

## CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

### ISIS Strategic Communication is Derailed

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

1. **Subject:** ISIS Strategic Communication is Derailed.
2. **Purpose:** An analysis of whether ISIS has changed its strategic communication (SC) messaging by purposefully decreasing its presence in mass media and social media, as a strategy, or whether ISIS has just adapted its SC approach to current realities.
3. **Introduction:** The Islamic State caliphate grew rapidly by attracting a substantial number of foreign fighters through SC. It achieved an unprecedented global recruiting success; therefore, SC could be considered ISIS's center of gravity.<sup>1</sup> Recently, ISIS has reduced its exposure in the media and social network services (SNS). ISIS seems to be struggling with an unfavorable situation and is trying to restore its SC capability.
4. **Facts:**
  - a. The foundation for a productive and effective SC for ISIS was the administrative "Organizational Structure of Media Office," with specialized teams (filming, design, montage, etc.), processes, tasks, and responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> This requires specialists, secure locations, and access to technology.
  - b. ISIS had experienced drastic losses of media specialists, such as the ISIS minister of information and senior ISIS propaganda officials, following coalition attacks.<sup>3</sup>
  - c. Arrests of ISIS media and cyber operators in UK, Kuwait and other countries decreased the group's ability to use supporters outside of Iraq and Syria for their SC activities.<sup>4</sup>
  - d. Global SNS companies have blocked terror related accounts. Twitter suspended 125,000 accounts linked to ISIS.<sup>5</sup> Despite the continuous deletion of content, ISIS remains capable of

<sup>1</sup> Ian MacWilliam, "ISLAMIC STATE AND JIHADIST MEDIA STRATEGIES IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION", 2020,

[https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/web\\_macwilliam\\_dsc\\_vol9-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit](https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/web_macwilliam_dsc_vol9-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit) (accessed JUL 26, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The Media Office, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Organizational-structure-of-the-media-office.pdf> (accessed July 30, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "IS 'caliphate' defeated but Jihadist group remains a threat", March 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595> (accessed July 31, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Kuwait detains member of Islamic State cyber army: newspapers, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-security-cyberarmy-idUSKCN1111CT>, August 26, 2016 (accessed August 02, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> NBC News, "Twitter reveals it has suspended 125,000 ISIS-related accounts", FEB 5, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/twitter-reveals-it-has-suspended-125000-isis-related-accounts/> (accessed Aug 01, 2023).

publishing videos and other products on a variety of media and file-sharing sites, such as YouTube, Archive.org and Justpaste.it, to name a few.<sup>6</sup>

- e. Although it once exerted direct influence, holding territory widely in Syria and Iraq, ISIS hardly maintains its presence in the region. ISIS has been restricted in its economic activities due to the loss of its main sources of finance in the region, including oil smuggling, taxation, extortion, and looting. In 2016, ISIS's budget dropped to \$870 million from \$1.9 billion in 2014.<sup>7</sup> There is no clear evidence on recent ISIS resource levels, but the trend is likely to remain downward.
- f. ISIS's operational capability to carry out large-scale attacks has degraded and may focus on reconstituting its strength while focusing on smaller-scale attacks around the world.
- g. An Afghan branch of the Islamic State claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Pakistan on July 31, 2023, which killed at least 54 people at an election rally of a pro-Taliban party, in one of the deadliest Islamic State attacks in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. **Assessment:**

- a. As ISIS has lost SC manpower and facilities, especially media specialists and key facilities for media propaganda, ISIS is likely to need to reconstitute its media organization. However, it doesn't seem to be able to restore its capability for producing the same quality of SC.
- b. All global communities started to monitor ISIS's activities in mass media/social media along with major SNS companies, worrying that ISIS's diminished conventional presence would encourage a re-posturing towards an encouragement of "lone wolf" attacks or the development of disaggregated cells capable of attacks around the world. The blocking of accounts and the deletion of content by media companies led to a significant decrease in the ability to distribute propaganda around the world.
- c. The loss of territorial control, disrupted money flow, and isolation by neighbors have weakened ISIS's capabilities not only militarily, but also their capabilities and methods of SC. It means that ISIS may suffer from a lack of recruitment of fighters and media specialists to maintain the organization.
- d. ISIS could focus on conducting assassinations and suicide bombings globally to maintain its influence, however, ISIS will struggle to find affordable methods to achieve maximum impact on the international media.
- e. Recent claims of responsibility for their attacks have proven that they will attempt to retain the same SC whenever they have the opportunity and capability.

## 6. **Conclusions:**

- a. ISIS could try to restore its caliphate back to its prime. This will require a reconstitution of its former SC capabilities. However, the ability to do so appears out of reach for them at present.
- b. Despite their diminished influence, the threat from ISIS is not permanently eliminated. The ISIS ideology still endures and has not changed its basic philosophy of SC. ISIS considers SC to be one of the most important priorities of its organization.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff John Roberts, "Google and Internet Archive Are Top Choices for ISIS Propaganda, According to a New Study" Google and Internet Archive are Top Choice for ISIS Propaganda | Fortune, May 15, 2018, <https://fortune.com/2018/05/15/isis-propaganda-google-internet-archive/> (accessed August 01, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament, "The financing of ISIS", 2017, <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docNDB72AB0C101A6f025b6c7c114e24898f50f21716c64741867f06db8969186cfc184ae8892b0> (accessed July 31, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Anwarullah Khan and Riaz Khan, "IS claims responsibility for the bombing that killed 54 at a pro-Taliban election rally in Pakistan", Associated Press, 31 Jul 23.

- c. ISIS's reduced capacity for effective SC does not mean that ISIS decided to divert its SC strategy on the ground. It seems likely that it will take more time to reconstitute its organization in places other than Syria, such as Afghanistan and Africa.
- d. The current situation is unfavorable to maintain the same ISIS SC strategy. There are no easy SC strategies for ISIS.
- e. CSAG assesses that the current ISIS SC situation is due to a tremendous loss of capacity for ISIS and decapitation of key leadership and not to a deliberate change of the ISIS SC.