

# Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent

## Topical Insert Supporting Material: ISIL Communications

Information correct as of 1 July 2015

*The threat from ISIL, (AKA ISIS, IS, Da'eesh) differs significantly from that posed by al-Qa'ida. Al-Qa'ida encouraged a tiny minority to travel and engage in training to carry out terrorist acts. ISIL appeal to all Muslims to make hijrah (migrate) to Syria and kill Muslims and non-Muslims. If people don't want to migrate then ISIL's appeal is for them to engage in violence in their home countries.*

*The Ideology of al-Qa'ida is broadly similar to that of ISIL. But their tactics differ significantly. Al-Qa'ida is secretive, elitist, and cellular. ISIL inspire others to Do-It-Yourself terrorism on a significant scale. We've seen examples of this in France, Tunisia and elsewhere. ISIL's reach into communities has therefore got to be greater for their strategy to work. Their industrial use of social media makes this come alive.*

*The WRAP session may prompt specific questions from delegates around ISIL. Such questions might include: What is the appeal of ISIL to young people? How are ISIL able to get their message out online if internet companies are taking down their propaganda?*

## What is ISIL?

- The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a proscribed terrorist group that uses sophisticated propaganda and online messaging to recruit new members.
- They are a brutal group that want to impose their rule on people and has regularly uses violence and extortion; it is a violent terrorist organisation that has caused huge suffering in the name of an Islamist extremist ideology.
- Having previously been affiliated to the al-Qa'ida network in Iraq, ISIL were expelled from the network following its move into Syria in 2014.
- After gaining control of large areas of uncontrolled territory in Syria, in June 2014, ISIL advanced on Iraq, taking the city of Mosul and declaring the establishment of the 'Caliphate'. At this time ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared 'Caliph'.

## ISIL PROPAGANDA ONLINE

### Why is ISIL producing online propaganda?

ISIL propaganda aims to portray the group as the successful administrators of a new Islamic state for Sunni Muslims. It is not only trying to recruit young men to fight jihad in the region, but also skilled workers, women and families. ISIL is offering them citizenship and a fulfilling life, claiming that they can help build this utopian society in the 'Caliphate'.

This messaging has an international focus – ISIL tells people that they have a religious duty to join the group, regardless of their age, gender or current location. In order to reach these people, ISIL produces propaganda tailored to a number of different audiences, and in multiple languages.

### **How does ISIL produce propaganda?**

ISIL has a number of central media arms that produce official propaganda for the group, which are known for being particularly slick and professional-looking. Typical official products from the group include:

- **Videos** - Often in HD quality, ISIL videos are well-edited, stylised and branded. Their footage of battles borrows the style of Hollywood action films.
- **Magazines** – Again, these online magazines are very professional and stylised, particularly in comparison to the al-Qa'ida products.
- **Photosets** – Following the jihadi tradition of creating photosets, this is an easy way to quickly release and share propaganda, particularly on social media.

Beyond its main media outlets, ISIL also has media organisations for each of the 'provinces' under its control, known as 'Wilayats'. These groups produce material on a daily basis claiming to show ISIL's successes and work to improve living standards in the area.

Alongside the official media outlets, ISIL supporters on social media will create their own images and memes promoting the group. They will often use the ISIL logo, images of key figures or events, or images taken from official ISIL products to make their own material – often in the style of online 'fan art' around pop culture and celebrities.

### **How does ISIL use social media to spread propaganda?**

ISIL do not have any 'official' social media accounts, as they are quickly removed by the sites. Instead, ISIL uses its large following on social media to distribute propaganda material and encourages supporters to share it as widely as possible – a form of social media crowdsourcing.

The latest independent estimates suggest that there are around 45,000 pro-ISIL social media accounts worldwide. One of the benefits of not having 'official' social media accounts is that material can be shared between supporters when the original accounts have been removed, and that these accounts can be quickly replaced.

## **ISIL MESSAGING**

The main themes of ISIL messaging found in the group's propaganda can be divided into three categories:

### **Statehood**

- Following its territorial gains in Iraq and Syria 2014, ISIL has claimed to have established a new state. Its propaganda presents the 'Caliphate' as a utopia under Sharia law.
- The group regularly produces images and videos of families living in ISIL-controlled areas, such as Raqqa and Mosul. They claim to show food and electricity are plentiful, children can attend schools, and that healthcare and other state support is freely available.

- This is one of the most powerful factors for recruitment, as it shows people living as citizens of the first Islamic 'Caliphate' in nearly 100 years, an offer that is unique to ISIL.

These claims to statehood are false and are undermined by the following factors:

- Virtually all Islamic scholars have rejected ISIL's claims to have created a caliphate.
- The claims of creating a utopia are untrue, and in many areas of ISIL-controlled territory people are experiencing hunger, power-rationing and disease.
- While claiming to provide for civilians, there are reports that ISIL has stolen international aid (including food and medicine), holding it back for fighters while ordinary people suffer.
- Instead of a justice system, violent punishments are carried out arbitrarily, including the use of cruel punishments for crimes not proscribed in the sharia (such as using mobile phones).

### **Success**

- ISIL messaging relies heavily on the image that the group is successful in its military engagements. Propaganda presents the image that its fighters are powerful, and that the group consistently delivers victories in Syria and Iraq.
- The group emphasises that it can give recruits a sense of personal strength and Islamic honour, something that potential recruits may be lacking in their own lives. This empowers ISIL supporters with the idea that they are backing a 'winning team'.

However, there are many examples of how ISIL has failed to deliver its promise of success to recruits:

- ISIL has given naive young recruits from the West the impression that it is 'unbeatable', but its defeats in Kobane, Tikrit (and elsewhere) prove that this was just a myth. Thousands of young ISIL recruits have already died as 'cannon fodder' in various battles.
- There is growing evidence of in-fighting within ISIL's ranks, and the group has brutally executed disillusioned fighters who have tried to leave.
- Joining ISIL is not empowering - many who have been lured to join ISIL report being humiliated and made to perform menial tasks such as cleaning toilets by their foreign commanders.

### **Sunni Supremacy**

- ISIL seeks to portray itself as the defenders of Sunni Muslims in the region. It capitalises on pre-existing sectarian tensions by presenting itself as the liberators and protectors of Iraq's Sunnis, by arguing that they face a threat from Shias, and from a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.
- ISIL presents itself as exclusive, in the sense that it only welcomes Sunni Muslims, yet it is also inclusive, as it appeals to Sunnis regardless of their race or nationality. ISIL propaganda aims to show Sunni Muslims from throughout the world who have travelled to join the group, not only to show their power, but also to show all or welcome.

Despite its claims to protect Sunnis, ISIL is seeking to exploit sectarian tensions for its own gain:

- ISIL is causing suffering to Muslims across Syria and Iraq, many of whom the group has subjugated and killed without mercy. As well as causing suffering to Muslims, it is damaging the name of Islam.

- ISIL seeks to divide people by provoking sectarian division, but ISIL themselves have shown the same brutality towards the Sunni tribes as to Shias. They have ejected Imams from their Mosques, and even killed those who oppose them.
- There is evidence of both racism and hierarchy based on nationality in the group. Reports from returned foreign recruits suggest that those from some countries receive better treatment than others.

## **RECRUITMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE ONLINE**

ISIL's slick propaganda products, combined with its prolific use of social media, have meant the group's messaging has been able to reach young people in the West on a scale previously unseen with a jihadi group.

The group exploits any confusion or disillusionment young Muslims may have about living in the West, and manipulates them by claiming to be offering the chance to live in a utopian society, under the moral absolutes of their interpretation of Sharia law.

The messaging of ISIL resonates with young people in the way that a brand does; young people who engage with ISIL and its messaging feel particularly loyal to the group, and will adopt its imagery and language. Whilst the salafi-jihadi ideology plays a role in the appeal of ISIL, the messaging around Statehood, Success and Supremacy seeks to engage people on an emotional level.

*This paper is for Government departments and statutory organisations dealing with counter-terrorism. It is intended to provide you with a summary of a topical issue and to help you to respond to discussions and questions generated in WRAP workshops. It is not intended to be a detailed briefing on Government policies and explaining these issues to the media is the role of relevant departmental press offices.*