

Daesh Media Strategies: The Role of our Community Leaders
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Introduction

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

Daesh’s systematic misrepresentation of religious doctrines and manipulation of political grievances serve as tactics to legitimize violence and attract new recruits. Even though their barbaric practices violate every Islamic law, it uses out of context religious texts to establish its authority and justify jihad as a morally and Islamically justifiable act. By re-contextualizing Quranic references, Daesh taps into the Muslim imagination to reminisce about the glory days of Muslim power. Apocalyptic in style, Daesh asks its target audience to relive Islamic history, the times of persecution, and the times of glory that God promised the community if they remained steadfast. This sympathetic figuration revives a nostalgic Muslim collective memory of Islam’s golden days and banks on its affective depository of cultural referents in their call for a transnational membership. The purported violence becomes a temporary method of self-preservation to the otherwise good-natured, honest, and humble servant.

Daesh and Social Media

To create an appealing Daesh brand, the recruiters play on the idyllic notion of a utopian Islamic state that addresses Muslim grievances across the globe. Based on Daesh social media postings, their main online propaganda narratives revolve around seven main themes: a) western

humiliation and transgression of the ummah; b) humiliating the west; c) military jihad; d) providing social services within Daesh controlled territory; e) hypocrisy of Muslim and MENA leaders; f) the ability to administer territory by providing security, law, and order; and lastly, g) espousing purely theological motivations. Their main narrative is heavily dependent on their target audience and media channel.

Daesh uses tech savvy online campaigns and sophisticated video production techniques in its propaganda to recruit and attract young foreign fighters. Ayman Al Zawahiri, leader of Al Qaeda Central said in 2005, “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the heart and minds of our umma.” Daesh digital propaganda videos are of high production value and share stylistic similarities of Hollywood action movies. For Daesh, being seen is as important as being heard in the branding of its caliphate project. Using social media to draw on vulnerable and disenfranchised youth, Daesh attempts to propagate its ideology and build identification with its target audience. Their use of various languages, stories of converts and foreign Muslim fighters project an image of acceptance in which everyone is seemingly united under the banner of Islam regardless of race, socio-economic status, physical disability, and country of origin. In one of his sermons, Baghdadi states, “the Islamic State is a state where the Arabs and non- Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers.” These types of propaganda videos tap into the socio-economic grievances of potential recruits and provide an alternative to their respective communities.

The Role of Muslim Community Leaders in Countering Daesh

Muslim religious and community leaders have an important role to play in discrediting and preventing violent extremism as they hold unique positions of authority, credibility, and communal ties. Our religious and community leaders must be proactive and identify the problems and solutions while recognizing the specific role that they can play in providing alternative avenues for expressing grievances, while promoting community based activities that respond to localized needs. This will foster greater inclusion and sense of belonging in vulnerable youth.

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

Muslim religious and community leaders must understand Daesh communication strategies so that they can identify productive ways of engaging Muslim youth. First, religious and community leaders must understand and identify the emotional appeals and various narratives Daesh employs. For example, how does Daesh propaganda differ in the United States from its counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa? Does Daesh target men and women differently? Effective solutions must be localized and grass root in nature. In parallel, apocalyptic and decontextualized interpretation of Quranic verses must be examined and refuted. One main reoccurring theme that is found in all Daesh media propaganda is the concept of caliphate and the abolition of nation state, which is directly tied to issues of Muslim identity. We should encourage and not shy away from critical discussion. Second, Daesh's heavy reliance on sophisticated digital media to recruit young Muslims makes it even more imperative for religious leaders to use the same mediums effectively when creating localized alternative online narratives. One helpful approach to address this challenge is for religious leaders to enhance their media capabilities and communication strategies so that they can effectively discredit Daesh propaganda. Third, the disconnect with youth has been a major challenge to Muslim religious leaders' attempt to guide and engage the youth. Community leaders must be able to communicate in a language that the youth can understand and identify with. This can be through the use of local dialects, shorter and interactive sermons, safe space for women, and local initiatives for youth. It is of utmost importance that our youth feel empowered and listened to.