what they might be.

76 Rukmini Callimachi, "The English Voice of ISIS Comes Out of the Shadows," *New York Times*, February 19, 2019.

77 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*, p. 18. See also "Information Security."

78 "Information Security." The documents order media operatives to use TrueCrypt, an encryption application. The Islamic State reportedly abandoned the use of this application.

79 "Information Security." The document ordered the use of two applications, namely Eraser and CCleaner.

80 "Information Security." The leaflet instructs operatives to keep computers connected to the internet away from devices being used for media-related operations (e.g., editing).

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, January 2018; author interview, DC04, April 2018; author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC02 and DC03, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC03, August 2018; author interview, DC02, August 2018; author interview, DC04, August 2018.

evaluation.⁸⁴

Collection

The long arm of the Media Security Office was documented throughout the data collection period. In the context of projects deemed to be especially sensitive—like, for example, those featuring the Islamic State’s senior leaders and key propagandists—its operatives were assigned prior to the commissioning of the production team they were charged with protecting and monitoring while on location.⁸⁵ Moreover, when the production team had concluded its coverage of the event in question, the raw materials it compiled would be passed straight to the *amni* operative in charge, who was then responsible for transporting it to the Information Bank for validation and processing.⁸⁶ In other words, it seems that, where possible, these materials were physically, not virtually, transmitted to the Islamic State’s central database at the Information Bank. While the data refers to just one physical archiving location, it seems likely that others existed.

In the context of less sensitive shoots, *amni* operatives did not shepherd media production teams when they were on location, though they were reportedly still ever-present in the background. On these occasions, the raw materials that were compiled in their absence would be transmitted digitally to them using HughesNet satellite internet, from whence they made their way to the Information Bank.⁸⁷ Production teams were still expected to physically store raw data with a view to delivering it to the Media Security Office and Information Bank in the future, but there was less urgency.⁸⁸

Assessment

The next stage of the propaganda cycle, in which raw materials were processed and validated at the Information Bank, was equally secretive. As mentioned, media offices were not allowed to use the materials they compiled unless they had been thoroughly checked, approved, and stored by officials at the Bank.⁸⁹ To accelerate this process, Bank officials would request four core details from the production teams with which they were working, namely the location of the sender(s) and, if data is transmitted online, its source; the guidelines issued by the Media Judiciary Committee in relation to the media event in question; the name(s) and details of the individual(s) who collected and transmitted the data; and, lastly, the name of the media office or agency under which the finished product

84 Author interview, DC01, July 2018; PHOTO-2018-07-07-2 and PHOTO-2018-07-07-3; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-2. It is noteworthy that the documents did not detail the roles and functions of the *amni* media office and affiliated operatives. Extensive details on the media office and operatives were provided in multiple data entries and from all data collectors: Author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interviews, DC02 and DC03, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; author interview, DC03, August 2018.

85 Author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

86 Author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

87 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018. This is the case when *amni* media operatives are not able to reach the location of shooting and/or in territories the Islamic State does not control or is not operational. Also, different directorates or Diwans (e.g., Mosques and Da’wa) have media operatives who are tasked with producing media material pertaining to the operation of these directorates. In some cases, these operatives cover events (e.g., photographing people rushing to receive aid and supply) without the presence or monitoring of *amni* media operatives.

88 Author interview, DC03, May 2018.

89 Author interview, DC03, May 2018. More on the processing of raw media material by the information bank is described in later sections.

is to be published.⁹⁰ Only distant branches of the Islamic State (e.g., those in Khorasan Province) or media operatives charged with producing raw materials in remote locations were expected to send the materials online.⁹¹

Upon receipt, raw materials were checked for and purged of all operationally sensitive information—like, for example, anything that inadvertently revealed the identities of leaders or locations of bases.⁹² The Bank would then store two copies: the first, a classified, secure, and possibly encrypted version of the original raw material, and the second, an edited and assessed version.⁹³ The latter would be re-catalogued and cleared for editorial work.⁹⁴ The Bank was authorized to reject materials that did not meet the Media Judiciary Committee’s minimum production standards.⁹⁵ To this effect, it was charged both with omitting operationally sensitive materials and ensuring that the materials satisfy or surpass the least acceptable production quality.

It is worth mentioning here that in 2017, Al-Tamimi wrote about emergent tensions between Central Media Directorate and the Media Office for Raqqa in Syria. Essentially, internal documents had emerged showing that the former had reprimanded the latter for revealing hidden locations of snipers in an unreleased propaganda video.⁹⁶ This highlighted at the time a need for centralized security checks for raw footage, something that, as of 2018, appeared to have been institutionalized in the form of the Information Bank.⁹⁷

Having received production approval, materials would be sent to a specific media office, designated by the Media Judiciary Committee, for development and distribution.⁹⁸ The office in question would be notified via its designated liaison to the Information Bank.⁹⁹ These liaisons, who were always security-cleared by the Media Security Office, served as a coupling link between it, the Information Bank, and their home production office—they shuttled messages, physically, and data back and forth between all three.¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting that media offices charged with covering media-worthy events were often, but not necessarily, the same offices that got commissioned with further editing and production.¹⁰¹ Also, it would appear that the bulk of materials captured by field media operatives is gathered for later editing, montage, and publication,¹⁰² with media liaisons at the Information Bank representing the offices charged with further editing and production.¹⁰³

The activities of Information Bank liaisons were strictly limited and their movements were closely monitored at all times.¹⁰⁴ The data collectors reported that *amni* operatives seconded to the Information Bank would always try to ensure that there were no unnecessary interactions between permanent employees and office liaisons in order to minimize the risk of unauthorized access to—and thus leakage

90 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

91 Ibid.

92 Author interview, DC05, April 2018. This will also be thoroughly discussed in the next section.

93 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Al-Tamimi, “The Archivist: Media Fitna in the Islamic State.”

97 More details on the workings of the Information Bank are discussed in Almohammad and Winter.

98 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

99 Ibid.

100 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

101 Ibid.

102 Author interview, DC03, May 2018.

103 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

104 Ibid.

from—the archives.¹⁰⁵ As one data collector put it, “access to information and archives [in the Information Bank] is highly compartmentalized” and “operatives who are tasked with storing and sharing media materials are not allowed to access information on other departments,” like the Directorates for Services or Mosques and Proselytization.¹⁰⁶ If such information was desired, operatives “are required to present a form from their respective department to get access,” something that was ultimately the decision of the emir of the Information Bank, who “has the power to deny, restrict, and/or permit” it.¹⁰⁷ The Media Judiciary Committee—which, lest one forget, oversaw the Bank’s operations with assistance from the Media Security Office—had stipulated that “any attempt to access information by operatives from outside the [B]ank or by [operatives at the Bank] without a permit or outside the scope of the specified department is a breach of code” and is thus “punishable.”¹⁰⁸

These security measures were strict for a reason.¹⁰⁹ For years now, the Islamic State has been racked by intra-organizational tensions regarding the issue of *takfir* (excommunication). Recently, this manifested most clearly in the context of its media operations, with a series of dissident pro-Islamic State outlets going to great lengths to undermine the monopoly of the Central Media Directorate in stipulating caliphate policy.¹¹⁰ With this in mind, it seems likely that these strictures were not just in place to protect against external incursions, but to limit the prospect of internal leaks and exploitations, too.¹¹¹

Based on a document declassified by the DoD in August 2018, Milton identified a three-tiered system for quality control and dissemination of propaganda material, each level of which relies on encrypted chatrooms.¹¹² The system consists of three chatrooms: one for pre-publication and review, one for publication, and one for discussion.¹¹³ This online structure is not necessarily mutually exclusive from that identified in this more recent data. Specifically, the pre-publication document states:¹¹⁴

“Everything you want to publish should be put in this room to be reviewed by the brothers in the room ... It is not permissible to publish (video releases, photo reports, individual images, breaking news images and statements) unless the Committee approves it. After the review is completed, and following the recommendations of the committee, the final version should be delivered to the (publishing) group ...”

The data indicates the existence of a similar system, one that saw materials captured by distant branches or remote media operatives being transmitted, online, to specific *amni* operatives working in the Central Media Directorate.¹¹⁵ The so-called Digital Units, entities that operated under the oversight of the Unified Security Center, were charged with a wide array of cyber operations, including but not

105 Ibid.

106 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 For a review of the Islamic State’s information security strategy, see Almoammad and Winter.

110 Thomas Joscelyn, “Islamic State radio tries to quell controversy over takfir,” FDD’s Long War Journal, September 26, 2017; Price and al-’Ubaydi; Al-Tamimi, “Internal Conflicts in the Islamic State’s Media Department;” Cole Bunzel, “A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State’s Ideological Divide,” Jihadica, June 5, 2018; Cole Bunzel, “The Islamic State’s Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the ‘Silsila ‘Ilmiyya,” CTC Sentinel 11:9 (2018); Cole Bunzel, “Ideological Infighting in the Islamic State,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019); Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “Dissent in the Islamic State: The Controversy Over Abu Ya’qub al-Maqdisi,” aymennjawad.org, September 27, 2018; Aymenn Al-Tamimi, “An Internal Report on Extremism in the Islamic State,” aymennjawad.org, November 1, 2018.

111 Almoammad and Winter.

112 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid. “Document: General Guidance and Instructions,” p. 5.

115 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC03, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, December 2018.

limited to receiving raw propaganda materials from distant branches and remote media operatives.¹¹⁶ Since the Information Bank was not equipped with internet connection for security reasons, it seems that these same operatives were charged with transporting these materials to it physically, after storing them on memory cards or flash drives.

To this end, it is conceivable that a pre-publication process similar to that outlined in the declassified documents was still in place as of 2018. That said, there is no way to state this definitively.

Security

After the convoluted pre-editing and notification procedures outlined above had been completed, approved raw materials made their way back to the media offices for post-production and distribution.

While they were moderately less secretive than the Information Bank, the Islamic State's media offices—of which there were a number in eastern Syria in 2018—nonetheless operated clandestinely. In order to keep this up, each office had a security officer who worked in parallel with the administrative leadership. Operating rather like political commissars in Soviet military units, they worked in parallel to the Media Office's activities, focusing primarily on reporting and monitoring to make sure that the Office in question stayed in line.¹¹⁷ To that end, they were charged with:¹¹⁸

1. maximizing the office's operational secrecy and information security;
2. limiting personal interactions between different media teams;
3. ensuring the physical security of the office's operational base and prohibiting unauthorized entry to it;
4. approving and delivering purchase orders;
5. inspecting and keeping records on all equipment and materials; and
6. delivering specially designated equipment and personnel to cover media-related events.

In addition to the security officer, media offices were also required to host an *amni* secondee known as the "internal *amni*."¹¹⁹ While the security officer answered to the overall leadership of the media office in question on security-related matters, the internal *amni* reported only to the Media Security Office.¹²⁰ They focused on mitigating internal security risks and were charged with:¹²¹

1. evaluating the operations of security officers;
2. receiving and assessing reports on production team performance;
3. ensuring the direct delivery of raw media materials to *amni* media operatives; and
4. reporting on the performance of other *amni* media operatives operating at the office in question.

116 Ibid.

117 This observation was highlighted by one of the reviewers.

118 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC05, August 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-21-4. It is noteworthy that the documents did not identify the title of the security officer. These details were obtained during the interview.

119 Author interview, DC06, July 2018.

120 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC05, August 2018.

121 Author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-07-2. The memo orders monitoring *amni* points at media centers and a plea to *amni* operatives not to take additional pictures during the coverage of events by media operatives. *Amni* media operatives mentioned in items ii, iii, and iv are those who are tasked with monitoring the operations of the production team. (See the section on handling raw material.)

On occasion, internal *amni* operatives were also charged with media-related functions like, for example, photography and editing.¹²² In this context, they answered to the leadership of their media offices.¹²³ They also collected and dispatched performance reports from the *amni* operatives charged with protecting and monitoring the production team, grading them according to anything from production efficiency and security evaluations (e.g., how capable they are in producing audio-visual materials during offensive or defensive operations).¹²⁴

Media offices were thus insulated from the outside world by a dual system of intelligence oversight, one that relied on interdepartmental cooperation and parallel surveillance activities. This allowed for a high degree of operational opacity and facilitated effective safeguarding of both raw and processed media materials. Working together on complementary, not intersecting, tasks, security officers and internal *amnis* enforced a standardized approach toward information security, one that extended right down to the level of individual media operatives, who were expected to conform to a strict set of behavioral guidelines and restrictions.¹²⁵ At all times, scrupulous security officers were charged with ensuring that they used encryption to ensure secure communications, data transmission, and media archiving; remained disconnected from the internet at all times except when on designated devices housed in specific locations; and masked their identities and affiliation on social media at all times.¹²⁶

It is worth noting that for any media-related activities that required access to the internet, security officers stepped back to allow *amni* officials, who were charged with monitoring all media operatives' digital communications and activities, to take charge.¹²⁷ This speaks to the Islamic State's "policy of absolute secrecy," one that Whiteside also highlighted in his work on the Central Media Directorate back in 2016.¹²⁸

The Media Production Cycle

In this section, the report explores the media production cycle in eastern Syria in 2018. Building on the above, as well as the accounts of Miller and Mekhennet and Milton, the authors break it down into five stages: i) pre-production; ii) production; iii) assessment and approval; iv) editing; and v) publication.¹²⁹

Pre-Production

This stage comprises everything that preceded the production team's being sent out on assignment. Prior to describing it, it is worth delineating the two types of media production teams that exist.¹³⁰ The first was housed at a specific media office and was directed by the emir of said office, whereas the second was housed in an administrative directorate (e.g., the Directorate for Health or Directorate

122 Author interview, DC06, July 2018.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, June 2018.

125 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*. "Documents: The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid;" "Information Security;" and "General Guidance and Instructions." It is noteworthy that while the interviews did not provide details on the use of encryption tools for archiving data at the information bank, the use of encrypted communication applications and the importance of using encryption to safeguard information by media operative were highlighted in author interview, DC03, January 2018; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

126 "The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid;" "Information Security;" "General Guidance and Instructions."

127 Author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, May 20, 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

128 Whiteside, "Lighting the Path," p. 24.

129 Miller and Mekhennet; Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

130 Author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018.

for Mosques and Proselytization) and answered to the emir of said directorate.¹³¹ Media personnel in the former were generally considered to be more skilled than those serving in the latter, but in any case, both were expected to follow the same directives and restrictions.¹³² The Unified Security Center, through its Media Security Office, orchestrated and monitored the operations of the latter type of teams.¹³³ Their activities were limited to producing raw materials (e.g., videos, still images, audios, and text) that pertained to the operations of their directorates (e.g., Health Directorate, Mosques and Proselytization Directorate, etc.).¹³⁴

All pre-production guidelines were authored by the Media Judiciary Committee.¹³⁵ Once issued, the production team in question was required to structure its proposed coverage in accordance with what had been stipulated. Both types of teams had to produce materials and operate according to the pre-production guidelines of the Media Judiciary Committee.¹³⁶ As discussed later in this section, only members of media offices could negotiate such guidelines. These guidelines included directives regarding:

1. the thematic focus of the media products;
2. the general scope of coverage;
3. the nature of the events to be covered (e.g., executions, daily life, battlefield gains);
4. the specific form of documentation (i.e., text, audio, still images, and videos); and
5. any other miscellaneous production preferences, restrictions, and cautions.¹³⁷

The captured and declassified documents from 2018 provide a prototypical example of pre-production guidelines regarding corporal and capital punishments.¹³⁸ Media operatives, they detailed, were instructed to make sure that they avoided displaying the faces of those receiving the punishments; appeared happy while reading out the pre-punishment declaration; and documented the victims' pronunciation of the *shahadah* when executing Muslims.¹³⁹ On top of this, as the data indicates, the detainees themselves receive pre-production coaching.¹⁴⁰ As one collector put it:

“Prior to executing foreign detainees, [Islamic State] media operatives trained them for their

131 Ibid.

132 Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

133 Almohammad and Winter (forthcoming 2019).

134 Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

135 Ibid.

136 Author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018. To review examples of the committee's guidelines, see Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*: “Clarification Regarding the Media of the Islamic State;” “General Guidance and Instructions;” “Organizational Structure of the Media Office;” “Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media;” “Responsibilities of the Media Offices towards Al-Bayan Radio;” “Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency;” and “The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid.”

137 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018. Islamic State documents that detail specific instructions and restriction on the production of propaganda material were released with Milton's report *Pulling Back the Curtain*. This includes “The Essential Duties of the Media Mujahid;” “General Guidance and Instructions;” “Information Security;” “Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Amaq Agency;” “Responsibilities of Media Offices towards Military Media;” and “Summary Advice for Media Mujahid.”

138 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*. See also “General Guidance and Instructions.”

139 Ibid. Author interview, DC04, September 2018; audio-6-Sep-18-1, audio-6-Sep-18-2, audio-6-Sep-18-3, and audio-6-Sep-18-4. The recordings feature a speech by a former emir in the directorate of Mosques and Proselytization, who was detained immediately after the speech. It was a clear dissent against Islamic State practices pertaining to injustices, and the audios are evidence of a schism inside Islamic State ranks regarding method and creed. The speaker argued against killing those who pronounced *shahadah* and denounced those who kill individuals who utter the statement.

140 Author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

roles in the propaganda videos, including how they move, their body language, and the detainees' pre-execution statement ... [One official] was in charge of preparing detainees and media operatives prior to carrying out an execution for propaganda purposes. The training also aims to allow media operative to obtain the best possible pre-execution testimony from detainees."¹⁴¹

In certain circumstances, like if a given media office wanted to experiment with a new methodology, pre-production guidelines were negotiable. In such cases, media offices filed specific requests to the Media Judiciary Committee through their designated representatives, a process that was described as follows:¹⁴²

"While the Committee commonly provides the guidelines for the production of media materials, representatives of media agencies and offices can suggest the production of propaganda materials even if they deviate from the Committee's guidelines. Such suggestions have to be [put] in front of the Committee. However, the Committee has the final say and is tasked with providing the religious and tactical justification for the production of such materials. In any case, the permission of the Committee must be secured before producing any propaganda material. In addition to permissions, the Committee provides the general guidelines [regarding the] nature of the product, the date of release, religious justification, and the general aim of the media product."

Once agreement was reached between the media office in question and the Committee, the negotiated terms would be submitted to the Media Council for approval.¹⁴³ Approval was either granted or denied by the Council, which would inform the media office liaison of its decision through the Committee.¹⁴⁴ In turn, the liaison that submitted the original terms would update his home media office.¹⁴⁵ In sum, everything hinged on directives that were conceived of by the Council and issued by the Committee.¹⁴⁶

Importantly, there was no direct communication between the Council and the media offices it has authority over. However, there is evidence to suggest that should it have wanted a specific issue to be covered in a specific way, the Council could prepare special commissions, which would be issued via the Media Security Office.¹⁴⁷ It would thus appear that the Media Security Office served an executive authority for the Council, something that was entrusted with anything from communicating and enforcing its directives to handling the logistics associated with plans to establish of new offices.¹⁴⁸

141 Author interview, DC04, May 2018. This account is corroborated in Rukmini Callimachi, "The Horror Before the Beheadings," *New York Times*, October 25, 2014; Aki Peritz, "Why do Islamic State hostages give such calm propaganda speeches right before they're killed?" *Washington Post*, September 23, 2014.

142 Author interview, DC06, May 2018.

143 Author interview, DC01, June 2018.

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid.

146 Author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

147 Ibid.; author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018; PHOTO-2018-07-21-3a and b, and PHOTO-2018-07-21-4; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-2. It is important to stress again that this effort could not obtain any data (interviews or internal documents) that shows direct communication between media offices and the media council. Moreover, PHOTO-2018-07-21-3a and b are two pictures of the same memo that summons the media operatives of the eastern region/district to the first media point. It names three operatives. PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1 displays an internal memo in which the author, an *amni* operative, orders a media operative to transport media equipment and satellite internet.

148 Author interview, DC01, June 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC01, September 2018; PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2. The picture displays an internal Islamic State memo. The author of the memo, an *amni* operative, orders the emir of a media office to set up and launch a new media office.

Production

The next stage of the media cycle was initiated at the behest of the Media Council.¹⁴⁹ As well as issuing a start date for the shoot in question, the Council would provide the Media Judiciary Committee with specific instructions regarding production guidelines, timelines, and responsibilities.¹⁵⁰ This information would then be relayed, via the Media Security Office, to the media office that had been selected for the assignment in question.¹⁵¹

As discussed in Section 5, for especially sensitive projects, *amni* media operatives were charged with meeting the designated production team at the designated locations on a specific date and at a specific time, and accompanying them throughout the coverage.¹⁵² Specifically, they were tasked with:¹⁵³

1. safeguarding members of the production team;
2. monitoring and reporting on the production team's performance; and
3. ensuring that the production team abides by the media committee's specific production guidelines.

Once shooting was over, they would take the production team back to its home media office along with the raw data, which was then transported, having been date-tagged and coded according to its contents, to the Information Bank.¹⁵⁴

Assessment and Approval

At the Information Bank, a team of editors would weed out any footage or recordings that did not fulfill minimum production guidelines in terms of content and quality.¹⁵⁵ After this, a separate team would embark on the security-related editing and archiving procedure.¹⁵⁶ Simultaneously, it would notify the Media Judiciary Committee of the materials' receipt.¹⁵⁷

As mentioned above, if media materials received pre-editorial clearance from the Bank, raw footage and recordings would then be carefully catalogued, assigned a unique number and file, and made available to the media office charged with turning them into finished propaganda.¹⁵⁸ These files would contain specific production guidelines stipulated by the Media Judiciary Committee, as well as details regarding the designated editorial team and the office in which it was to be housed.¹⁵⁹ In addition to

149 Author interview, DC01, June 2018.

150 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

151 Ibid.; author interview, DC01, July 2018: PHOTO-2018-07-21-3a and b; author interview, DC01, September 8, 2018: PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-8-2; author interview, DC01, September 2018: PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-1 and PHOTO-2018-Sep-23-2. The pictures of the memos suggest that orders to produce media materials, ship media-related equipment, and set up media offices are received from *amni* media operatives.

152 Author interview, DC04, May 2018.

153 Author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

154 Author interview, DC05, April 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

155 Author interview, DC03, May 2018.

156 Author interview, DC05, April 2018. For detailed review, see the section on "Archiving and Assessing Raw Material."

157 Author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

158 Author interviews, DC02, DC04, and DC05, May 2018.

159 Ibid.; author interview, DC03, May 2018.

this, the file also denoted an expected date for initial completion.¹⁶⁰

Editing

At this point in the process, all pre-approved footage would be provided to the media office's design, montage, and printing teams, which incorporated the Media Judiciary Council's comments and instructions, along with any additional ones made by officials at the Information Bank, as they worked up finalized materials for publication.¹⁶¹ The emir of the office in question oversaw these efforts and, once they had been completed, would be charged with giving initial approval to them.¹⁶² Once the initial approval had been granted, the office's Committee liaison would present the materials to the Media Judiciary Committee, which decided whether they were ready for publication or whether further editing was required.¹⁶³ If they were deemed to be sufficiently polished, they would be relayed to the Media Council, which had the final say over publication, rejection, or revisions.¹⁶⁴ It is unclear if this was done for all propaganda products or if it was just the case for videos and written materials.

As discussed earlier, based on documents captured by the DoD in 2016 and 2017, Milton's account of Islamic State editorial processes spoke of a tripartite editorial system based on a network of secret chatrooms—one for pre-publication editorial discussion, one for publication itself, and one for strategic discussions on media-related issues.¹⁶⁵ While these chatrooms likely still exist and, based on more recent data, they have also been created for purposes that go beyond media-related matters (e.g., the procurement of arms and discussion of war tactics, etc.),¹⁶⁶ the approval process described above appears to be more rigorous, involving a range of entities and operatives. This could be because:

1. the authors of the documents did not detail the whole process, specifying all entities and procedures involved in approval and feedback;
2. the virtual approval and feedback system only applied to media produced in distant provinces or remote media offices in Syria and Iraq;
3. these practices were limited to the Islamic State's media operations in eastern Syria; or
4. new practices had been implemented since those documents were first distributed.

Publication

On the issue of distribution, both in-theater and externally, much of what the data collectors reported reaffirmed what was suggested in the DoD-captured documents.¹⁶⁷ On the external front, the data collectors reported that a digital team handled the management of online accounts associated with

160 Ibid.

161 Ibid.; "Organizational Structure of Media Office." Filming team is also an element of the production team. This section assesses the operations and practices of other elements of the production team.

162 Author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC01, July 2018.

163 Author interviews, DC04, DC05, and DC02, May 2018.

164 Author interview, DC01, June 2018.

165 Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

166 Author interview, DC03, November 2018; interview materials and pictures and audio messages from a secret chatroom for arms trade: PHOTO-2018-11-20-1, PHOTO-2018-11-20-2, PHOTO-2018-11-20-3, PHOTO-2018-11-20-4, AUDIO-2018-11-20-01, AUDIO-2018-11-20-02, AUDIO-2018-11-20-03, AUDIO-2018-11-20-04, AUDIO-2018-11-20-05. PHOTO-2018-11-20-2 displays a post and a picture of a rifle. The rifle appears to be the property of the U.S. government (possibly stolen from Iraqi forces). PHOTO-2018-11-20-3 displays a walkie-talkie and a suicide belt. The walkie-talkie is priced at \$250, in both Arabic and Russian. The post displaying the suicide belt advertises two suicide belts (TNT) on sale for only \$50.

167 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC02, April 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018; "Organizational Structure of Media Office."

propaganda distribution, a description that corresponds to what the documents refer to as the “exterior media team.”¹⁶⁸ Because media offices were prohibited from using the internet for information security reasons, one can logically extrapolate that these digital teams operated from separate locations.¹⁶⁹ That this was the case—and that such external facilities were closely monitored by the Media Security Office—was confirmed multiple times by the data collectors.¹⁷⁰

One of the documents on information security stated that media products were distributed online by a *nashir*.¹⁷¹ The translator of the document noted that “the word used here is *nashir*” and that “it is not clear if the author meant *Nashir* the institution or the word *nashir* in Arabic which means publisher.” Given what is already known about the means by which the Islamic State publishes its propaganda online—i.e., through a network of highly secretive channels on Telegram that are all labeled *Nashir*—it seems likely that the author was referring to *Nashir* the institution.

While the data collectors did not speak to this institution specifically, they did make mention of a subsidiary network that supports its efforts, the *Nashir News Agency*. Specifically, they reported that:¹⁷²

“[T]here are individuals outside [Islamic State]-held territories who assist the organization in uploading and disseminating the videos. Particularly, there are agents in Lebanon who handle the operation [multiple data collectors mentioned operatives in Lebanon]. Those individuals are considered media operatives. Operatives in Lebanon are attached to Nashir news agency. [...] They are consistently renewing and providing links due to the continuous removal of such material. There are also individuals who handle the dissemination from European countries like the UK, Germany, and Sweden.”

It is highly significant that the data collectors reported on the *Nashir News Agency*. It was and continues to be an unofficial entity that operates voluntarily, so the fact that they did report on it speaks to its importance to the group. In any case, it should not be confused with the original *Nashir* channels, which, based on the data collectors’ accounts, were and still are almost certainly operated by officials in the Media Security Office.¹⁷³

Conclusion

As Volders noted in 2016, shifts in the shape and inner workings of insurgent organizations are bound to have significant implications for intelligence and counterterrorism practitioners.¹⁷⁴ Hence, by understanding them, it is possible to speculate more accurately as to how the leaders involved will deal with critical trade-offs between competing objectives when such tradeoffs arise.¹⁷⁵ Such challenges lie at the heart of successful insurgency, and the above discussion speaks to how the Islamic State has

168 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC03, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, January 2018; author interview, DC03, May 2018; author interview, DC06, May 2018; author interview, DC04, May 2018. See Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*. The duties of the exterior media team are outlined in “Organizational Structure of Media Office” and “General Guidance and Instructions.” For instance, in “General Guidance and Instructions,” this subset of media operatives is instructed on how to post pictures on social media and what kind of hashtags to use.

169 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC06, July 2018; author interview, DC05, August 2018. Also see “Information Security.”

170 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC03, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, January 2018.

171 “Information Security.” See also Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*.

172 Author interview, DC04, May 2018.

173 Author interview, DC01, January 2018; author interview, DC03, January 2018; author interview, DC02, January 2018; author interview, DC06, January 2018.

174 Brecht Volders, “Assessing the terrorist threat: impact of the group’s organizational design?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39:2 (2016).

175 Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing violent covert organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

sought to navigate through them, specifically in the context of its media operations.

Based on interview data and audio-visual materials gathered in eastern Syria during the first nine months of 2018, the above analysis greatly enriches the understanding of how this organization works on both a strategic and tactical basis. It provides critical insight as to how it managed to maintain a steady (though much-depleted) production of propaganda through 2018 and 2019 while simultaneously retaining a semblance of organizational cohesion in the face of mounting territorial losses and metastasizing internal rifts.

Building on Milton's account, this report scrutinized the administrative hierarchy of the Islamic State's Central Media Directorate, assessing how it cultivated such a high degree of operational opacity, fluidity, and effectiveness. Specifically, it examined the administrative infrastructure that undergirds its interdepartmental oversight, monitoring bodies, and media production and distribution. Among other things, this enabled the authors to demystify the elaborate media-related activities of the Directorate of General Security, especially as they pertain to operational security and personnel management. The findings suggest that its subsidiary, the Media Security Office, was central to the monitoring and reporting systems that the Islamic State had in place to keep track of the performance of individual media cadres and offices.

All of the above points to a high degree of systemic standardization, something that can loosely be defined as the implementation of pre-determined norms and/or technical specifications that clarify guidelines, restrictions, and rules to achieve an optimum level of operational order and quality.¹⁷⁶ In symphony with Milton's 2018 assessment, these findings demonstrate that the Islamic State expended a great deal of effort to devise and establish workable forms of these norms, which include its efforts to:

1. define and limit the scope of media personnel's operations and interactions within the media department and with the security apparatus;
2. guide and restrain the activities of media operatives and the use of information assets;
3. describe the processes and entities involved in the production of media material; and
4. ensure desired quality and evaluation schemes.

With this in mind, it can reasonably be concluded that the Central Media Directorate employed both *de jure* and *de facto* standardization measures. The former refers to its many codes and guidelines that are geared toward defining and regulating its propaganda practices.¹⁷⁷ The latter refers to the more organic promotion of uniformity through the selective adoption of pre-defined rules, restrictions, and technical specifications for operations and final products.¹⁷⁸ Synergizing both, the Islamic State has systematically fostered uniformity and consistency across the full scope of its media activities.¹⁷⁹

In large part, these efforts seem to have arisen because the Islamic State is obsessed with brand credibility—that is to say, the degree of believability of its information.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, besides security, these convoluted media standards and regulations seem to be specifically geared toward ensuring quality

176 Joseph Farrell and Garth Saloner, "Standardization, compatibility, and innovation," *RAND Journal of Economics* (1985): pp. 70-83; Paul David and Shane Greenstein, 1990. "The economics of compatibility standards: an introduction to recent research," *Economics of Innovation and New Technology* 1:1-2 (1990): pp. 3-41; "ISO/IEC Guide 2:2004—Standardization and related activities: General vocabulary" (Geneva, Switzerland: International Organization for Standardization: definition 3.2).

177 Nils Brunsson, Andreas Rasche, and David Seidl, "The dynamics of standardization: Three perspectives on standards in organization studies," *Organization Studies* 33:5-6 (2012): pp. 613-632.

178 Ibid.

179 Nils Brunsson, "Standardization and uniformity," in Nils Brunsson and Bengt Jacobsson eds., *A World of Standards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 138-150.

180 Tulin Erdem and Joffre Swait, "Brand Credibility, Brand Consideration, and Choice," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31:1 (2004): pp. 191-198.

throughout the various stages of production. They speak to the strategic and systematic thinking of the architects of the Islamic State's propaganda machine, the design of which privileges consistency, efficiency, uniformity, and quality—all of which are central to its credibility.

These findings are a testament to the value of in-theater primary data collection. While high-risk, such research methods stand to provide critically important insights into the day-to-day workings of covert organizations like the Islamic State.¹⁸¹ Understanding how the Islamic State ran its Central Media Directorate during 2018 provides critical insights as to how its future operating structure, both inside and outside of Syria, will be shaped. While they are limited by virtue of the fact that they are speculative, they are based on informed reasoning and cross-validation, and the authors believe they are necessary in order to identify effective countermeasures against the post-territorial Islamic State.

Future efforts to corroborate this approach would benefit from using similar methods in other localities. This would further improve the understanding of the enemy's organizational assets and operational processes, thereby allowing practitioners to make better-informed decisions about how to deal with its future menace.

181 Milton provided a persuasive argument regarding the analytical value of the Islamic State's official documents in *Pulling Back the Curtain*.



Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT