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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: THE STATE DEPARTMENT VERSUS THE ISLAMIC STATE

by

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June 2017

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As the battle against the Islamic State unfolds on the battleground and in cyberspace, the U.S. government has declared its commitment to disrupt—and ultimately defeat—the terrorist group. The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and ISIS, has become one of the most deadly and influential terrorist groups in the Middle East. Strategic communications cannot be underestimated.

The unit tasked with countering the terrorist group's propaganda and recruitment efforts, the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), has recently restructured to improve its efforts. This thesis examines the Center's mission, strategy, and communications to assess the efficacy of its efforts to counter the Islamic State terrorist group and degrade its ability to recruit foreign fighters. It analyzes the Islamic State and introduces the CSCC's successor, the Global Engagement Center. Finally, it offers research findings and provides recommendations for future consideration.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: THE STATE DEPARTMENT VERSUS THE ISLAMIC STATE

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ABSTRACT

As the battle against the Islamic State unfolds on the battleground and in cyberspace, the U.S. government has declared its commitment to disrupt—and ultimately defeat—the terrorist group. The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and ISIS, has become one of the most deadly and influential terrorist groups in the Middle East. Strategic communications cannot be underestimated.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CSCC   Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications

DOT   Digital Outreach team

Daesh   Islamic State as an Arabic acronym

GEC   Global Engagement Center

IS   Islamic State

ISIL   Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISF   Iraqi Security Forces

ISIS   Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

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I.   INTRODUCTION

A.   MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The U.S. government has declared its commitment to disrupt and ultimately defeat the terrorist group the Islamic State (also referred to as IS, ISIL, ISIS, or Daesh) and the threat it poses to Iraq and the wider international community. As part of this objective, the United States is conducting counterterrorism operations using both kinetic and non-kinetic instruments of national power. One of the key non-kinetic efforts was led by the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) through its use of counter messaging, which is intended to reduce support for ISIL and other radical groups. However, while the United States has made substantial gains by conducting targeted airstrikes since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve, the Islamic State has been able to recruit an unprecedented number of foreign fighters. This thesis will examine the following question: What is the efficacy of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications' efforts to disrupt the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters?

B.   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

America's enemies have noted the importance of strategic communications. Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has stated that "more than half of the battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of Muslims."[1] The United States does not appear to realize the importance of that battle. It often emphasizes more traditional kinetic means on the battlefield, as evident in former President Barack Obama's statement during an address to the United Nations: "The only language

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1 "Understanding Jihadists in Their Own Words," *Now*, accessed April 7, 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/specialreports/565067-understanding-jihadists-in-their-own-words.

understood by killers like this is the language of force."[2] He was referring to the jihadist group The Islamic State, and shortly afterward, the president announced that the United States would target the terrorist group by coordinating an air campaign, which is now known as Operation Inherent Resolve.[3] However, experts argue that a campaign centered on the use of force is not likely to defeat ISIL or its powerful ideology. The need for an information campaign to counter the group's narrative is imperative.

The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was established on September 9, 2011, by Executive Order 13584.[4] The center launched its media campaign—Think Again, Turn Away— in December 2013.[5] The CSCC was realigned in 2016 and renamed the Global Engagement Center. The change suggested the State Department recognized the CSCC's lack of effectiveness;[6] however, without an understanding of the limitations of the CSCC, it seems unlikely that a new organization will be more effective. Additionally, there are many scholars who claim that the State Department may not be the right entity to conduct such a campaign, because its methods are questionable and it effectiveness unclear.[7] This is an important issue if the United States is to align its policies with its strategy efficiently.

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2 David S. Sorenson, "Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the appeal of ISIS," *Parameters* 44, no 3, (Autumn 2014): 27, http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/Parameters/Issues/Autumn_2014/USAWC_Quarterly _Parameters_Autumn_v44n3.pdf.

3Kathleen Bouzis, "Countering the Islamic State: U.S. Counterterrorism Measures*," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2015) 1–2, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2015.1046302.

4Executive Order No. 13584, 3 C.F.R. 586 (2011-206).

5Rita Katz, "Think Again Turn Away: The State Department is Fumbling Online," *Time*, September 16, 2014, http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/.

6U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, "A New Center for Global Engagement," Department of the State, accessed January 20, 2016. https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/251066.htm.

7Tom McCauley, "The War of Ideas on the Internet: An Asymmetric Conflict in Which the Strong Become Weak," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways toward Terrorism and Genocide*, 8, no.1 (March 2015): 81, doi: 10.1080/17467586.2014.1002511.

Although assessing the efficacy of the State Department's methods to counter the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters is relevant, these efforts are seemingly falling short, considering that the group's recruiting numbers indicate that it had enrolled over 6,000 new members in June 2014.[8] According to some experts, the United States' effort to disrupt and defeat the Islamic State may not only be ineffective, but in fact, it may be counter-productive, as the State Department's efforts may actually be aiding ISIS' recruitment efforts.[9]

C.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this section is to review the literature on the policies and strategies of the State Department's CSCC, and in particular, the methods the United States uses to counter the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters. The literature review begins with a review of the Islamic State's use of propaganda and the State Department's counter messaging strategy, followed by a review of the scholarly discourse on how to challenge the narrative of the Islamic State. This thesis will explore these works and others to assess the efficacy of the State Department's CSCC and identify potential alternative strategies that the State Department's restructured Global Engagement Center could adopt to increase its efficiency.

1.   Islamic State Propaganda

Scholars suggest the Islamic State's unprecedented rise has contributed to a return of mainstream attentiveness to jihadist propaganda.[10] According to

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8 Christopher J. Bolan, "On Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS" *Parameters,* (Winter 2014–2015): 26, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/Pubs/Parameters/Issues/Winter_201415/Parameters _Winter2014_15_v44n4.pdf.

9Alex P Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the Islamic State," (research paper), International Center for Counter-Terrorism-The Huge, 2015.

10Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *Quilliam*, June 12, 2015, https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy/.

one expert, "the Islamic State has captured the imagination of the international media like no terrorist group before it."[11] This view holds that we must understand the Islamic State's propaganda if we are to counter it effectively. In order to interpret the Islamic State's comprehensive media strategy, it must be broken down into its fundamental parts. Experts suggest that if this can be accomplished, a more measured approach to the war of ideas can be realized.[12]

One misconception discussed in the literature is that brutality is the main or singular theme of Islamic State propaganda. On the contrary, Charlie Winter argues that the Islamic State's strategic messaging covers a full spectrum of ideas to include five additional themes: "besides brutality, it is preoccupied with mercy, victimhood, belonging, militarism, and of course, apocalyptic utopianism."[13] These themes must be analyzed to gain a better understanding of the Islamic State. A review of literature indicates that the Islamic State's strategy is based on its propaganda that promotes finding one's identity, belonging, purpose or spiritual fulfillment.[14] This strategy allows the terrorist group to allure potential recruits, who for the lack of a positive more attractive counter or alternative narrative would choose to either join the Islamic State to escape a worst fate or simply change their current lifestyle.

Scholars have declared, "there is no one-size-fits-all messaging strategy for any political movement, jihadist or otherwise."[15] With regard to understanding Islamic State propaganda, one must look beyond the violence and examine how

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[11]Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate," 8.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., 18.

[14]Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State" *The Soufan Group*, accessed July 21, 2014. http://soufangroup.com/the-islamic-state/.

[15]Winter, "Virtual Caliphate," 13; and Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans by Konrad and Jean Lerner, (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1973), 34.

their declaration of a caliphate has affected the Islamic State's strategy.[16] Moreover, the Islamic State's messaging strategy is centered on a wide array of audiences to include current and potential opponents, the international public, active members, disseminators and potential recruits.[17] These messages are tailored to fit one or more of these groups, considering they are nebulous and commonly overlap. The State Department's CSCC has focused its counter messaging strategy on potential recruits, which is only a portion of the audience listed above that the Islamic State targets.[18]

2.   The State Department's Method

CSCC director Alberto Fernandez described the mission of the State Department's CSCC during a congressional hearing in 2012:

> CSCC was established at the direction of the President and the Secretary of State to coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism, particularly al-Qaeda and its allies… We work very closely with the bureau of Counterterrorism, other department bureaus and other agencies… So our goal is to move quickly, to respond effectively and contest the space, which had been for too long monopolized by our adversaries.[19]

In addition to its mission, the CSCC had three guiding principles for its operation: "contest the space, redirect the conversation, and confound the adversary." These principles make examining the audience, the adversary

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16 The Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared his organization as 'caliph' on 29 June 2014; Abu Muhammad al-Anani, "This is the promise of Allah," *al Furqan Foundation*, 29 June 2014.

17al-Anani, "This is the Promise of Allah," 28.

18One of the missions of the CSCC as detailed in a statement provided by Alberto Fernandez, coordinator of the CSCC. U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation. "The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications: Mission, Operations, and Impact : Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee On Foreign Affairs," House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, August 2, 2012 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012).

19Fernandez, "State Department's Center," 6.

(Islamic State), and the appropriate themes extremely important in developing a counter-messaging strategy.[20]

The State Department's CSCC was comprised of three distinctive areas. The intelligence and analysis section of the center was responsible for gathering and analyzing information essential to the center's mission to counter violent extremism.[21] The plans and operations section was intended to design and implement communications strategies to counter violent extremist ability to recruit and win support.[22] Lastly, the Digital Outreach Team was tasked with directly countering the narrative of violent extremists.[23] Academics argue, however, that countering the narrative (a defensive mission) is only part of the solution.[24] Additionally, some suggest that it is necessary to develop alternative narratives, which would address issues of belonging and purpose. The State Department's CSCC did not addressed these pursuits.[25]

3.   Challenging the Narrative of ISIL

Outside of the State Department, many scholars and analysts have debated various methods of countering the Islamic State's narrative. Some have gone as far as suggesting ways to not only counter the existing Islamic State narrative, but also construct a viable alternative narrative.[26] Of these sources, most agree that the State Department is not efficient at countering the Islamic State. Due to the lack of efficient solicitation of assistance and support from the Muslim community, some critics suggest that the government in general may not be the best entity to carry out the mission of counter-messaging.

20Fernandez, "State Department's Center," 7.

21Ibid., 6.

22Ibid., 7.

23 Ibid.

24 Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative," 15.

25 Ibid., and Fernandez, "State Department's Center," 6.

26 Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative," 6–17.

In recent history, pundits suggest that U.S. actions internationally are one of the sources of America's lack of credibility among Muslims worldwide, especially in the Middle East. Incidents at prison sites such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have created opportunities for jihadists to further their claims that the United States and apostate regimes are no different from each other.[27] Additionally, statements of top U.S. officials have added to the problem; for example, two scholars have argued that, "President Bush calling the war on terror a 'Crusade,' has played directly into the hands of the jihadi communication strategy."[28] This lack of credibility helps explain why some believe the State Department is not the right entity to disseminate strategic communications to counter the Islamic State. Messages designed to refute the Islamic State's legitimacy—as many of the CSCC's are—can not only become ineffective but also counterproductive and framed by jihadists as further attempts to manipulate Muslims.[29]

Moreover, some experts have compared the "Truth" anti-smoking campaign with the strategic messaging campaign of the State Department.[30] A review of literature indicates that the psychological dynamics involved with combating teenage smoking have striking similarities with the dynamics involved with countering the radicalization and recruitment of young adults by groups like ISIL.[31] Experts suggest that the State Department's "'Think Again, Turn Away' campaign is eerily similar to the ineffective anti-smoking slogan of think, don't smoke."[32] To this end, according to one expert, the CSCC should have adopted

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27 Steven R. Corman and Jill S. Schiefelbein. 2006. "Communication and media strategy in the Jihadi War of Ideas." [Tempe]: Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University, 17. http://www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/terrorism/publications/jihad_comm_media.pdf.

28 Corman and Schiefelbein, "Communication and media strategy," 17.

29 Ibid., 18.

30 Pete Favat and Bryan C. Price, "The Truth Campaign and the War of Ideas," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 8, No. 7 July 2015, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/post/july-2015-3.

31 Favat and Price, "The Truth Campaign."

32 Ibid.

some of the productive tenets used in the Truth campaign to design a more efficient counter-messaging campaign in order to disrupt the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters.[33]

D.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

It is difficult to establish a universally recognized and accepted model for a counter-narrative campaign and a useful measure of effectiveness to assess the State Department's efforts to counter ISIL. Part of this difficulty stems from the lack of understanding of what motivates a person's decision to join the Islamic State and become a foreign fighter. Additionally, establishing an appropriate measure of effectiveness is hindered by various factors that contribute to the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters.

In an attempt to limit the factors considered, this thesis does not concern itself with ISIL's ability to raise funds, its military success on the ground, or its ability to seize and hold territory. Additionally, this thesis is not concerned with the other methods the United States and coalition partners have employed to counter ISIL outside of those of the State Department's CSCC. This thesis attempts to establish an appropriate measure of effectiveness that can be applied to the State Department's CSCC efforts to disrupt ISIL's ability to recruit foreign fighters. Furthermore, using this measure of effectiveness, this thesis attempts to evaluate the efficacy of the CSCC's efforts.

My hypothesis is that the State Department's efforts are not effectively disrupting ISIL's ability to recruit foreign fighters, and consequently, a more robust campaign should be developed. Some scholars suggest making better use of the Muslim American population, while others suggest that the State department is not the right entity to take on this type of campaign. Still other authors suggest that the State Department review and adopt methods used in

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33 Favat and Price, "The Truth Campaign."

the successful "Truth Anti-smoking Campaign."[34] Preliminary research indicates that the State Department's Think Again, Turn Away campaign has not kept up with the massive the Islamic State media campaign. Additionally, the State Department's efforts may be counter to its mission and actually strengthen the Islamic State's campaign's recruitment efforts.[35]

E.   RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis sets out to accomplish three goals. The first goal is to assess the CSCC's knowledge of the Islamic State's propaganda strategy. The second goal is to assess the efficacy of the State Department's CSCC efforts to disrupt the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters. The third goal is to determine if there are cases of successful strategic communications methods available that might be used to improve the State Department's efforts.

This thesis attempts to assess the efficacy of the State Department's CSCC by examining examples of successful strategic communications campaigns and that of unsuccessful ones. These examples will be helpful in the process of establishing a measure of effectiveness for counter-messaging strategies. In an attempt to measure effectiveness, this thesis reviews statistical data on ISIL's recruiting efforts prior to and during the State Department's Think Again, Turn Away campaign.

Beyond those described in the literature review, sources include a broad array of academic books and articles, as well as multiple original source documents from the U.S. government. Original source documents include State Department and White House publications and articles from the Congressional

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34 Favat and Price, "Truth Campaign."

35 Ibid., and Alex P Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the Islamic State," (Research Paper, International Center for Counter-Terrorism-The Huge, (2015).

Research Service.[36] These sources offer insights into accepted definitions of key terms and provide political leaderships' perspectives on the United States counter messaging campaign targeted at disrupting the recruitment activities of the Islamic State.

F.   THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. Chapter II provides a brief history of the rise of the Islamic State, their use of propaganda, and their forms of recruitment. Chapter III provides an overview of the State Department's CSCC establishment, reviews its efforts aimed at countering the Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters, and an examination of the effectiveness of these efforts. The conclusion ties the research together, draws overall conclusions, and explores other plausible recommended courses of action.

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36 U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation. "The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications: Mission, Operations, and Impact: Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee On Foreign Affairs," House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, August 2, 2012 (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 2012).

II.   THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

> The group's main tool has been brute force! As it attempts to build credibility and establish legitimacy, however, it has proved deft in the use of social media … to drive home its messages.
>
> —James P. Farwell,
> "The Media Strategy of ISIS," *Survival Magazine*

The terrorist group known as the Islamic State (IS) currently operates primarily in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and in Arabic as the acronym DAESH, but in this thesis, I will refer to the group as the Islamic State with the exception of direct quotations.[37]

The Islamic State is undisputedly the largest and most influential terrorist group in the Middle East. The United States Central Intelligence Agency estimates that the Islamic State has more than 31,000 fighters.[38] Researcher Daniel R. DePetris writes, "ISIL has single-handedly swept across an area of the Middle East roughly the size of Belgium."[39] This effort effectively revealed the weakness of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and was seen as an embarrassment to the Iraqi government.[40] Unlike al-Qaeda or other influential Islamist terrorist organizations, the Islamic State has set itself apart by its unique ability to capture and hold territory, and by its self-proclamation as an Islamic caliphate.[41]

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[37] The Levant as in ISIL referrers geographically to west part of Syria and Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and parts of Egypt (Sinai).

[38] Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State" *The Soufan Group*, (November 2014): 18, accessed

July 21, 2015, http://soufangroup.com/the-islamic-state/.

[39] Daniel R. DePetris, "The 5 Deadliest Terrorist Groups on the Planet," The National Interest, (November 16, 2014) accessed 10 June 2016. http://nationalinterest.org/feature/washington-watching-the-5-deadliest-terrorist-groups-the-11687.

[40] DePetris, "The 5 Deadliest."

[41] Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 4–6.

Moreover, the Islamic State has been able to recruit an unprecedented number of foreign fighters. Its lucrative recruiting efforts are possible due to its large footprint on the Internet. The Islamic State, its supporters, and its sympathizers use an array of social media outlets to disseminate propaganda via an elaborate strategic messaging campaign. Social media outlets allow the Islamic State to spread its powerful propaganda based on an extreme version of Sunni Islam, through this medium the Islamic State encourages the use of suicidal terrorism, insurgency, and guerrilla warfare tactics by millions of current and potential supporters.

This chapter will examine the Islamic State, focusing on its ideology and other attributes. Furthermore, this chapter will analyze the geopolitical situation that allowed for the rise of the Islamic State, its use of strategic communications, and its propaganda.

A.   THE ISLAMIC STATE—BACKGROUND

The Islamic State has emerged from multiple political, social, and economic tensions in the Middle East.[42] Patrick Cockburn, a Middle East correspondent for the *Independent*, writes that

> ISIS is a child of war. Its members seek to reshape the world around them by acts of violence. The movement's toxic but potent mix of extreme religious beliefs and military skill is the outcome of the war in Iraq since the U.S. invasion of 2003 and the war in Syria since 2011…It is the government and media consensus in the West that the civil war in Iraq was reignited by the sectarian policies of [the] Iraqi prime minister. In reality, it was the war in Syria that destabilized Iraq when jihadi groups like ISIS, then called al-Qaeda in Iraq, found a new battlefield where they could fight and flourish.[43]

The Islamic State has challenged and continues to challenge the existing concepts of government, national identity, and state sovereignty.[44] States were

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42 Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State": 4.

43Cockburn, "*Rise of Islamic State*," 8.

44 Barrett, "Islamic State," 4.

created once the Ottoman Empire collapsed. These current geographic divisions now known as states became the source of people's identity in the region. The Islamic State does not accept these divides and it has carved out its own territory without regard for the existing state lines.

The infamous terrorist group had superseded al-Qaeda as the most dominant Jihadi group around the globe by June 2014.[45] The Islamic State carried out an attack on Mosul with a force of approximately 1,300 troops against the Iraqi forces of approximately 60,000 men.[46] Though their troops were tremendously outnumbered, the second-largest city in Iraq, Mosul, fell to the Islamic State on June 6, 2014, after only four days of open fighting. This rapid gain of territory across central and northern Iraq can be attributed to the lack of resistance from the U.S. trained ISF.

The Islamic State has demonstrated that its clear understanding of the geopolitical situation and demographics in Iraq proved useful in its rise to power and gain of territory.[47] At the time, Iraq and Syria was on the brink of civil war. The U.S. removed and installed a new government in Iraq. Subsequently, the United States pulled out of Iraq. In addition to other factors, these combined events helped to create a power vacuum in the region, which the Islamic State benefited from.

The Islamic State gains its legitimacy from its seemingly extremist interpretation of Islam. Its ideological-religious appeal is modeled after the popular belief of Salafists. Salafists are a group that subscribes to a "strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect advocating a return to the early Islam of the Koran."[48] Additionally, they follow the belief of Sunna: "The Muslim world can and

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45 Cockburn, "*Rise of Islamic State*," 2.

46 Ibid., 11.

47 Ibid., 1.

48 Barrett, "Islamic State,"9.

should return to the simplicity and unity that they imagined existed in the earliest days of Islam."[49]

The Islamic State's ideology is derived from Jihadi-Salafism, also referred to as jihadism.[50] "Jihadi-Salafism is a distinctive ideological movement within Sunni Islam" that is based on an interpretation of Islamic scripture.[51] A global network of websites, scholars and popular media outlets subscribe to this political school of thought as well.[52] Jihadi-Salafism is "deeply rooted in pre-modern theological tradition and is extensively elaborated by a recognized cadre of religious authorities."[53] Both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda adheres to Jihadi-Salafism, however, the Islamic State's position is very narrow and strictly follows all the tents, which distinguishes the group from al-Qaeda.[54]

Jihadi-Salafism was derived from two sources: the Muslim Brotherhood movement and Salafi. The movement was founded by Hasan al-Banna in1928.[55] This exclusively Sunni Muslim movement was founded on the basis of gaining power, influence, and capturing states, which at the time was in response to Western imperialism.[56] Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood regarded the "caliphate as the ideal system of government for the Islamic world."[57] This was in unambiguous contrast to any other form of government, especially democracies.

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49 Oxford Dictionaries, "Salafi," and Barrett, "Islamic State," 9.

50 Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate, 7.

51Ibid.

52Ibid.

53Ibid.

54Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate, 7.

55Ibid.

56Ibid.

57 Ibid.,8.

The second source of Jihadi-Salafism, Salafi can be defined as a theological movement within Sunni Islam involving "purifying the faith."[58] Bunzel writes "Salafists regard themselves as the only true Muslims."[59] Moreover, the Salafi movement derived from Wahhabism, which is synonymous with the politics in Saudi Arabia.[60]

Prominent U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia have contributed to the rise of the Islamic State. The implications of this connection are often understated. As previously mentioned, one of the main tenets of the Islamic State's ideology is Jihadi-Salafism, which is derived directly from Wahhabism. Wahhabism is the basis of Saudi Arabia's political system.[61] Wahhabism, an "eighteenth-century version of Islam that imposes sharia law, regulates women of Islam to the status of second-class citizens, and regards Shia and Sufi Muslims as non-Muslims to be persecuted along with Christians and Jews."[62] Wahhabism has many shared themes with the Islamic State's ideology. Wahhabism further exacerbates the volatile sectarian divide between the Sunni and Shia versions of Islam.[63] This sectarian divide has been fueling civil war in Iraq and many other countries within the Middle East.

This seemingly powerful religious based legitimacy allows the Islamic State to gain media support and recruit foreign fighters from all over the globe. Scholars agree that most of the Islamic State's active supporters generally have insufficient religious knowledge to challenge the distortions of Islam prevalent

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58 Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer London: Hurst (2009). The Term Salafi derives from al-salaf al-salih, meaning the venerable ancestors of the first generations of Islam whom Salafists seek to emulate. quoted in Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State" Digital PDF file. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, (2015), 8.

59Bunzel, "From Paper State," 8.

60Ibid., and Cockburn, "Rise of ISIS," 5.

61 Cockburn, "Rise of Islamic State," 5., and Bunzel, "From Paper State," 8.

62 Cockburn, "Rise of Islamic State," 5.

63 Ibid.

within the group's ideology.[64] Cockburn writes that the Islamic State within Iraq and the rest of the region exploits the same narrative of most global Jihadist terrorist groups: "the governments in the Muslim countries of the Middle East are corrupt, irreligious, and heavily influenced by the United States and other Western powers."[65]

The Islamic State has also distinguished itself from other similar terrorist groups by focusing on revolution in Muslim majority countries rather than on committing attacks against the Western countries that sponsor these governments, as al-Qaeda has in the past.[66] Moreover, the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the terrorist group as the caliphate.[67] This declaration and re-establishment of the caliphate has allowed the Islamic State to assert itself above all other Islamist groups.[68]

B.   GEOGRAPHICAL-POLITICAL SITUATION

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks consisted of four coordinated suicide attacks resulting in the successfully targeting of two symbolic U.S. landmarks: the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. In the aftermath of these attacks, the United States declared a war on terrorism. The war on terror has propelled the United States into a series of preemptive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to combat terrorist cells, find weapons of mass destruction, and prevent further terrorist attacks on the United

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64 Cockburn, "Rise of Islamic State,"2–7.

65 Ibid., 6.

66 Ibid.

67 Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *Quilliam Foundation* : (2015), 2, http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf.

68Charlie Winter "Islamic State Propaganda: Key Elements of the Group's Messaging," *Terrorism Monitor 12*, no. 12 (2015): 9–10, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44030&cHash=8e2c776b9fa5b40119a8dfc05b5c3ebf#.Vd5JOXbn-Uk.

States. Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, was overthrown in 2003 as a result of the War on Terror.

The occupation of Iraq included removing the Baathist government and installing a U.S.-backed democratic government. Additionally, the Iraqi Security Force (ISF), which includes both the Iraqi Army and police force, was disestablished, reestablished and trained by the United States. Seemingly, these changes were executed without a full understanding of the politics and demographics of Iraq. As a result, Iraq was left with a fragile, democratic Shia government. The ISF was well equipped but arguably poorly trained and motivated. Additionally, when the Iraqi army came under pressure from the Islamic State, it melted away without significant resistance.[69] This fragility was exasperated the sectarian divide and led to a civil war between the Sunnis, the Shia and the Kurds, all fighting to protect their very existence.[70]

The conditions above contributed to Iraq becoming a power vacuum and allowed the Islamic State to flourish. There are several accounts from people living under the Islamic State's rule who felt the terrorist organization was a better alternative than the unstable central government. Cockburn quotes a story written by a Sunni woman living under the control of the Islamic State to underscore the point that the United States-backed government of Iraq is perceived as more threatening than the Islamic State:

> The bombardment was carried out by the government. The air strikes focused on wholly civilian neighborhoods. Maybe they wanted to target ISIS bases. But neither round of bombardment found its target. One target is a house connected to a church where ISIS men live. It is next to the neighborhood generator and about 200–300 meters from our home. The bombing hurt civilians only and demolished the generator. Now we don't have electricity since yesterday night. I am writing from a device in my sister's house, which is empty. The government bombardment did not hit any of the ISIS men. I have just heard from a relative who visited us to

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69 Winter "Islamic State Propaganda," xi.

70 Ibid.

check on us after the terrible night. He says that because of this bombardment, youngsters are joining ISIS in tens if not hundreds because this increase of hatred towards the government, which doesn't care about us Sunnis being killed and targeted. Government forces went to Amerli, a Shia village surrounded by tens of Sunni villages, through Amerli was never taken by ISIS. The government militias attacked the surrounding Sunni villages, killing hundreds, with help from the American air strikes.[71]

The weak government installed by the United States coupled with the ongoing sectarian civil war in Iraq allowed the Islamic State (at the time known as al-Qaeda in Iraq) to become stronger. Many leaders within the Baathist bureaucracy who were removed by the United States during the occupation subsequently joined the group, lending its military and political expertise.

In addition to poor policies in Iraq, the ongoing civil unrest in Syria has contributed to the conditions that have allowed the Islamic State to gain traction. The United States and its allies have continually backed the anti-Assad groups in Syria. Western-backed anti-Assad militias continue the fighting even though at the time Syrian President Bashar Hafez al-Assad controlled an overwhelming majority of territory within Syria. Not only has the Islamic State routinely captured weapons from these militias, but the prolonged fighting has also deepened the gap between Sunni and Shia Muslims, creating ideal conditions for the Islamic State to gain the support of the Sunni opposition and the ability to recruit foreign fighters.[72]

C.   ISLAMIC STATE'S PROPAGANDA

Scholars suggest the Islamic State's unprecedented rise has contributed to a return of mainstream attentiveness to jihadist propaganda.[73] Seemingly, a war of ideas is taking place. To this end, according to one expert, "the Islamic

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71 Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, xviii.

72Ibid., 9.

73 Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate," 9.

State has captured the imagination of the international media like no terrorist group before it."[74]

With the press and social media saturated with Islamic State propaganda, creating a comparable messaging strategy should be paramount in addressing and countering the Islamic State's messages. And to effectively counter the Islamic State's propaganda, the first step must be to gain a thorough understanding of it.

The Islamic State's comprehensive media strategy has to be broken down into its integral parts. Experts suggest that if this can be accomplished, a more measured approach to the war of ideas can be realized.[75] Additionally, Winter writes that "unless we understand the strategy behind the organization's media machine, misconceptions about what drives its supporters-be they potential migrants or potential domestic terrorist—will continue to flourish."[76]

As mentioned in Chapter I, the Islamic State's strategic messaging covers a full spectrum of ideas to include six main themes—brutality, mercy, victimhood, belonging, militarism, and apocalyptic utopianism.[77] Acknowledging and understanding the role of these six themes are the keys to developing a comprehensive media strategy for effectively countering the Islamic State. A review of literature indicates that the Islamic State's strategy allures potential recruits—in the absence of a positive more attractive counter or alternative narrative—with its propaganda that promotes finding one's identity, belonging, purpose or spiritual fulfillment.[78] The Islamic State's effective propaganda strategy combined with its powerful use of ideology has enabled the Islamic State to recruit an unprecedented number of foreign fighters.

74Ibid.

75Ibid., 8.

76 Ibid.

77Ibid., 18.

78Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State" *The Soufan Group*, (November 2014). Accessed July 21, 2014. http://soufangroup.com/the-islamic-state/.

D. SUMMARY OF ISLAMIC STATE'S ATTRIBUTES

The Islamic State has become the dominant terrorist group operating primarily in Iraq and Syria. It started in Iraq as a faction of al-Qaeda. Once the U.S.-led coalition forces overthrew the government in Iraq, a complicated sectarian divide produced civil war, insurgency, and guerrilla warfare, all in the name of political reform. The Islamic State's ideology coupled with its declaration as the caliphate allows it to claim that it is the only true and pure form of government, and that all others, especially democracies, should not and will not be tolerated. Its record indicates that it believes that secular- or non-Muslim-governed states have no power. On that basis, the Islamic State has created a de facto state through propaganda, violence and fear. The Islamic State has been able to take advantage of its knowledge of demographics and politics within Iraq and Syria. The terrorist group has also been able to make use of its powerful propaganda via traditional and social media outlets to recruit foreign fighters.

Scholars agree that the rise of the Islamic State has been exacerbated by the sectarian divide and civil war in Iraq and Syria, in addition to the fear and discontent for the Western backed governments of these states. The Islamic State has been able to capitalize on the Sunni's fear of the U.S. backed Iraqi government and the ongoing civil war in Syria. Though the Islamic State may not be popular, it uses fear to control the people living under its rule and it is considered the lesser of two evils. As the Islamic State continues to rise, we do not know how long the group will be able to impact politics in the Middle East. By understanding the Islamic State's ideology, there is a better chance that the United States and its State Department can curtail this rise by using its own strategic communications efforts.

III.   THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC COUNTERTERRORISM COMMUNICATIONS

> Run do not walk to ISIS Land. Come over for as Syria is no longer for Syrians, and Iraq is no longer for Iraqis. Where you can learn useful new skills for the Ummah! Blowing up mosques! Crucifying and executing Muslims! Plundering public resources! Suicide bombings inside mosques! Travel is inexpensive because you won't need a return ticket!
>
> —State Department video,
> "Welcome to the Islamic State Land," YouTube

A.   INTRODUCTION

The excerpt above is the caption from the video, "Welcome to the Islamic State Land," released by the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) on July 23, 2014.[79] The video depicts graphic images and short clips of the Islamic State in action. It portrays the way the group treats people on the ground and urges Muslims not to join the Islamic State. The video is one of the strategic releases by the State Department's Think Again Turn Away media campaign to frame the Islamic State as inconsistent in its ideology and as a dangerous place for Muslims who follow the terrorist group. This notable propaganda counter-offensive effort by the CSCC used raw material gathered from the Islamic State's own images of barbaric acts. This video has been highly criticized, as have other communications efforts of the CSCC.

This thesis aims to evaluate the efficacy of the State Department's CSCC's efforts to disrupt the Islamic States' ability to recruit foreign fighters. As noted in Chapter I, the Global Engagement Center has recently replaced the CSCC. An understanding of the strengths and weakness of the CSCC will be

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[79] "Welcome to the Islamic State Land," YouTube video, 1:10, released by the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) on July 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wmdEFvsY0E.

essential to the success of the Global Engagement Center, and this chapter is intended to provide such an understanding. This chapter explores the different departments that made up the CSCC and their roles in countering Islamic State propaganda and the recruitment of foreign fighters. The Center's mission and its purpose are examined. Moreover, the CSCC's Think Again Turn Away campaign will be analyzed along with its social media operations, both in print and video formats such as the video described above.

B.   THE STATE DEPARTMENT'S CSCC

The U.S. government created the CSCC as one of various tools the State Department could use to contend better with terrorist groups in the war of ideas. Specifically, its mission was "to identify, confront, and undermine the communications of al-Qaeda affiliates."[80] To achieve its goals, the CSCC was divided into three entities: intelligence and analysis, plans and operations, and a Digital Outreach team (DOT).[81]

Within its intelligence and analysis section, the CSCC was responsible for coordinating its efforts with various U.S. intelligence agencies.[82] The intelligence and analysis section followed two guiding principles. First, it must ensure all of its efforts were interagency coordinated.[83] Prior to the launching of the CSCC, little interdepartmental coordination existed. Within the U.S. government, multiple agencies had overlapping responsibilities within the counterterrorism/counter-violent extremist realm, yet their efforts were uncoordinated. Second, the intelligence and analysis section was to make the best use of information

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[80]U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation. "The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications: Mission, Operations, and Impact: Hearing before the Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee On Foreign Affairs," House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, August 2, 2012 (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2012).

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

[83]"The State Department Center for Strategic"

provided by intelligence agencies and academic analysis of the adversary of interest.[84]

The plans and operations team designed and implemented all non-digital counter violent extremist communication tools.[85] These tools were used to counter terrorist groups' ability to gain support and recruit new members. The materials produced by this section could be used by all U.S. government agencies.[86]

The third section of the CSCC was its Digital Outreach Team. This team was responsible for authoring, coordinating, disseminating, and branding all of the center's digital communications, including written and video communications, and especially those posted to social media websites.[87] The activities of the DOT were guided by three principles: "Contest the space, redirect the conversation, and confound the adversary."[88] In an effort to refine the material to be analyzed, this thesis focuses on the digital efforts of the CSCC, its use of social media to counter the Islamic State's propaganda, and the terrorist group's ability to recruit foreign fighters. Hence, the Digital Outreach Team will be central to the analysis of the efficacy of the State Department's efforts to counter the Islamic State.

The CSCC had the stated intention of contesting the space (social media presence) and being innovative; but was it able to keep pace with the robust communications campaign of the Islamic State? Moreover, is the State Department, as one of the larger U.S. government bureaucracies, the right entity to effectively counter the Islamic State's messages? Many scholars suggest that not only was the Center's Digital Outreach Team unable to keep pace with the

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84The State Department Center for Strategic"

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

Islamic State, but it may have actually been counterproductive.[89] Some pundits go as far as to argue that the State Department is not effective at all, considering it is a government agency attempting to target a young, impressionable, pre-radicalized audience. Nicholas Rasmussen, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, declared in a statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2015 that "unfortunately, as we all know, the government is probably not the best platform to try to communicate with the set of actors who are probably vulnerable to this kind of propaganda and this type of recruiting."[90]

C.   THINK AGAIN TURN AWAY

Another one of the CSCC's stated missions was to disrupt the terrorist group's ability to recruit foreign fighters.[91] The State Department's CSCC launched its Think Again, Turn Away campaign in late 2013, specifically to counter the propaganda of the Islamic State.[92] The campaign was an additional tool used by the center's Digital Outreach Team to compete with the Islamic State to "enter the war of ideas and win over the hearts and minds of jihadists using social media" as its platform in multiple languages.[93]

Think Again, Turn Away appeared in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Somali, and English to "counter terrorist propaganda and misinformation about the United States."[94] The campaign used its accounts on Twitter in two distinctive ways: to

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89Rita Katz, The State Department's Twitter War With ISIS IS Embarrassing," Time, Accessed August 21, 2015. http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/.

90Mark Mazzetti and Michael R. Gordon, "ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War, U.S. Concludes," *New York Times,* Middle East, Accessed June 13, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/middleeast/isis-is-winning-message-war-us-concludes.html?hpw&rref=world&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=well-region&region=bottom-well&WT.nav=bottom-well&_r=0

91"U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs"

92Katz, "State Department's Twitter War, 4."

93Ibid., 3.

94"United States: State Dept. Uses IS Propaganda to Fight Militants." Asia News Monitor, Sep 05, 2014. http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1559904230?accountid=12702.

disseminate counter-messaging materials and to directly address popular jihadist accounts.[95] Its stated aim was to expose facts about terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and point out fallacies within terrorist propaganda. As part of its messaging strategy to highlight differences in terrorist propaganda and realities on the ground, the CSCC used brief clips from existing terrorist propaganda.

D.   THE GOOD AND THE BAD: A CRITIQUE OF THE CSCC

Strategic communications is one of the critical areas in which the United States, and more specifically the State Department's CSCC, strives to counter the Islamic State. However, the Islamic State uses a wide array of social media outlets to communicate, including both public and private sites and applications, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, the WhatsApp and Snapchat.[96] In addition, most of Islamic State's communication efforts are decentralized, which makes targeting them directly extremely difficult. Even so, the State Department's CSCC has been subject to various accusations of inefficiency and complaints.

The State Department uses multiple strategies, both overt and covert. The CSCC had attempted to counter the Islamic State using public platforms, and it saw some success in terms of attracting followers. For example, its Arabic language Facebook Page had approximately 146,445 followers.[97] It has also used general posts such as the re-posting of material from Arabic news outlets to influence its targeted Middle Eastern audience and appear less pro-Western. However, an assessment of a counter-messaging strategy cannot be evaluated solely on likes, views, and followers.

1.   Social Media Tactics

The value of U.S. social media presence remains debatable. While in operation, the CSCC's Digital Outreach Team used its Arabic Twitter account to

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95Katz, "State Department's Twitter War. 4"

96 Bouzis, "Countering the Islamic State," 4.

97Ibid.

portray the Islamic State's seeming lack of humanity. However, the type of comparisons the CSCC made was quite ambiguous. For example, the CSCC wrote in Arabic, "What is the difference between members of DAESH and hyenas?"[98] Within the same post, they attached a graphic video depicting a pack of hyenas killing its prey, followed by members of ISIL conducting a beheading.[99] These images may be disturbing to some, showing that the Islamic State's actions are similar to the actions of animals; however, to a troubled, mostly young male audience, they may very well appear to boast about ISIL's ability to take down its adversary and show no mercy—a function of The Islamic State's own propaganda. Unfortunately, this example of misleading or communicating a mixed message mirrors multiple examples of messages that made the CSCC notorious.[100]

2.   Messaging Complaints

The CSCC has used its Twitter accounts in English, Arabic, and other languages to engage directly with jihadists, specifically employing tactics that promote the Islamic State's narrative. Moreover, the CSCC's English-language Twitter account has been highly criticized for engaging in meaningless communications directly with jihadist accounts. One critic accused the State Department of being counterproductive by wasting the government's time and money by engaging in trivial conversations on its website. In her article "The State Department's Twitter War with ISIS is Embarrassing," Rita Katz declares that the State department regularly engaged in menial conversations with jihadist and implied that the Department's actions were embarrassing.[101] Katz's criticisms are warranted due to the number of times the State Department

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98 Ibid., 5.

99Bouzis, "Countering the Islamic State," 4.

100 Barbara Plett Usher, "The U.S. state department's YouTube 'digital jihad,'" BBC News Magazine, November 28, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30045038.

101Katz, "State Department's Twitter War, 4."

responded to other accounts in a child-like argumentative manner. The United States is a state actor, so meeting the terrorist group on their level gives reason for pause. Many of the Department's tweets have validated Islamic State leaders by addressing and, in some cases, providing a direct response to their accounts. Since these conversations used a U.S. government asset, the CSCC's Twitter account had unintentionally become yet another platform for terrorist groups to voice their arguments, and inadvertently recruit more followers and foreign fighters. This is in stark contrast to the State' Department Center's mission and has negatively impacted its efficiency in its counter-messaging efforts.

In response to the growing number of complaints regarding the CSCC's tactics and lack of efficiency, the center's director and other officials openly expressed their own frustration. CSCC's director Fernandez, for example, suggested that the center lacked the ability to fully counter the sheer volume of the Islamic States propaganda.[102] However, they have not offered any real explanations as to why the center had not been able to curtail the Islamic States' social media operations.

Another challenge the State Department's CSCC faced with its digital counter-messaging strategy was the rate at which information is disseminated online. For example, when the U.S. Department of Defense decided to use the Apache Helicopter in Iraq, within hours Islamic State followers and sympathizers gathered specific data about the helicopter, to include its weapons suite and how to best shoot it down, and published the information online. Terrorist groups immediately took action and used this information to further their propaganda.[103]

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102 U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation. "The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications: Mission, Operations, and Impact: Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee On Foreign Affairs," House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, August 2, 2012 (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2012).

103Schmitt, U.S. Intensifies Effort, 3.

Richard A. Stengel, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, told the *New York Times* that "we are getting beaten on volume, so the only way to compete is by aggregating creating and amplifying existing content."[104] Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the State Department, responded to CNN in regard to the volume of Islamic State's social media posts: "We are seeing 90,000 tweets a day that we are combating!"[105] The Islamic State has demonstrated a surprising amount of skillfulness and preeminence with disseminating its propaganda via social media outlets.[106] Psaki also told CNN: "There is no question what we're combating with ISIL's propaganda machine is something we have not seen before."[107] During a Senate hearing, the director of the CSCC, Fernandez, stated that "radical Islamist clerics and terrorist organizations have become masters at using social media."[108] He declared that social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook allow those who have been radicalized to package and distribute its messages to every growing audience instantaneously.[109]

3.   Resources

Not only have the State Department CSCC's strategic messaging tactics been criticized, but its budget had also been under constant scrutiny. The State

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104Ibid.

105 John Mullen, "What ISIS' Appeal for young people?" CNN Webpage, Accessed February 25, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/25/middleeast/isis-kids-propaganda/

106Brain Knowlton, "Digital War Takes Shape on websites Over ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 26, 2014, Accessed May 18, 2016, 5, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/27/world/middleeast/us-vividly-rebuts-isis-propaganda-on-arab-social-media.html?_r=0.

107Ibid.

108U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on

Terrorism, Nonproliferation. "The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications: Mission, Operations, and Impact: Hearing Before the Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the Committee On Foreign Affairs," House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session, August 2, 2012 (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2012).

109Ibid.

Department's operating budget in 2015 was $40.3 billion, while the Department of Defense's budget was $495.6 billion for the same year.[110] How and where a country places its resources says a lot about its priorities and lends a view into its overall strategy, and such a grave imbalance with regard to the two departments may be part of the reason why the CSCC failed.

Moreover, other critics of Think Again Turn away and previous members of the CSCC have declared that "the U.S. government has failed to provide the time, attention, and resources necessary to match the size and scope of the Islamic State's propaganda machine."[111] In 2015, Fernandez and other members and supporters of the CSCC complained that "neither the State Department nor the White House fully supported or properly financed the center's activities."[112] At the time of the ambassador's comments, the CSCC operated with a staff of less than one hundred, and on a budget of only approximately $5 million a year.[113]

4. Narratives

Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was quoted in *The Atlantic* exclaiming that, "the war on narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm, and knives."[114] As detailed in Chapter II, the Islamic State's narrative portrays itself clearly to its supporters, prospective followers, and recruits. But what is the CSCC's narrative? One of the most prominent of all reasons that the State Department's CSCC has not had notable success is that it

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110 "US Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2015 Budget," *White House*, October 16, 2016. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2015/assets/defense.pdf; "United States Department of the State: Agency Financial Report," *State Department*, October 16, 2016.
https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2015/assets/state.pdf.

111Eric, Schmitt, "U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS' Message," *The New York Times*: Middle East, February 16, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.

112Ibid., 3.

113Ibid., 4.

114 Simon Cotte, "Why It's So Hard to Stop ISIS Propaganda," The Atlantic," Accessed June 15, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/why-its-so-hard-to-stop-isis-propaganda/386216/

lacks a narrative. During an interview, CSCC director Fernandez exclaimed that "we don't have a counter-narrative…what we (The CSCC) have is half a message." His comments referred to the fact that the Islamic State presents a problem and solution to that problem; whereas, in addition to the CSCC's lack of a narrative, it only recommended not following the Islamic State. The CSCC, in turn, provided only a negative message but did not offer a positive narrative of what it wants one to do.[115] As with many forms of communication, providing a positive message or an alternative narrative is more effective than the lack of one or using a negative one.

5.   Foreign Fighters

In 2015, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence declared that the Islamic State had at least 20,000 foreign fighters. This number had increased by approximately 5,000 since the previous year. Apparently, the Islamic State's inexhaustible online presence, combined with its 2014 self-declaration as the caliphate and battlefield success, has contributed to its recruitment efforts. That the United States and many of its allies have also contributed to its recruitment success cannot be understated. Detrimental statements from Washington drive home this point. The White House states that the Islamic State was "an imminent threat to every interest we have," and a member of the U.S. Congress said, "These people have become very sophisticated.[116] Additionally, Senator James Inhofe describes how we boast that the Islamic State is an exceptional group:

> We're in the most dangerous position we've ever been in as a nation…ISIS, they are really bad terrorists, they're so bad even Al Qaeda is afraid of them… They're crazy out there and they are

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115Cotte, "Why Is It so Hard."

116 Senator James Inhofe, quoted in Aisha Chowdry, "ISIS and Twitter," Roll Call, September 11, 2014. https://www.questia.com/newspaper/1P2-38221713/isis-and-twitter.

rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city and people just can't believe that's happening.[117]

The comments by Senator Inhofe, made as a member of the Armed Forces Committee, directly validate the Islamic State as a powerful group. This is an example of the type of affirmation that has aided the Islamic State with its recruitment methods and has made it harder for the CSCC to diminish the group's recruitment efforts.

E.   SUMMARY

This chapter examined the State Department's recently realigned Center for Strategic Counter Terrorism Communications—its mission, its principles, its organizational structure, and its use of social media via its Think again, Turn Away campaign to counter Islamic State propaganda. It demonstrated that the CSCC had entered the War of Ideas against the Islamic State; however, its digital footprint may have not been large enough to effectively counter the terrorist group. Though the CSCC had marginal success, many of its operations were met with stark criticism.

Counter-messaging is not an exact science; hence, the Center's efficiency is hard to measure. But a review of various critiques yielded the results listed below. The counter-messaging strategy of the Center produced ambiguous, if not misleading, messages at best. The sheer volume of content the Islamic State puts on social media on a daily bases is difficult to contend with, but the Center's small staff and budget did not allow them to effectively counter the narrative of the Islamic State. Even if the CSCC did have a larger staff and budget, it would be hard for any government bureaucracy to keep up with the amount of information that is constantly being disseminated by the decentralized Islamic State. Moreover, the counter-messaging strategy of the CSCC lacked a narrative, and in particular it did not offer a clear, positive narrative that could

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117 Ibid.

give potential ISIL sympathizers any alternative. Lastly, the United States, including government entities and the media, may be doing itself a disservice by recognizing and sensationalizing the terrorist group as exceptional. Such descriptions and characterizations of the Islamic State as exceptional were contrary to the State Department CSCC's messaging campaign and directly supported the group's propaganda.

The final chapter of this thesis provides an overview of the Global Engagement Center, which replaced the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, and compares the two organizations. It also offers solutions to the problem of countering the Islamic State's narrative. Finally, it suggests alternative narratives that that could be employed by the Global Engagement Center, and considers ways that Muslim community leaders could be recruited to assist the CSCC and the U.S. government in the strategic communication effort against ISIS.

IV. CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzed the Center for Strategic Counter-terrorism Communications, including its mission, strategy, and communication methods to assess the efficacy of its efforts to counter the Islamic State and weaken the group's ability to recruit foreign fighters. It outlined the Islamic State's mission and forms of propaganda used via social media outlets. Within that context, it analyzed the plausible reasons for the successful recruitment of ISIL and the CSCC's methods to counter them. The research illustrated that there were clear explanations for that success based on both the kinetic and non-kinetic success of the Islamic State, the empowerment of the group in the media and the reality on the ground. This chapter concludes with a review of the research findings, additional notes on the Global Engagement Center (GEC), and recommendations for future consideration.

A. REVIEW

This thesis reviewed factors such as the Islamic State's propaganda efforts and its success in recruiting a continuous flow of foreign fighters. In addition, a thorough inquiry was made into the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications and its efforts to curtail these efforts of the Islamic State. A diverse range of academic and subject matter expert critiques of the CSCC's efforts were also taken into consideration.

The analysis of this thesis suggests that the CSCC did not carry out its stated mission effectively. The ultimate realignment of the CSCC and recent establishment of the Global Engagement Center show that the U.S. government also felt that the CSCC's level of efficiency fell short. In his remarks regarding the CSCC, the first director of the GEC stated that, "over time, we were not putting the right amount of resources—technology, people, and funding—necessary to address the evolving threat. The communications landscape has changed, and

we must adapt to it to be successful."[118] His remarks suggest that the CSCC just could not keep pace with the Islamic State's communications efforts.

The CSCC did not provide a narrative for potential Islamic State recruits to follow; it only provided a half or negative message. The United States and others continually validate the lethality and appeal of the Islamic State by the way they are portrayed by senior government officials and in the media as an exceptional group. Finally, by virtue of branding its communications, the CSCC did itself a disservice to the multitudes of groups who do not recognize the United States a creditable source of information, including its main target audience.

B.   THE GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT CENTER

> Our messaging cannot be just an after-thought, but rather it has to be baked into everything we do from the beginning. As a government fighting an agile movement, we face disadvantages… We have to break out of our traditional bureaucratic stovepipes and be innovative and agile to address this threat.
>
> –Michael D. Lumpkin on the Global Engagement Center
> "Engaging Through Messaging"
> Spring 2016 Ambassador's Review

On March 14, 2016, Executive Order 13721 established the Global Engagement Center, which effectively replaced the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication.[119] Michael D. Lumpkin was named special envoy and coordinator of the new center; he served in that position until the end of the Obama administration.[120] The GEC is housed within the State Department,

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118 Michael D. Lumpkin, "Engaging Through Messaging - The New Global Engagement Center" *The Ambassador's Review* Spring 2016, 3 https://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/spring-2016/engaging-through-messaging-the-new-global-engagement-center.

119 "Global Engagement Center," U.S. Department of State, last modified April, 1, 2016. https://www.state.gov/r/gec/.

120 Lumkin, "Engaging Through Messaging," 1.

but it is considered an interagency organization.[121] Its main charge is to coordinate strategic counterterrorism messages to foreign audiences on the United States behalf to "diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations, such as ISIL."[122]

The Global Engagement Center has bolder and notably different goals and themes than the late CSCC. The GEC is centered on fostering partnerships.[123] It seeks to orchestrate and enable a global network of credible voices, not only government actors but also non-government actors and beyond, to confront and discredit ISIL's repulsive messages.[124] It explicitly states that "the new strategy seeks to be more effective in the information space," implying that there was more to be desired in regards to the effectiveness of its predecessor the CSCC. But the Global Engagement Center's main goal is very similar to that of the CSCC: "expose ISIL's true nature…thereby diminishing their influence and decreasing this organization's allure in the eyes of potential recruits and sympathizers."[125]

The Global Engagement Center is organized into four core competency areas: partnerships, data analytics, content, and interagency engagement. In the first area of partnerships, the GEC has launched initiatives which include fostering partnerships and empowering groups on a local level such as schools and universities, civil and religious leaders, and directly with youth groups to name a few. As research shows us, this may be a huge, once missing piece of the strategic communications puzzle.[126] In the past, critics pointed to this very thing as a solution to the CSCC's methods with regard to the credibility of only relying on the government to create and disseminate counterterrorism

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121 "Global Engagement Center."

122 Ibid.

123Ibid.

124Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Lumkin, "Engaging Through Messaging," 2.

messaging. These types of decentralized partnerships may prove to be more effective than the messaging campaigns used in the past.

The next area of discussion is the GEC's focus on data analytics. The center values and is striving to use data analytics to better understand how people become radicalized over the internet, and use this data to not only guide the center's own messaging efforts but also to create a plausible measure of effectiveness.[127] This data includes proven measures of effectiveness such as polling, studies of the targeted audience, and academic research of all levels. By placing a precedent on the means for the Global Engagement Center to evaluate and critique itself, it should be able to grow and become increasingly effective in reaching its mission.

The last two focus areas of the GEC are content and interagency engagement. The importance of these areas of focus cannot be denied. As noted above, scholars found that the CSCC's messages were ambiguous and at times misleading. This focus not only addresses this issue but also strives to reduce its own direct messages to ensure messaging is coordinated and less vague. And in the area of interagency engagement, members of various U.S. security departments staff the GEC to ensure interagency coordination and the synchronizing of the entire government's efforts to dismantle the Islamic State.

In general the language used by the U.S. State Department in describing the GEC directly addresses many of the underlying issues that the CSCC's effectiveness suffered from. It acknowledges the need and importance of enabling creditable voices. This acknowledgment seems to be a response to the many critics that the government, or the government alone, was not a creditable voice in the minds of potential Islamic State sympathizers and potential recruits. The Center also strives to "enhance the capacities and empower third party, positive messengers," yet another example of the GEC's effort to address issues

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127 Joby Warrick, "How a U.S. team uses Facebook, guerrilla marketing to peel off potential ISIS recruits," Washington Post, February 6, 2017.

that haunted the CSCC. Within this research, it was uncovered that the CSCC only provided a negative message—don not do this–-instead of a complete, or a positive one. Hopefully, this acknowledgment on the part of the GEC will lead to the United States' ability to find and portray a positive more complete message in its efforts to counter the Islamic State.

C. RECOMMENDATION: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

As discussed in Chapter III, the State Department's CSCC was unable to challenge the volume of the Islamic State's propaganda. Most of the center's efforts lacked the relevant research, resources, or skills—resulting in an "investment without return."[128] To effectively counter ISIL's influential propaganda, the United States must first fully understand them. The Islamic State's narratives continue to attract foreign and local populations. According to one narrative analytics company, young Sunni's, specifically those who have never lived under a functional state, are highly influenced by ISIL's narratives.[129] For example, a 17-year-old male Syrian has known war for most of his life. It is unlikely that he recalls any purposeful state services such as trash disposal or the military. Consequently, the Islamic State promises such as law and order may be a welcome change to this young man and many others of similar circumstance.[130]

The Islamic State's narratives resonate with Muslims seeking a state govern by Islamic laws. ISIL's declaration of the caliphate has proven to be quite powerful. According to the Monitor 360, "This narrative leverages feelings of economic disenfranchisement and social exclusion of Muslim communities in the

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128 Clint Watts, "Countering ISIL's Ideology: Keep It Limited, Focused, and in Tune with Lessons Learned," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC, December 2, 2016,
https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/documents/other/wattsStatement20150202.pdf.

129 Peter Lavoy, Alexa Monti, and Elizabeth Wente, "Why Is ISIL winning the Narrative War?," *Monitor 360*, August 20, 2016, http://monitor-360.com/ideas/isil-narratives.

130Ibid.

West to promote the Caliphate as a place where they have a purpose and are part of a broader transnational movement."[131]

Having a counter-narrative, not just a counter message or a negative message, is key to competing with the Islamic State and winning the war of ideas. The authors of the Monitor 360 article eloquently stated that "the success of the U.S. strategy to reverse ISIL's territorial gains and popular appeal in the Middle East will depend in large part on the development of an effective counter-narrative strategy to combat a wider ISIL threat."[132] The Global Engagement Center is making strides to compete better with ISIL through its new vision and mission to become less branded and more partnership oriented. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy recommends that a successful counter-messaging campaign highlight the fighting between different Sunni Jihadi groups and the Islamic State's abuse and mistreatment of innocent groups of people.[133] Additionally, the conditions on the ground must deny the Islamic State battlefield success. However, the milestone of creating a narrative has not yet been fully realized.

This thesis recommends an additional approach. In addition to the strides being made by the Global Engagement Center, the U.S. counter-narrative should consist of these two elements. First, it needs to portray the Islamic State as a criminal, manipulative, and a failing organization. Far too often, the group is portrayed as exceptional, but dangerous and powerful. These traits attract recruits. The U.S. should not refer to the Islamic State as a state or recognize its leaders. The entire U.S. government and a concerted effort by media outlets need to deliver the same message.

Finally, counter-narratives must directly target specific vulnerable audiences. Again, the Global Engagement Center is working on various data

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131Lavoy, "Why is ISIL winning."

132 Ibid.

133Ibid.

analytics techniques. This data must be analyzed and used to identify specific targets and the most efficient way to reach potential Islamic State supporters and recruits. The U.S. counter-narrative must be inclusive, give hope and be positive, in addition to ensuring the Islamic State is discredited in the process

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