

Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'

By Charlie Winter

Foreword by Haras Rafiq



Quilliam is the world's first counter-extremism think tank, set up to address the unique challenges of citizenship, identity, and belonging in a globalized world. Quilliam stands for religious freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy. Challenging extremism is the duty of all responsible members of society. Not least because cultural insularity and extremism are products of the failures of wider society to foster a shared sense of belonging and to advance democratic values. Quilliam seeks to challenge what we think and the way we think. It aims to generate creative, informed, and inclusive discussions to counter the ideological underpinnings of terrorism, whilst simultaneously providing evidence-based recommendations to governments for related policy measures.

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1. Foreword – by Haras Rafiq, Managing Director of Quilliam

The menace presented by Islamic State's (IS) self-proclaimed 'caliphate' is uniquely challenging on a number of levels. Tactically, its military operations demand lateral thinking, since the group exists as a nebulous, swarming network constantly seeking to expand its reach. Strategically, too, it is pioneering new insurgent methods, establishing numerous, complex administrative and institutional foundations in Iraq and Syria that are already deeply rooted and sure to prolong the war for years to come, as the middle ground between civilian and soldier is systematically destroyed. It is in psychological terms, though, that IS has truly transformed the state of play. Its vast propaganda operation is unrivalled, involving devoted media teams from West Africa to Afghanistan who work relentlessly, day and night, in the production and dissemination of the 'caliphate' brand. So far, most of our attempts to meaningfully mitigate IS's ability to globally engage have been left floundering.

Numerically speaking, it is an uphill struggle. Though there are some commendable efforts being undertaken by counter violent extremism practitioners and civil society organisations, they are dwarfed in size by IS's media behemoth, which produces on average 38 individual batches of propaganda each day – videos, photo essays, articles and audio programmes. Apart from practicalities, the counter effort is, from the offset, structurally impaired from success. Indeed, the cult of the counter-narrative has left coalition partners working from within a reactive paradigm, something that means it is perpetually on the back foot when it comes to presenting an alternative to what IS offers.

The difficulties we face in the information war on IS are not something of which we can opt out. Hence, we need to recognise our weaknesses and circumnavigate the obstacles we face. Arguably the most damaging of those weaknesses has been a persistent tendency to misunderstand just what it is that IS is doing – myriad questions have been asked, and most left unanswered.

In the Quilliam Foundation's latest research into IS propaganda, Senior Researcher Charlie Winter presents us with a truly ground-breaking window into the mind of the propagandist, demystifying the media war more than ever before. Between 17 July and 15 August 2015, the Islamic month of Shawwal, Charlie compiled an exhaustive archive of IS propaganda, creating not just a snapshot of its output, but a comprehensive, 30-day view of it.

Over the course of the data collection period, he recorded 1146 separate propaganda "events", discrete batches of data that were disseminated with a view to bolstering the IS world view, be that through graphic violence or millenarian scenes of vividly lit fairgrounds. Each event was recorded according to 7 variables and then grouped by narrative and subcategory, enabling detailed analysis. By postponing any assessment until the data had been collected in full, Charlie was able to circumvent IS's tactical saturation of the Internet and consider its messaging in an aggregated, considered manner. In so doing, as important trends, iniquities and anomalies that are otherwise impossible to discern become strikingly apparent, he has presented us with an important tactical and strategic insight into the virtual 'caliphate'.

When it comes to IS propaganda, it is imperative that we understand it in as granular and nuanced a manner as possible. Using data to test the hypothesis of the July 2015 report 'The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy', Charlie has illuminated the bare bones of the IS brand. It is high time we recognised that there is no elixir that can deliver us from IS' information supremacy, no catch-all counter-narrative to undercut its carefully cultivated and choreographed image. In this absence, we must instead seek to enrich our understanding. The IS 'caliphate' is marketing itself on an industrial scale. If we are to destroy its brand, we must first be able to fathom its depths.

2. Executive Summary

This report illuminates the strategic thinking behind Islamic State's propaganda machine. Building on the theoretical framework established in 'The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy', the following analysis is based upon an exhaustive 30-day survey of Islamic State's media output.

At 24 hour intervals from 17 July to 15 August 2015, the Islamic month of Shawwal, all media output from Islamic State's official outlets, from the provincial offices to the central foundations, was compiled for aggregated analysis. A total of 1146 separate events – discrete batches of propaganda – were recorded in the data collection period: a mixture of photo essays, videos, audio statements, news bulletins, posters, theological essays, and so on. After the data collection period had ended, the archive was translated and refined, as events were grouped according to their primary narrative and, if applicable, sub-narratives. Following this, the data was rigorously tested against a number of variables to determine inconsistencies and anomalies. Then, the archive was broken down into its various narrative groupings, which were qualitatively assessed both in isolation of, and respect to, each other.

From the following pages, 10 key conclusions emerge:

1. The volume of output produced by Islamic State far exceeds most estimates, which have been, until now, necessarily conservative. Disseminating an average of 38.2 unique propaganda events a day from all corners of the Islamic State 'caliphate', this is an exceptionally sophisticated information operation campaign, the success of which lies in the twin pillars of quantity and quality. Given this scale and dedication, negative measures like censorship are bound to fail.

2. While there is broad consistency in the Islamic State narrative, it changes on a day-to-day basis according to on-the-ground priorities for the group. Composed of 6 non-discrete parts – mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war and utopia – the ‘caliphate’ brand is constantly shifting.
3. Constituting just 3.48% of the Shawwal dataset, the themes of mercy, belonging and brutality are dwarfed by the latter three narratives in terms of prominence. This is a marked shift from past propaganda norms and is indicative of changes in tactical outreach for Islamic State.
4. Over half of all the propaganda was focused on depicting civilian life in Islamic State-held territories. The spectre of ultraviolence was ever-present, but the preponderant focus on the ‘caliphate’ utopia demonstrates the priorities of the group’s media strategists.
5. Economic activity, social events, abundant wildlife, unwavering law and order, and pro-active, pristine ‘religious’ fervour form the foundations of Islamic State’s civilian appeal. In this way, the group attracts supporters based on ideological *and* political appeal.
6. Besides civilian life, the propagandists go to great lengths to portray their military, variously depicting it in stasis or during offensives. There are few occasions upon which its defensive war is documented, something that makes sense given the need to perpetuate the aura of supremacy and momentum.
7. A large proportion of military-themed events is devoted to showing Islamic State’s war of attrition, with mortars and rockets being fired towards an unseen enemy. Given the locations from which many of these reports emerge, as well as the fact that the aftermath of such strikes is rarely, if ever documented, it is conceivable that these low-risk attacks are falsely choreographed to perpetuate a sense of Islamic State’s constantly being ‘on the offensive’.

8. Islamic State still markets itself with brutality. However, the intended audiences for its ultraviolence are decidedly more regional than they have been in days gone by. Indeed, it seems that fostering international infamy is now secondary to intimidating its population, in order to discourage rebellion and dissent. Of course, this is very much subject to change.
9. The quantity, quality and variation of Islamic State propaganda in just one month far outweighs the quantity, quality and variation of any attempts, state or non-state, to challenge the group. All current efforts must be scaled up to achieve meaningful progress in this war.
10. The global desire to find a panacea counter-narrative to undermine the Islamic State brand is misplaced. Categorically, there is no such thing. Those engaged in the information war on the 'caliphate' must take a leaf out of the group's own media strategy book and prioritise quantity, quality, variation, adaptability and differentiation. Most importantly, though, it must be based upon an *alternative*, not *counter*, narrative.

Until we recognise that responding to Islamic State's psychological operations on a reactive, piece-by-piece basis is bound to fail, countering its propaganda supremacy will always be a Sisyphean task. As a first step towards developing a viable information framework from which to tackle the group's marketing strategy, it is critical that we prioritise understanding the strategy itself. Based as it is on a 30-day snapshot of Islamic State propaganda, the following report is an important contribution to this end. However, it is just a first step. If we are to take the information war seriously, this endeavour must be scaled up and expanded such that it is long-term. After all, we will never be able to truly second guess – and hence undermine – the IS propagandist unless we can decode the strategy behind their actions.

1. Introduction

Since Islamic State seized Iraq's second city Mosul in June 2014, there has been an unprecedented surge of interest into jihadist propaganda. Publics, policymakers and journalists watched on aghast as Islamic State set about expanding its sphere of influence, seemingly documenting all facets of its existence on high-definition cameras. Now in its second year as 'caliphate', the group's brutality continues to reach new levels of sterilised depravity, as its propagandists seek to maintain and cultivate the menace their insurgent pseudo-state presents. Such consistent, glossy violence has served to derail the mainstream discourse on the group, with tabloid newspapers and politicians perpetually citing the group's ultraviolence as its chief appeal to foreign recruits. Categorically, this is not the case. Beyond soundbites, the fixation on brutality at the expense of a more rational, holistic analysis of the group adds little to our assessment.¹

As part of the Quilliam Foundation's ongoing research into Islamic State's propaganda strategy, the following report seeks to meaningfully contribute to our understanding of how the group projects itself – both inside and outside of its boundaries – by detailing and analysing the findings of an exhaustive data-based census of its official media output. Presenting a practical application of the theoretical framework for understanding Islamic State propaganda set out in the July 2015 report 'The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy', this project illuminates the strategic thinking and tactical evolution of the group's brand and messaging.²

¹ That said, some excellent contributions have been provided by the likes of Haroro Ingram, Aaron Zelin, J.M. Berger, Nico Prucha and Ali Fisher. See Aaron Zelin, 'Picture or it didn't happen: a snapshot of the Islamic State's media output', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9), 2015; J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, 'The ISIS Twitter Census: defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter', *The Brookings Institution* (20), 2015; Ali Fisher, 'Swarmcast: how jihadist networks maintain a persistent online presence', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9), 2015; J.M. Berger, 'The metronome of apocalyptic time: social media as a carrier wave for millenarian contagion', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9), 2015.

² Charlie Winter, 'The virtual 'caliphate': understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy', *The Quilliam Foundation*, July 2015.

Through systematic and regular monitoring of Islamic State's Arabic-language echo chamber, a comprehensive archive of its official output has been compiled – 1146 individual propaganda 'events', all of which were released over the course of the tenth month of the lunar calendar, Shawwal, in the Islamic year 1436 (17 July to 15 August 2015).³ Coming immediately after the month of Ramadan and thirteen Islamic months after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared as Islamic State's 'caliph' on 29 June 2014, Shawwal was an ideal test case for the 'Virtual 'Caliphate'' hypothesis. Equipped with such an extensive sample, it has been possible to further demystify Islamic State's marketing strategy with evidence-based analysis. Such a study is important because, at the time of writing, too much insight into Islamic State propaganda is based on conjecture and hence, the prevailing assessment of its metanarrative is based upon an incomplete picture. If the coalition is to be able to meaningfully challenge the group's information operations, it must first determine exactly what fruit those operations are bearing.

After setting out the methodology used to assemble the archive, each of Islamic State's key narratives – brutality, mercy, belonging, victimhood, war and utopia – is closely examined in the context of the dataset. Accompanying this, there are tabular and graphical representations of the archive that appear throughout the paper. It fast becomes clear that close analysis of the Shawwal dataset provides a unique insight into Islamic State's information operations, insight that is sorely needed. With it, the constituent parts of Islamic State's idealised understanding of itself can be dismantled and interpreted in minute detail. With it, our own information operations can be tailored to directly challenge the composite elements of the 'caliphate' brand, something required in the absence of a panacea counter-narrative that can singlehandedly undermine Islamic State.

³ In the context of this paper, the term 'event' denotes a discrete collection of data through which is delivered a specific propagandistic message. An event may feature a number of narratives, but there is always one principal idea that it is trying to convey or reinforce. Individually, most propaganda events are insignificant. However, when disparate events emerge tens of times a day for months on end, as they do in Islamic State's case, their collective value is profound.

2. Methodology

a) Locating the source

Before attempting to compile a full archive of Islamic State propaganda, it is first necessary to determine the source from which to compile it. In the past, jihadist groups tended to prefer using password-protected Arabic-language forums to share and exchange ideas.⁴ These forums still exist and are still used; however, they now play a role secondary to that of open source (Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook etc.) and peer-to-peer (Kik, Surespot, Telegram etc.) social media, as jihadists have become less insular and have sought to increase their exposure and accessibility.⁵ Operating out in the open necessitates significant operational security sacrifices. However, the advantages are manifold, as evidenced by Islamic State's unprecedented recruitment success, among other things.

Indisputably, social media has emerged as the arena of choice for jihadist propagandising and, recognising that the unencumbered instrumentalisation of their platforms by violent extremist groups is likely to cause long-term legislative and ethical problems, social media corporations have fought back. For example, Facebook has imposed strict user limitations and regulations that have largely succeeded in ejecting jihadist propagandising from the platform.⁶ In contrast, Twitter, which initially took a less hands-on approach towards the issue, remains unable to eject the extremists that have colonised it in recent years. The rapidity with which media can be disseminated on Twitter, coupled with its capacity for extremely targeted messaging and the hashtag search functionality, removes the need for self-

⁴ See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's useful resource: 'Database: identifiers of designated terrorist organizations – jihadist media (forums)', *Jihad Intel presented by the Middle East Forum*, (<http://jihadintel.meforum.org/identifiers/25/jihadist-media-forums>).

⁵ The role that social media plays for violent extremists is perpetually shifting. In a Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence congressional hearing at the end of 2011, of the 6 platforms listed, only Twitter and Facebook were mentioned. See 'House hearing, 112 Congress: jihadist use of social media – how to prevent terrorism and preserve innovation', *Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the Committee on Homeland Security*, 6 December 2011.

⁶ Steven Stalinsky, 'The Facebook model for taking on jihadist groups online', *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2015.

advertising centralised accounts, thus making it an ideal place for violent extremists to operate.⁷ No group does this more effectively than Islamic State, the supporters of which have proved to be both resilient and quick to adapt to all counter-measures to date.⁸ Indeed, over the past year, despite the formidable obstacles that Twitter's administrators now present them with, Islamic State's propaganda productivity and rate of dissemination has continued to accelerate.

b) The dissemination structure

Since the summer of 2014, Islamic State has eschewed the use of 'official' accounts on Twitter.⁹ This occurred out of necessity, rather than choice. Officially branded accounts made easy targets for those with the power to suspend – administrators could glance at a user profile, recognise it as both 'jihadist' and 'official', and suspend it before it could gather a following or disseminate media. Hindered by such negative measures, operating on Twitter became more difficult for Islamic State's proselytisers, who came to realise that their methodology would have to adapt.

Reflective of this, hashtags – which Twitter neither suspends nor blocks – are now Islamic State's preferred vehicle for dissemination. By using an organically defined set of tags, Islamic State's official disseminators can simultaneously be effective and low-key. They do not require official branding or a large following to have a large impact. Indeed, the more they blend in with the crowd, the better. By operating as much as is feasible below the radar, they are able to avoid suspension for relatively long periods of time, all the while sharing pre-uploaded batches of propaganda along with the relevant hashtags, a system that renders them immediately accessible to an ever-waiting audience that then shoulders the burden of mass broadcasting. The fact that mass dissemination is done by a separate tier

⁷ Berger, 'Metronome'.

⁸ It is worth recognising that, while Twitter has emerged as Islamic State's platform of choice for propagandising, it is not so integral to the recruitment process. This is a function reserved for peer-to-peer social media platforms, upon which detailed conversations can be conducted with assured anonymity.

⁹ Berger, 'Twitter census', 23.

of Islamic State's online supporter nexus means that the official disseminators are more difficult to detect and suspend.¹⁰ Furthermore, because there are a number of 'official' initial disseminators, even if 1 or 2 are removed, others will always be present to make up the numbers. This is not a fool-proof means of operating – suspensions of the right accounts still occur fairly regularly – but, to date, the flow of propaganda has not been stemmed.

Country	Total Number of Events	% of Events
Iraq	380	42.49
Syria	301	33.74
Central	141	10.09
Libya	46	5.16
Egypt	10	1.12
Afghanistan	4	0.45
Yemen	4	0.45
Algeria	2	0.22
Saudi Arabia	2	0.22
West Africa	2	0.22
Total	892	100

c) Building the archive

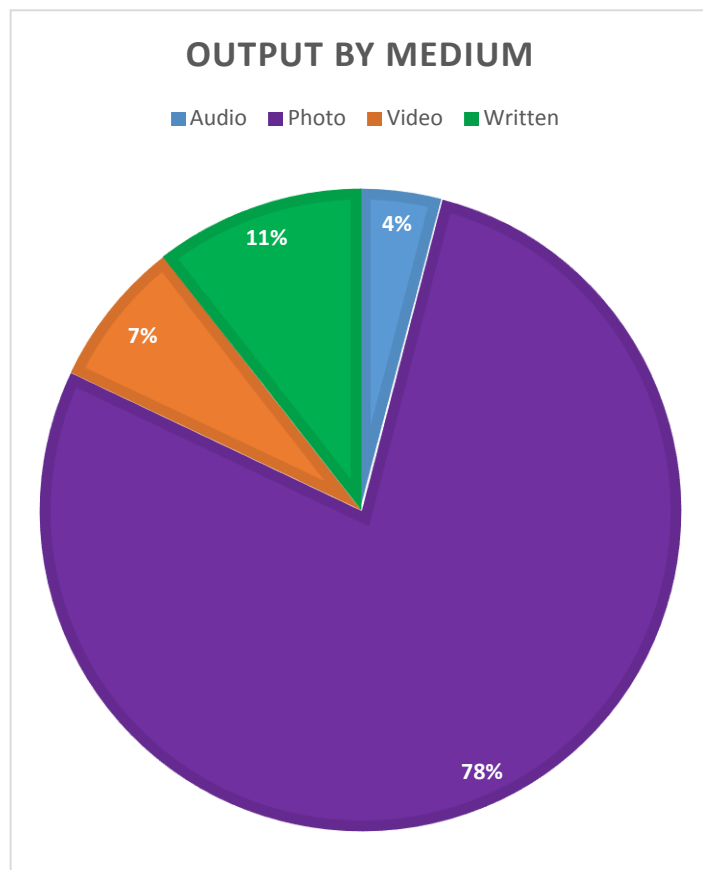
As there is no single account responsible for introducing Islamic State's propaganda to the Internet, identifying and monitoring initial disseminators, while useful, only gives a partial snapshot of the full output. Furthermore, while there are some Twitter users that act rather like living archives of Islamic State's messaging, they are insufficient as sources due to their periodic absences, suspensions, or apparent lapses of interest. Therefore, the only way to compile a full dataset of all Islamic State propaganda is to systematically monitor each of the organisation's designated hashtags.¹¹ By using

¹⁰ Berger, 'Twitter census', 24.

¹¹ Given that some of these hashtags appear over 1,512 times in 24 hours, this is a time intensive pursuit.

these tags in combination with a set of other ‘key’ hashtags to refine the search, as Islamic State supporters do, it is possible to circumnavigate the Twitter bots – computer programs set up to create automated posts – and other sources of noise that flood jihadist channels seeking to disrupt easy access to propaganda.

With that in mind, this paper was researched by tracking hashtags, not users. For 30 days at 24 hour intervals, all officially branded propaganda events released by any of Islamic State’s provincial media offices were collected and entered into the archive, along with those issued by its central propaganda organs (the al-Furqan, al-I’tisam and Ajnad Foundations and the al-Hayat Media Center), radio station (al-Bayan Radio) and publishing house (al-Himma Library). Besides the magazines released



by the al-Hayat Media Center, the only written propaganda that was recorded was *da’wa* literature published by Islamic State’s al-Himma Library, al-Bayan Radio’s transcribed bulletins and battlefield reports from A’maq News Agency, which were collected at daily intervals from A’maq’s Tumblr page.¹² Officially prescribed tweets and individual operation claims, both of which are repeated in Islamic State’s daily bulletins, were excluded from the dataset.

¹² It is worth noting that, even though A’maq News Agency is party to exclusive information and continually produces videos filmed by embedded ‘reporters’ at the frontlines, it has, until recently, described itself as *ghayr rasmi* (unofficial) on its website.

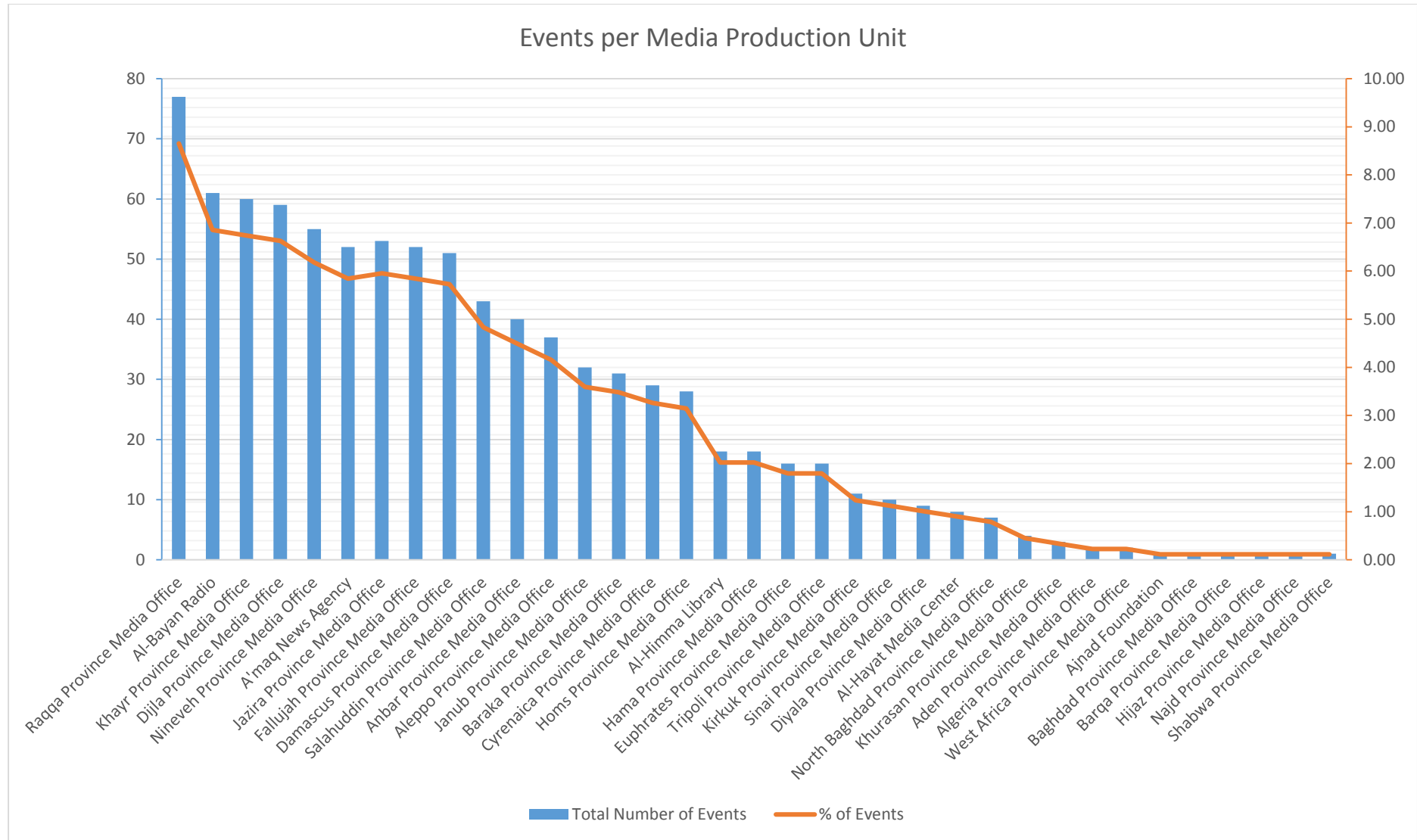
Each set of propaganda was recorded as an event, a discrete piece of propagandistic messaging ranging from photographic reports to audio statements, magazines, online articles and videos. Every event, whether audio, visual or textual, was recorded according to 7 variables: date, country, location (if applicable), production unit, medium, language and title. While Islamic State regularly releases foreign language media, all the data for the project was compiled using Arabic-language sources because the group's foreign-language supporters, the majority of whom are restricted by their language skills, offer but a partial view of the full picture.

d) Refining the archive

Over the 30 day data collection period, a total of 1146 events were recorded in their original Arabic form. Prior to the analysis phase of the project, the title and content of each of the events was translated along with the respective production unit, language and location. Following this, they were sorted by key narrative – brutality, mercy, belonging, victimhood, war and utopia. The latter 2, war and utopia, were then further refined into 14 subcategories – for war: preparation, offensive, defence, attrition, martyrdom panegyrics and summary; for utopia: economic activity, expansion, governance, justice, religion, social life and, lastly, nature and landscape.

The regularity and duplication of multiple-language bulletin broadcasts from al-Bayan Radio meant that aggregating each of these events into just 2 entries a day – 1 audio and 1 textual – facilitated more nuanced analysis.¹³ Prior to this, the archive was skewed by the volume of 'summary' events, which are almost uniquely vehicles of the war narrative. As a result, the full dataset was compressed from 1146 events to an abridged version of 892. It is this abridged set that is analysed below.

¹³ This should not be interpreted as an assertion that a French or Russian news broadcast should be considered the same as an English or Arabic broadcast of the same day – after all, while the content and editorial decision behind each event may be identical, the audiences are entirely different. Since the data collection, bulletins have begun emerging in both Bosnian and Bengali.



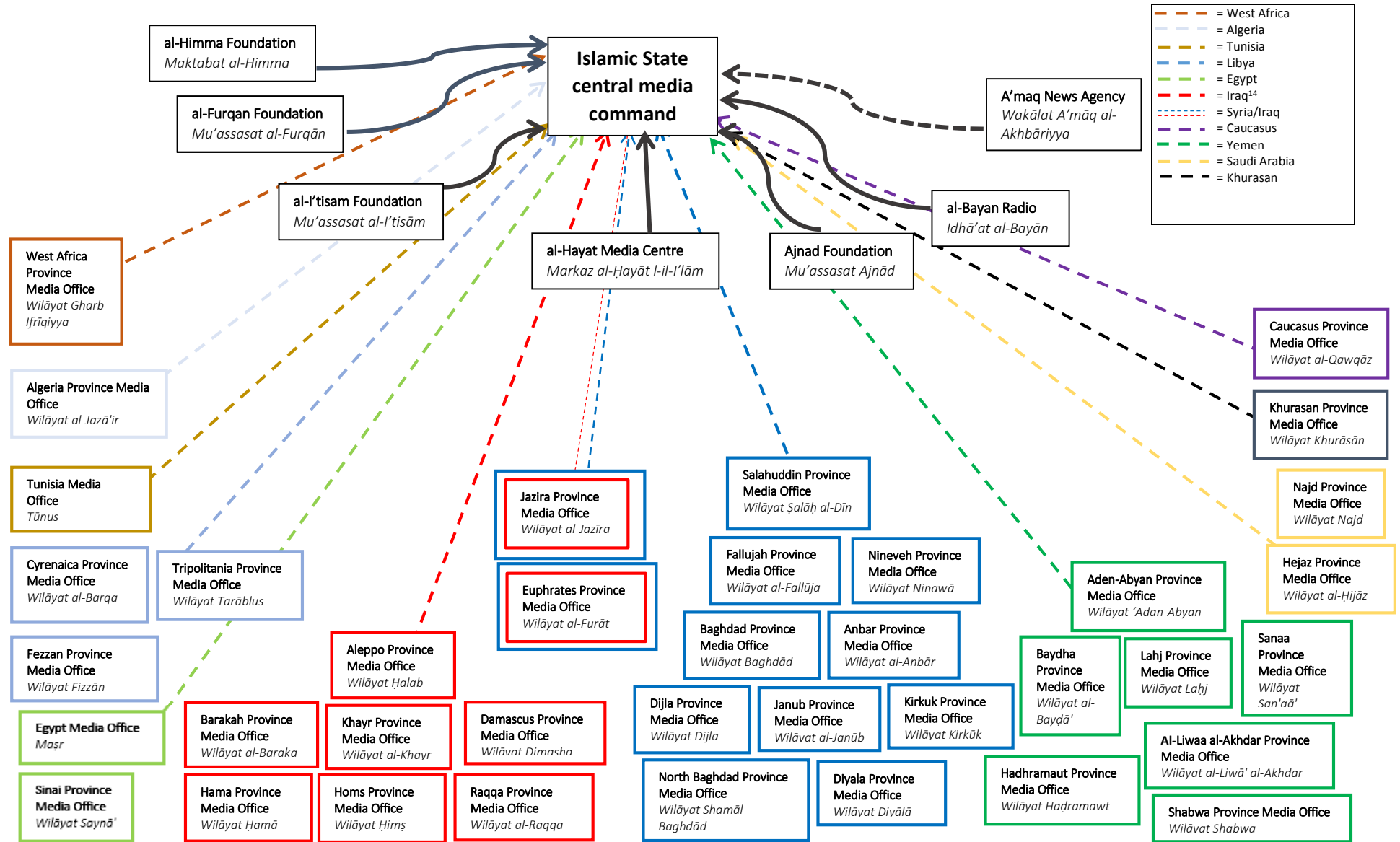
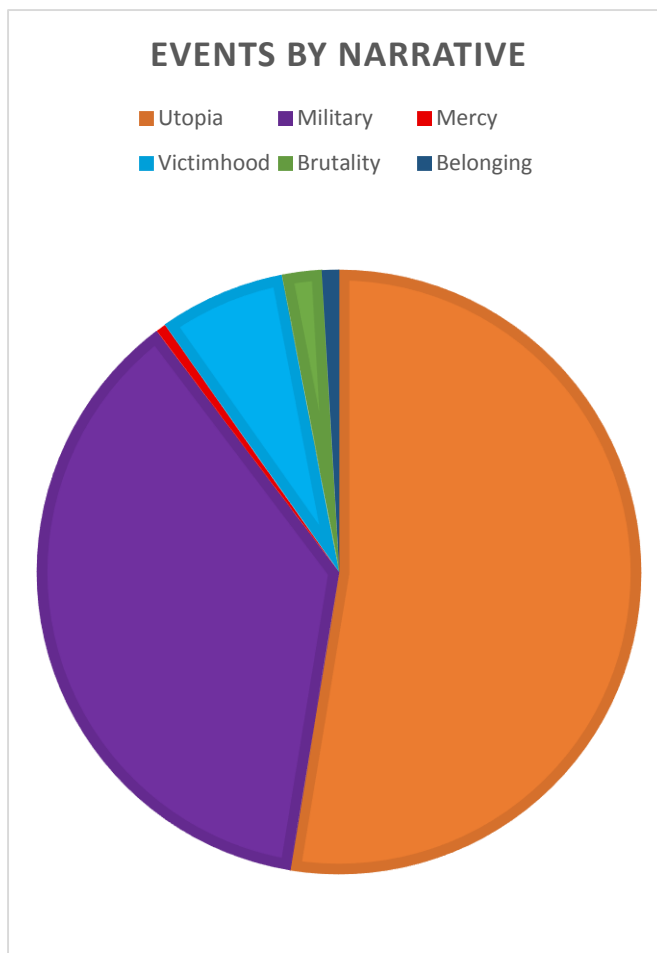


Figure 1

3. Thematic Analysis

A common misconception about Islamic State propaganda is that it starts and finishes with brutality. In July 2015 there was speculation as to whether this would no longer be the case, with multiple media outlets reporting on a spurious rumour that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had banned the featuring of executions in videos.¹⁵ However, as footage released in the days following those reports would show, brutality is still very much present, albeit less prominently than is often portrayed. Compared to the norms that emerged between 1 Ramadan 1435 to 1 Ramadan 1436, it seems that the overall Islamic State narrative has shifted in favour of victimhood, war and utopia. The brutality, mercy and belonging



themes are still present, but instances of those 3 are now vastly outnumbered by propaganda prioritising the others (there are only 31 of them, out of a dataset of 892).

The following pages continue the discussion on the 6 central themes of Islamic State's messaging as defined in 'The Virtual Caliphate' – brutality, mercy, belonging, victimhood, war and utopia – about which myriad questions remain:¹⁶ how do they operate together? Which of them is exploited the most at any given time? Do they change according to on-the-ground

¹⁵ For example: Sara Aridi, 'No more gory beheading videos: why ISIS has banned execution videos', *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 July 2015; 'A kinder and gentler ISIS? Baghdadi reportedly bans gruesome beheading scenes', *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 July 2015.

¹⁶ Charlie Winter, 'The virtual 'caliphate': understanding Islamic State's propaganda strategy', *The Quilliam Foundation*, July 2015, 22.

events such as tactical setbacks or advances? Through the lens of the Shawwal dataset, questions such as these can be answered empirically.

a) Mercy – 0.45%

The mercy narrative – the idea that Islamic State is willing and able to grant clemency to those who repent – features in 4 events in the Shawwal dataset, 1 video depicting the repentance of a group of former members of the Iraqi police and army, and 3 photo reports from Tripoli and Cyrenaica Provinces in Libya.¹⁷ Given that a total of 892 events were recorded, it does not figure prominently. By way of contrast, in the run-up to and initial months of the inaugural ‘caliphal’ year, much more attention was paid to *istitāba* (appeals for repentance). At these carefully orchestrated events, people – fighters and civilians – would be shown pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi *en masse*.¹⁸ The motivation is self-evident: Islamic State wanted to send a message that, if past beliefs are recanted, one has the opportunity to be forgiven – something that would facilitate its rapid expansion in the region.

The comparative scarcity of mercy-prioritising propaganda in Shawwal could be interpreted in a number of ways. In practical terms, assuring prospective subjects of the group’s mercy is not so important if there is little prospect of expansion, so it could be borne of the fact that Islamic State is no longer looking to enlarge its borders at a rapid pace. After all, at this juncture, the group is prioritising consolidation in Syria and Iraq, not expansion. There is much evidence that repentance is still being encouraged by Islamic State internally, but it is not being bragged about as it once was.¹⁹ If its offer of amnesty is too prominent, the group’s attempts to discourage dissent through intimidation could run

¹⁷ ‘Repentants and returners to God’, *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 27 July 2015; ‘A number of African Christians embracing the religion of Islam in Sirte’, *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; ‘Repentance of a number of apostates in the village of Um al-Qandil’, *Cyrenaica Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; ‘The repentance of a group of apostates in the city of Sirte’, *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 11 August 2015.

¹⁸ ‘From the darkness to the light’, *Khayr Province Media Office*, 16 April 2015; ‘Education in the shade of the caliphate’, *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 5 March 2015.

¹⁹ See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, ‘Repentance: financial income for the Islamic State’, *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi’s Blog*, 28 September 2015.

the risk of being undermined.

b) Belonging – 0.89%

There were only 8 belonging-themed propaganda events during the data collection period, all of which were in Arabic. All stressing the collective nature of the ‘caliphate’, 3 were videos and the rest were photo reports. None of the events – video or otherwise – were as carefully choreographed as past releases from al-Hayat Media Center.²⁰ However, photos and videos showing fighters relaxing with each other, drinking tea and enjoying themselves, still convey a particularly appealing story of the collective, and it would be wrong to discount the importance of these events based on their relative scarcity.²¹ Indeed, while the belonging narrative is by no means the only draw for foreign recruits, it still plays a critically important role.

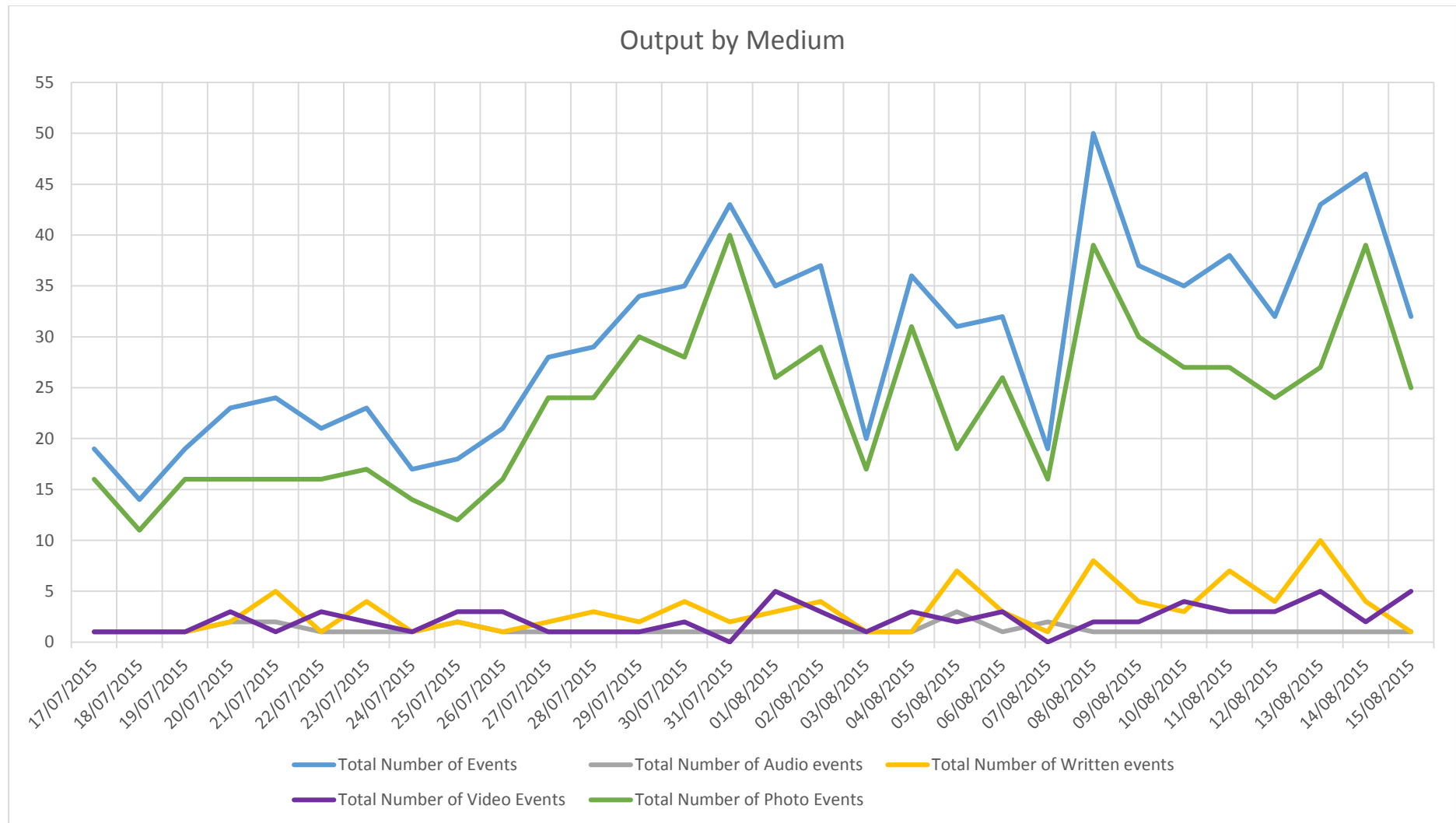
Again, the Shawwal dataset contrasts to past norms. Just as Islamic State was less outward-looking with its brutality propaganda, its overt, external stressing of belonging seems to have been tempered too. In the initial months of its inaugural year as ‘caliphate’, Islamic State disseminated a series of videos that championed the idea of belonging. They depicted Western foreign fighters sitting together on grassy hillocks and in children-filled parks, calling upon their fellow extremists to join them in the land of the ‘caliphate’.²² Many others emerged over the rest of the year, showing Arab supporters singing and drinking tea together during *istirāḥāt* (breaks) and rapturously inviting their compatriots to join them at *ribāt* (the frontier).²³ Distinct from the expansion-focused ‘Message to [...]’ series of videos, in

²⁰ ‘There Is No Life without Jihad’, *al-Hayat Media Center*, 10 June 2014; ‘Eid Greetings from the Land of the Caliphate’, *al-Hayat Media Center*, 2 August 2014; ‘The Story of Abu Khaled al-Cambodi’, *al-Hayat Media Center*, 21 April 2015.

²¹ ‘Relaxation of the *mujāhidin* on ‘Id al-Fitr in the city of Harawa’, *Cyrenaica Province Media Office*, 19 July 2015; ‘Relaxation of the *mujāhid*’, *Sinai Province Media Office*, 10 August 2015.

²² ‘Eid greetings from the land of the caliphate’, *al-Hayat Media Center*, 2 August 2014; ‘Wait. We are also waiting’, *al-Hayat Media Center*, 15 October 2014.

²³ ‘Break of *mujāhid*’, *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 9 April 2015; ‘Break of a *mujāhid*’, *Jazira Province Media Office*, 18 March 2015; ‘Break of the *mujāhidin* on one of the days of Ramadan in southern Damascus Province’, *Damascus Province Media Office*, 15 July 2015.



which fighters of a given nationality incite their fellow countrymen to join them in jihad or wage it back home, this belonging-focused stream of propaganda tells a story of camaraderie and friendship, one designed to lure the marginalised and disenfranchised into making *hijra* (migrating) and joining the ‘caliphal’ project.²⁴

c) Brutality – 2.13%

The brutality narrative was present in the dataset but, at just 19 events of 892, it was not nearly as prominent as many observers tend to assume. Most instances provoked negligible international scrutiny, even though executioners from Germany and France, among others, were featured.²⁵ While a Croatian oil worker was beheaded in Egypt and explosives detonated beneath a group of pro-Taliban Afghans, the vast majority of the people executed were Iraqi or Syrian nationals, who were alleged to be spies and traitors.²⁶

Brutality is notorious as a key feature of Islamic State’s messaging. It gratifies ideological supporters at home, attracts others from abroad and, to political sympathisers, positions the group as the one entity that is able to truly reverse the status quo. Importantly, though, propaganda that prioritises brutality is not produced solely for securing support. As an embodiment of its cultivated triumphalism, the documented executions of spies or enemy soldiers are intended to intimidate adversaries, provoke irrational reactions from the media and polarise communities. While it has often been the case in the

²⁴ ‘Message to the brothers of monotheism 2’, *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 12 March 2015; ‘Message to the Muslims in Somalia’, *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 21 May 2015; ‘Message to our people in Gaza’, *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 30 June 2015.

²⁵ ‘Tourism of the Umma’, *Homs Province Media Office*, 5 August 2015; ‘And we did not wrong them but they were wronging themselves’, *Hama Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015.

²⁶ ‘A message to the government of Egypt’, *Sinai Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; ‘Croatian captive killed because of the ‘participation of his country in the war on the caliphate’’, *Sinai Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015; ‘Killing the apostates in revenge for the monotheists II’, *Khurasan Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; ‘And we did not wrong them but they were wronging themselves’, *Hama Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; ‘Tourism of the Umma’, *Homs Province Media Office*, 5 August 2015.

past that all of the above motivations are sought and achieved in the same release, in the Shawwal dataset, there was no such success.²⁷

While only an expanded dataset could provide a definitive explanation for this, it is possible to preliminarily conclude that it is indicative of a broader shift in Islamic State's aggregated propaganda narrative. Indeed, in the past year, the key target audience for Islamic State brutality has constantly been subject to change. While it used to be, until 29 January, infamous for Mohammed 'Jihadi John' Emwazi's direct, bloody addresses to Western governments, he has not appeared since 31 January 2015.²⁸ The immolation and mass killings of Christians in Libya that replaced the Briton's beheadings continued to secure mass media attention.²⁹ However, since April 2015, Islamic State's propagandists have been decidedly more inward-looking, instead focusing on intimidating and provoking those forces militarily engaging the group on the ground, be that in Iraq, Syria, Libya or Khurasan.³⁰ Global attention towards the group's brutality periodically re-emerges, but in a manner far less significant than in days gone by that is predicated upon the mode of execution, not the message behind the act itself.

d) Victimhood - 6.84%

There were 61 events that channelled the victimhood narrative in the Shawwal dataset. With the exception of 3 videos and 10 written reports, they were photographic in nature. In all of the events, the dead and injured are, invariably, civilians: children, youths, the infirm and, in 1 case, a woman.³¹ Damage

²⁷ See, for example, 'Healing of the believers' chests', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 3 February 2015.

²⁸ 'A message to America', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 19 August 2014; 'A message to the allies of America', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 13 September 2014; 'A message to the government and the people of Japan', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 31 January 2015.

²⁹ 'Healing of the believers' chests', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 3 February 2015; 'A message signed with blood to the people of the cross', *al-Hayat Media Center*, 15 February 2015; 'Until there came to them clear evidence', *al-Furqan Foundation*, 19 April 2015.

³⁰ 'Deterring the spies II', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 26 July 2015; 'Liquidation of a spy from the Peshmerga and Yezidi Intelligence Services', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 28 July 2015; 'Deterring the offenders', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 3 August 2015; 'The liquidation of members of the Hashd and the police', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; 'They are the enemy, so be wary of them', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015.

³¹ 'The death of a Turkmen woman and her children in the deserts of Tal'afar', *A'maq Media Agency*, 15 August 2015; 'Muslim deaths resulting from the bombardment by the Crusader Saluli planes on Rutba', *Anbar Province Media Office*, 31

to places of worship and civil infrastructure also features heavily.³²

Like all jihadist groups, Islamic State relies heavily upon the victimhood narrative – the idea that Sunni Muslims are being persecuted by a global conspiracy – to justify not only its most heinous acts, but also its very existence. In many of its most renowned, brutal videos, victimhood is closely entwined with the ‘punishment’ that follows. 2 cases in point are ‘Healing of the Believers’ Chests’, in which the Jordanian pilot Mu’adh al-Kasasbeh was burned alive, and ‘But If You Return, We Shall Return’, in which 3 groups of alleged ‘spies’ are burned alive in a car, drowned in a steel cage and beheaded with explosives.³³ Recently, the victimhood narrative was starkly juxtaposed with brutality in an Anbar Province Media Office video that begins with grainy footage of 2 alleged Islamic State fighters being hung upside down and burned to death by Shi’ite militiamen.³⁴ The scene cuts to 4 alleged members of the predominantly Shi’ite pro-Iraqi government al-Hashd al-Sha’abi watching the clips, before they themselves are hung upside down and burned alive. While the prioritised theme of each of these videos is brutality, the victimhood narrative plays a crucial role as a justifier, a means of legitimating Islamic State’s acts.

Images of the dying, dead or maimed are not found exclusively in execution videos. Photo reports or stand-alone videos documenting the collateral damage of airstrikes in detail are regularly circulated too. In doing so, the group justifies its harshest acts by instrumentalising the anguish of its civilian population and, using the ‘Crusader’-‘Safavid’-‘Nusayri’ war as a cause to rally around the flag, legitimises its continued existence.³⁵ Graphic evidence of civilian casualties is Islamic State’s lifeblood

August 2015; ‘Victims of the bombardment from Crusader Nusayri planes on the city of Manbij’, *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 21 July 2015; ‘Bombardment by the warplanes of the Crusader Safavid Alliance on the children’s hospital in the city of Fallujah’, *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 13 August 2015.

³² ‘Aftermath of bombardment from Crusader Safavid planes on a mosque in the Sakra region’, *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 20 July 2015; ‘The Safavid army targets a mosque with heavy artillery’, *Janub Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; ‘Bombardment of the Crusader Safavid Alliance upon Muslim mosques in Sajar’, *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; ‘Two raids by the Crusader Safavid Alliance on Qa’im hospital’, *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 23 July 2015; ‘Bombardment from the planes of the Crusader Nusayri is on the new and old bridges of Mayadin’, *Khayr Province Media Office*, 4 August 2015.

³³ ‘Healing of the believers’ chests’, *al-Furqan Foundation*, 3 February 2015; ‘But if you return, we shall return’, *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 23 June 2015.

³⁴ ‘Punish them in the same way that they punish you’, *Anbar Province Media Office*, 31 August 2015.

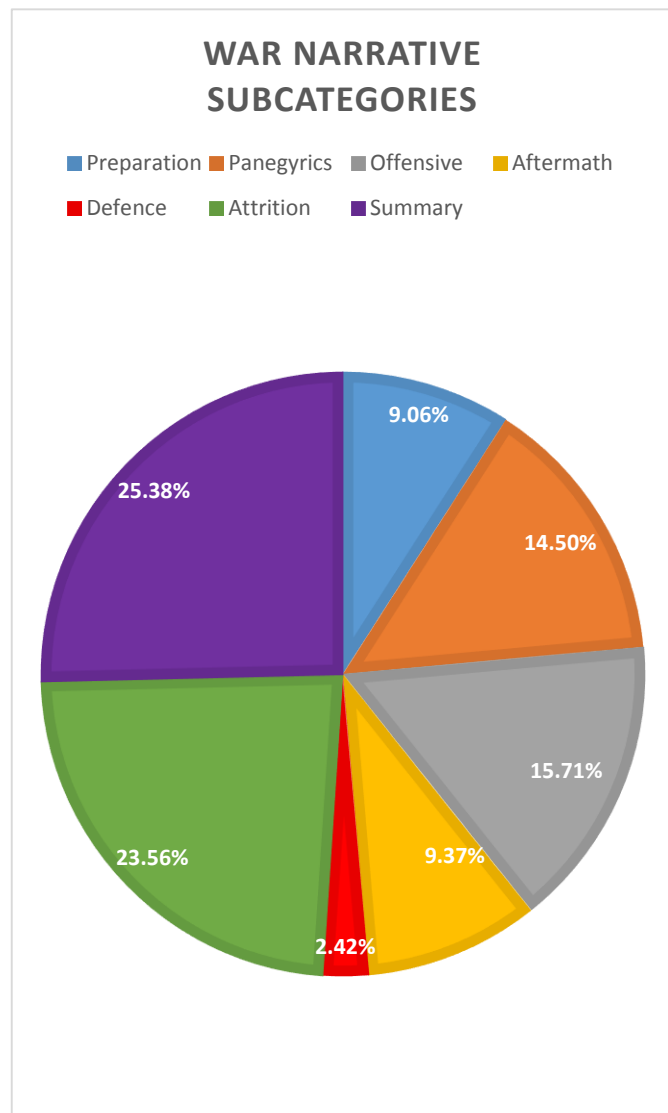
³⁵ ‘Crusader’ refers to the West; ‘Safavid’ to Iraq’s Iran-backed government; and ‘Nusayri’ to Assad.

and the more graphic the evidence, the more powerful the propaganda. Critically, reminders of the victimhood narrative are not just served up as justifiers for its existence, they are also intended as indicators of the ‘sacrifices’ it suffers on behalf of Sunni Muslims the world over.

e) War – 37.12%

Prioritised in 331 of the 892 events, war is the second most prominent narrative in the Shawwal dataset. This is unsurprising. Regardless of what it claims, war is Islamic State’s *raison d’être*, its primary agent of change and revolution. Without war-themed propaganda, Islamic State would lose the cement that binds it together because, in order to buoy up support and perpetuate the perception of its apocalyptic momentum, it must always appear to be triumphant.

Islamic State’s messaging is a ‘winner’s messaging’.³⁶ Hence, while it is fighting on



both defensive and offensive fronts, it is the latter that receives the most propagandistic attention. No supporter, committed or otherwise, receives gratification from witnessing their own army disintegrate. For that reason, whether it is grainy operation reports from A’maq News Agency, carefully compiled

³⁶ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, ‘Jihad 2.0: social media in the next evolution of terrorist recruitment’, Full Committee Hearing, *Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 7 May 2015.

photo reports from the provincial media offices, or longer documentary-like battlefield montages from the al-I'tisam Foundation, the message is clear: the boundaries of the 'caliphate' are forever expanding.³⁷

Such is the regularity of war propaganda events that one could reasonably assess that Islamic State advertises the entirety of its military operations.³⁸ However, this is far from the case, something clearly attested to in the data. In places where the fiercest fighting is taking place, there tends to be a marked absence of the production of war events, with a majority of this subset being issued in less sensitive areas. That said, notable exceptions occur when a particular *ghazwa* (raid) has been selected for broadcast, like, for example, the 'Raid for Shaykh Abu Khattab al-Shayhawi' that took place at the end of Shawwal in the environs of Bayji.³⁹ In cases like these, photo reports are circulated continuously with a specially designated hashtag, emerging with a much shorter lead time than usual, depicting the preparation, operation and aftermath in vivid detail. *Ghazwāt* events are painstakingly choreographed such that, when combined with a textual narrative, the reports seem to unfold in real time. While they occur regularly, they are not indicative of the norm.

Of the 331 war narrative events recorded, 63 of them were written: 33 articles on the A'maq News Agency website and 30 news items in the daily bulletins. 32 of the total subset were in audio format: apart from 2 wills from suicide bombers, they were all al-Bayan bulletins, 1 for each day of the sample month. The remaining material was composed of 216 photo reports and 20 videos. After being aggregated, it was broken up into 7 sub-categories: summary, preparation, defence, offensive, attrition,

³⁷ 'The progress of Islamic State's fighters inside the city of Qaryatayn', *A'maq Media Agency*, 6 August 2015; 'Sniping one of the Peshmerga apostates in the region of Aski Mosul', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 23 July 2015; 'Disperse them with those behind them', *al-I'tisam Foundation*, 23 August 2014.

³⁸ Winter, 'Virtual Caliphate', 26.

³⁹ 'An armoured bulldozer operating in state of the Caliphate', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'Aspect of the ongoing battles to the West of the city of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'The destruction of the Rafidi Army reinforcements during battles West of the city of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'Aspect of the booty after the defeat of the Rafidi swine West of the city of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015.

aftermath and martyrdom panegyrics. These are explained in greater detail below:

1. *Summary*: 84 of the events were, quite simply, retrospective reports on the previous day's military accomplishments.⁴⁰
2. *Preparation*: 30 events depict the 'caliphate's' military in stasis, showing training camps, parades, fortified *ribāt* lines and weapons training. They are intended to impress upon current and prospective members of Islamic State the professionalism, stoicism and well-equipped nature of its standing army.⁴¹
3. *Defence*: just 8 events documented Islamic State's defensive war. There were 6 photo reports depicting anti-aircraft gunfire and 2 videos claiming to show enemy offensives being repelled.⁴²

The lack of time devoted to defence is inevitable: Islamic State cannot afford to be perceived as 'on the defensive', because its chief appeal is the perception of its political and military supremacy. Furthermore, practically speaking, it serves the group tactically to keep as tight a lid as possible on its defensive procedures.
4. *Attrition*: 78 events in the dataset depict Islamic State's war of attrition. These reports are accompanied with minimal narrative and tend to be limited to images of mortars, Qa'qā' and

⁴⁰ Each day, al-Bayan Radio released an audio and written summary of the previous day's military accomplishments in multiple languages (Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, French, English and Russian). While Arabic bulletins were circulated every day without fail, bulletins in other languages appeared most but not all of the time.

⁴¹ 'From the line of *ribāt*', *Hama Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'The graduation of the fourth batch from Shaykhayn camp', *Aden Province Media Office*, 25 July 2015; '*Ribāt* of the soldiers of the caliphate near Kuwaires Airbase', *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 1 August 2015; 'Deployment of the lions of the caliphate in the Zawba'a areas', *Janub Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015 'The graduation of a new batch of the anti-tank squadron', *Anbar Province Media Office*, 14 August 2015.

⁴² 'Countering an attack on the Muqbila Hill in the countryside of eastern Aleppo Province', *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'Repelling the Nusayri planes with anti-aircraft weapons', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; 'Islamic State fighters repel an attempt by the Syrian regime to advance on Salahiyya', *A'maq Media Agency*, 12 August 2015; 'Fending off the warplanes of the Nusayri Crusader alliance', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'Fending off the warplanes of the Rafidi Crusader Alliance southwest of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015.

Katyusha rockets being fired at the unseen enemy.⁴³ Intriguingly, none of the attrition events provide any evidence that an enemy is actually at the receiving end of the projectiles being photographed. Given the prevalence and location of the majority of these reports (often provinces in which there is less heavy fighting), it is conceivable that Islamic State falsely produces these low-risk, low-cost photo reports simply to lend itself an air of activity. This would make sense, given the propagandists' history of duplicity.⁴⁴

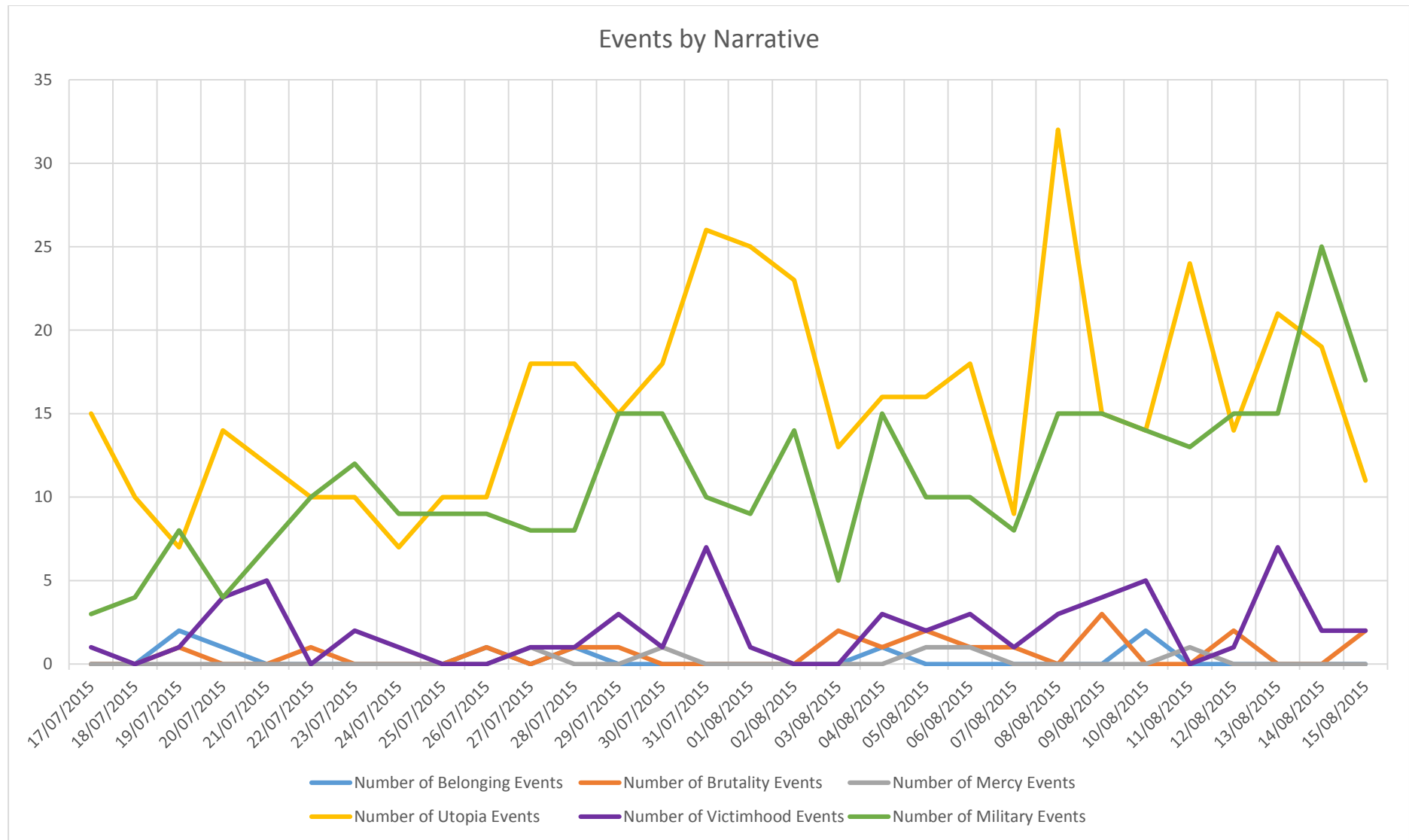
5. *Offensive*: there are 52 events in this subset, 7 videos and 45 photo reports, documenting specific attacks or raids and showing off the efficiency and supremacy of Islamic State's fighters.⁴⁵ Its soldiers are mythologised, portrayed as courageous and committed, something that is intended to shame sympathetic observers into volunteering. Warfare is glamorised and gamified as observers are fed the propagandists' stories of divinely guided conquest.
6. *Aftermath*: there are 31 depictions of the aftermath of battles, with Islamic State fighters being shown lauding over *ghanā'im* (war booty) and defiling the bodies of their enemies in a mixture of photo reports and videos.⁴⁶ Prisoners are paraded, destroyed tanks examined, and trenches

⁴³ 'Attacking the barracks of the Rafidi Army with 120 mm mortars, south of the city of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 21 July 2015; 'Attacking the Peshmerga apostates with a number of mortars in the region of Tal Rim', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 23 July 2015; 'Attacking the apostates of the Peshmerga and the PKK with different types of weapons and mortars in Tal Barak', *Baraka Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; 'Targeting the officers club with mortars', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 10 August 2015; 'Targeting a barracks belonging to the Safavid Army with a 106 mm cannon/Zawba'a', *Janub Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015; 'Targeting the barracks of the Safavid Army with Qa'qa' missiles', *Janub Province Media Office*, 14 August 2015.

⁴⁴ For example, in August 2015 they released 'Fallujah, the graveyard of the invaders', a video in which was depicted what is, at first glance, a recent attack on forces loyal to Baghdad. In reality, as noticed by Daniele Rainieri, the raid had actually taken place the year before no later than October 2014, when a photo report was released on it. See @DanieleRainieri, *Twitter*, 21 August.

⁴⁵ 'Quality operation on Houthi sniper position in the Sha'ab al-'Aidrus neighbourhood', *Aden Province Media Office*, 18 July 2015; 'Progress of the battles in northern Fallujah', *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 20 July 2015; 'And sit in wait for them at every lookout IV', *Sinai Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; 'The knights of Africa', *West Africa Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; 'The battle to liberate Qaryatayn', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 5 August 2015; 'The battle front in the Hawijat al-Mari'yya', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015; 'The battles that were ongoing on Friday in the west of the city of Bayji', *A'maq Media Agency*, 15 August 2015.

⁴⁶ 'Aspect of the booty that God bequeathed to his *mujāhidin* in the Qaryatayn sector', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 19 July 2015; 'Perished apostates of the Awakening in the city of Derna', *Cyrenaica Province Media Office*, 29 July 2015; 'Breaking - Abrams tank destroyed in Fallujah', *A'maq Media Agency*, 1 August 2015; 'Aspect of booty from the liberation of the city of Qaryatayn', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 7 August 2015; 'A vehicle is taken as booty from a group called 'Sayyid al-Shuhuda' Brigades' in the west of the city of Bayji', *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 14 August 2015; 'Aspect of the booty that God bestowed upon his *mujāhidin* servants in the city of Sirte', *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015.



shown filled with enemy corpses.⁴⁷ All of this is a means of declaring hegemony – it is the essence of triumphalist propaganda.

7. *Martyrdom panegyrics*: 48 of the events eulogise ‘martyrs’, something that buoys up morale and incentivises perilous battlefield tactics. On an almost daily basis, Islamic State circulates officially branded photographs (and sometimes videos) of the heroes among its war dead with a range of hashtags that hold ideological, theological or political resonance for the group, like ‘Ink of Jihad’, ‘Caravans of the Martyrs’ or ‘Among them is he who fulfilled his vow [to God]’.⁴⁸ Through these reports, Islamic State celebrates those who were killed for its cause, creates a sort of celebrity culture around them. For disengaged supporters, it is a way to praise those they respect. For those who are active members of the group, it glamorises the idea of martyrdom and inspires glory-seeking candidates to register for suicide operations.

As with all of Islamic State’s propaganda, none of the above subcategories are discrete, let alone mutually exclusive. Indeed, in most major video or photo reports of large-scale offensives, all are present in linear fashion apart from the defence subcategory.⁴⁹ Islamic State presents its followers with what appears to be a comprehensive view of its war. In reality, though, it depicts only the successes of its offensives, while almost entirely excluding its defensive operations.

⁴⁷ ‘One of the operatives that was captured near the Nusayri checkpoints’, *Baraka Province Media Office*, 19 July 2015; ‘An Abrams tank belonging to the Safavid Army in the area of Tarah’, *Anbar Province Media Office*, 7 August 2015; ‘Dead apostates from the Awakening in the city of Derna’, *Cyrenaica Province Media Office*, 7 August 2015.

⁴⁸ See, for example, ‘Abu Talha al-Iraqi, Abu Mu’adh al-Iraqi (Ink of jihad)’, *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; ‘Abu Qa’qaa’ al-Rusi, Abu ‘A’isha al-Iraqi (Caravans of the martyrs)’, *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015; ‘Abu Harith al-Iraqi (Media man, you are a *mujāhid*)’, *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; ‘Abu Khattab al-Ansari, Abu ‘Abdulahman al-Ansari, Fadi al-Ansari (Among them is he who has fulfilled his vow)’, *Kirkuk Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015.

⁴⁹ The August offensives at Qaryatayn and Bayji, about which 11 events were devoted, are prime examples of this.

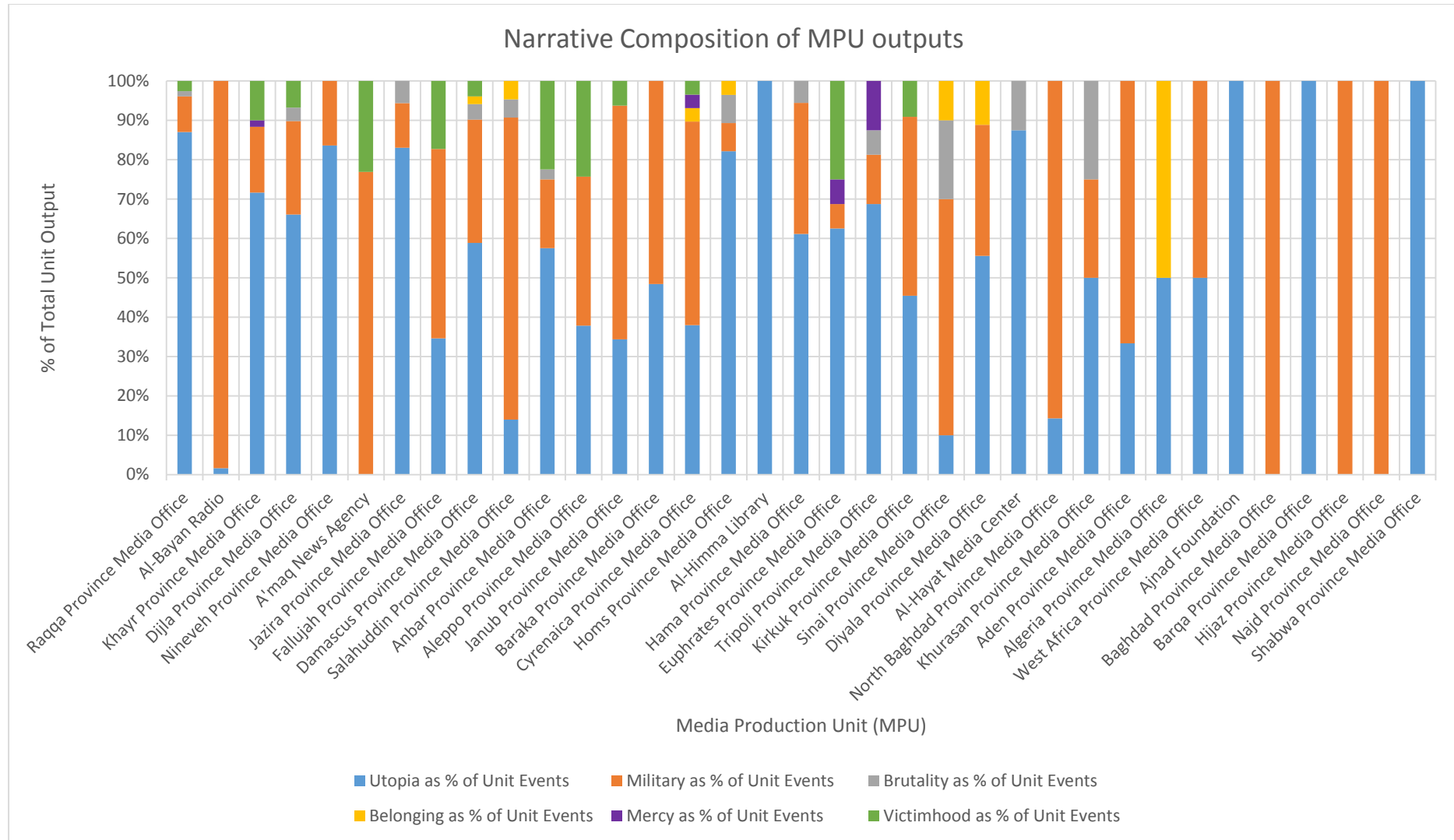
f) Utopia – 52.57%

Islamic State's emphasis on the utopia narrative is unambiguous: over half of the propaganda events in the Shawwal dataset (469 of 892) convey it above all else. The fact that this theme is more prominent than any other is a significant, though expected, finding: Islamic State's millenarian promise is the fulcrum of its global appeal.⁵⁰ That it is a 'true' manifestation of the jihadist utopia is the most difficult promise to persuade observers of, something else that leads to the disproportionate emphasis upon it in the dataset. Of the subset, 27 events were videos (13 from Syria, 10 from Iraq, 1 from Libya, 1 from 'West Africa' and 2 from Islamic State's central production units al-Hayat Media Center), 4 were audio events (1 radio programme, 2 statements and a *nashīd*, or chant) and 21 were digital republications of written materials already distributed in the 'caliphate', predominantly from the *da'wa* focused al-Himma Library. The remaining 417 are photo reports.

The relative importance of the utopian strand of Islamic State's propaganda is inevitable and necessary. 'Statehood' is the group's chief appeal, one that is just as crucial domestically as it is abroad. With its 'caliphate' narrative as a unique selling point, the group is able to decry the intransigence of its jihadist rivals, pick holes in their respective programmes, and claim that Islamic State alone is legitimate in the eyes of God. Through the portrayal of seemingly every facet of life in the 'caliphate' – from treatises on *ḥijāb* and martyrdom to photo reports on melon agriculture, camel breeding, frame-making, masonry, pipeworks, and videos showing the implementation of Islamic State's version of the *sharī'a* and *zakāt* distribution – the propagandists are able to create and cultivate a comprehensive image of utopia.⁵¹ To be sure, other jihadist groups engage in these activities. However, the extent to

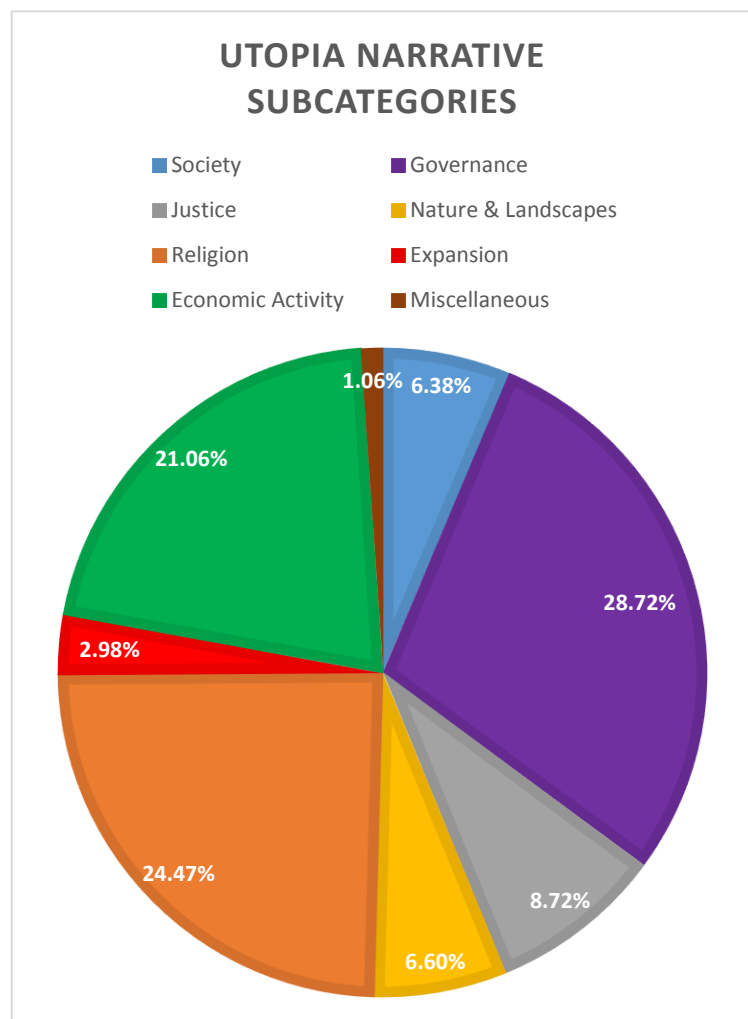
⁵⁰ See William McCants, 'How ISIL out-terrorized bin Laden', *Politico*, 19 August 2015.

⁵¹ 'Stipulations of *ḥijāb*', *al-Himma Library*, 28 July 2015; 'Happiness in martyrdom', *al-Himma Library*, 5 August 2015; 'Harvesting melons in Qa'im city', *Janub Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; 'The breeding of camels in the city of Tabqa', *Raqqā Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'A tour inside a stonemasonry workshop in Sirte', *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 1 August 2015; 'A factory for the production of pipes in the northern area', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 10 August 2015; 'The implementation of the *ḥadd* upon a murderer in the region of Karma in the east of the Province', *Raqqā Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'Distribution of zakat to those who deserve it', *Kirkuk Province Media Office*, 24 July 2015.



which Islamic State broadcasts and boasts about its civilian life is unparalleled.

Given that most of the current challenges to Islamic State propaganda are limited to questions of its legitimacy and the credibility of its claims, the group compensates by projecting its implementation of the jihadist project meticulously, so it can defend itself from the derision of its detractors. Therefore, regardless of how benign some of its propaganda may appear – whether it is videos of children playing or photo reports of young people getting married – utopian events are of existential importance to the group.⁵² The utopia narrative is refined into 7 subsets: religion, economic activity, social life, justice, governance, expansion and, lastly, nature and landscapes. Such distinctions – which, it is worth noting, are not discrete – facilitate a more nuanced level of analysis and



enable one to grasp the multi-faceted nature of Islamic State’s branding exercise as a fully-fledged ‘state’.

1. *Religion*: of the 469 utopia events, 115 of them are primarily focused on religious life. Central to Islamic State’s projection of itself is the assertion that it is the sole implementer of true Islam

⁵² ‘Games on the day of ‘Id in the city of Tabqa’, *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 17 July 2015; ‘The Zakat and Charities Department marries young Muslims’, *Jazira Province Media Office*, 25 July 2015.

the world over. Hence, a large proportion of Islamic State's messaging depicts 'religious activities' – people praying and breaking fast together, cigarettes and water-pipes being confiscated and incinerated, shrines being demolished, and so on.⁵³ Regardless of the heated debate about it in the West, in the Islamic State mind-set, these activities are undoubtedly 'Islamic'. For that reason, the continuous depiction of the implementation of 'religion' like this is to be expected.

2. *Economic activity*: 99 of the utopia narrative events are focused on delivering evidence of the 'flourishing' economic life under Islamic State.⁵⁴ This is logical; it would not be much of a utopia if people were seen to be living hand to mouth and struggling to provide for themselves. Therefore, supermarkets with bulging shelves and crowded souks have, alongside agriculture, handicrafts and industry, been fetishised by the group.⁵⁵ The appeal of such propaganda is not uniquely felt by those outside of the region, who look to such videos and photo reports as evidence of the fact that life there is a feasible alternative. It is also used to allay domestic concerns and convince others in the region of the benefits of migration to what is portrayed as a land of plenty. To those millions who have spent years living under lawlessness and corruption, promises of economic sufficiency are powerful indeed.

⁵³ 'Friday prayers in Shadadi', *Baraka Province Media Office*, 1 August 2015; 'The ambiances of 'Id in the city of Fallujah', *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 18 July 2015; 'Confiscation and destruction of a quantity of cigarettes in the city of Harawa', *Cyrenaica Province Media Office*, 24 July 2015; 'Confiscation and destruction of a quantity of water-pipes', *Anbar Province Media Office*, 4 August 2015; 'Removing the tree of Moses (a polytheistic shrine)', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 13 August 2015.

⁵⁴ 'The flourishing of the markets on the night of 'Id in the city of Raqqa', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 17 July 2015.

⁵⁵ 'Vegetable market in the city of Hawija', *Kirkuk Province Media Office*, 10 August 2015; 'Photos from Sharqat market', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'Vegetable and fruit trade in Hal market', *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 29 July 2015; 'Meat markets in the city of Mosul', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 29 July 2015; 'Markets in 'Ana', *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 4 August 2015; 'Activity in the markets on the night of 'Id in the city of Tabqa', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 17 July 2015; 'Agriculture in the western sector of Raqqa Province', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 27 July 2015; 'Agriculture in the village of Suwi'ayya in the countryside of Albu Kamal', *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 29 July 2015; 'Agriculture in the Akhratayn area', *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 10 August 2015; 'The blacksmith workshops in the city of Qayara', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 27 July 2015; 'One of the goldsmiths in the town of Ba'aj', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 28 July 2015; 'A flags factory', *Shabwa Province Media Office*, 12 August 2015; 'Tailoring stores in the city of Tal'afar', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 11 August 2015.

3. *Social life*: 30 of the 469 utopia-themed events depict civilian social gatherings in Islamic State-held territories: children playing, friends fishing together, and so on.⁵⁶ The intended message is clear: while there may be difficulties from time to time, life in the 'caliphate' is joyful, something that needs to be protected and cherished by any and all means. This joyfulness is inextricably entwined with Islamic State's implementation of its theo-political programme.

4. *Justice*: there are 41 justice-themed events, of which 4 were videos and the rest photo reports. Through its regular depiction of the implementation of *ḥudūd* punishments for 'civil' and 'religious' crimes, Islamic State manipulates this narrative in a manner that appeals to a range of audiences. Locally, the principal message it is trying to convey is that the 'caliphate' is a 'caliphate of law', where civil crimes like murder, banditry, theft and drug-taking are punished, swiftly and unwaveringly.⁵⁷ To many in the region, civil security – even if harshly imposed – is enticing. Besides this, depictions of the *ḥudūd* punishments for religious 'crimes', like adultery, insulting God and homosexuality, attract and gratify ideological supporters.⁵⁸ The harsher, more graphic and sterilised the reports, the better. As Brynjar Lia notes, 'a jihadi insurgent group whose enforcement of Sharia is halfhearted [...] will not attract ideologically committed foreign fighters'.⁵⁹ Of course, while they are invariably in gross contravention of international legal norms, the application of *ḥudūd* punishments in this manner also has a measure of local,

⁵⁶ 'Felicitations of ordinary Muslims at the advent of 'Id al-Fitr in Khunayfis', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 18 July 2015; 'Happiness of 'Id in the lands of monotheism', *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 20 July 2015; 'Muslims at leisure at the Euphrates River in the city of Raqqa', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 21 July 2015; 'Swimming pools in Mosul city', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; 'Outing of the young descendants of Salahuddin', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 11 August 2015.

⁵⁷ 'Implementation of the *ḥadd* upon two thieves', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'Implementation of the *ḥadd* of banditry on a corrupt individual', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 27 July 2015; 'Arrest of two regime food smugglers in the northern sector', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 5 August 2015; 'Punishment of three drug takers', *Anbar Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; 'Punishing drug addicts by whipping', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 13 August 2015; 'The implementation of the *ḥadd* upon a murderer in the region of Karma in the east of the province', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015.

⁵⁸ 'Whipping the unmarried adulterers', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 21 July 2015; 'Implementation of the *ḥadd* upon two homosexuals in the city of Tadmur', *Homs Province Media Office*, 23 July 2015; 'Implementation of the *ḥadd* upon a sorcerer', *Homs Province Media Office*, 31 July 2015; 'Implementation of the *ḥadd* upon an insulter of God the Almighty', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 4 August 2015.

⁵⁹ Brynjar Lia, 'Understanding jihadi proto-states', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (9), 2015, 37.

non-ideological support.⁶⁰ Lastly, and almost as an afterthought, reports on Islamic State's 'justice' seek to provoke outrage among the international community, a key tenet of the group's international outreach strategy.

5. *Governance*: 135 of the events focus upon Islamic State's service provision and bureaucracy.

The breadth of this particular stream of media is impressive; photo reports and videos emerge on a daily basis showing the group administering its civilian population, cleaning the streets, fitting electricity pylons, fixing sewage systems, purifying water, collecting blood donations, providing healthcare and education.⁶¹ Determining why there is such a preponderant focus on this aspect of the group's existence is critical to understanding its appeal as a whole. Fundamentally, Islamic State is showing that it can be a real, practicable alternative to the status quo. The emphasis on governance enables it to maintain an aura of absolute defiance in the face of the anti-Islamic State coalition and persuasively argue that it is the *only* feasible option for Sunnis. Wherever they are, depictions of governance, dwarfing brutality in their prevalence, are appreciated by supporters of all persuasions, not just the ideologically inclined. Of course, the idea of governance and social justice has long been a feature in jihadist messaging; however, the amount that Islamic State relies on it is, like so many other aspects of the group, unparalleled.

6. *Expansion*: Islamic State issued propaganda preoccupied with the notion of continuous

⁶⁰ See, for example, 'Why my own father would have let IS kill me', *BBC Magazine*, 23 July 2015.

⁶¹ 'Cleaning and decorating the streets in the city of Sirte', *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 19 July 2015; 'Paving the streets in Sharqat area', *Dijla Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; 'Repairing the electricity lines in the city of Shadadi', *Baraka Province Media Office*, 31 July 2015; 'Lighting up of Karmeh after the repair of electricity and the return of Muslims to their houses', *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 3 August 2015; 'Fixing the sewage system in Mayadin', *Khayr Province Media Office*, 28 July 2015; 'Fixing the sewage system', *Anbar Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; 'Water purification plant in the city of Albu Kamal', *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; 'A water purification plant', *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 30 July 2015; 'Blood bank in the city of Mosul', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015; 'The Medical Services Department on a visit to the Medical Centre of the Health Department', *Aden Province Media Office*, 28 July 2015; 'Ba'aj hospital under the protection of the caliphate', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; 'Second term exams begin in the schools of Nineveh Province', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 15 August 2015; 'The exams of the qualifying session for teachers in the city of Raqqa', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015.

expansion 15 times. Among those 15 events, there were 5 videos in which fighters were recorded calling for their jihadist brethren in Turkestan and Kyrgyzstan to join their 'caliphate', celebrating the recent *bay'a* of Caucasus jihadists and receiving a freshly allegiant tribe in Syria with open arms.⁶² The purpose of this content is not just outreach, but also to ensure the perpetuation of that most precious symbolic asset: the perception of momentum. Islamic State faced numerous military setbacks in Iraq and Syria in its inaugural year. However, by routinely featuring its foreign recruits, whether they are inviting their countrymen to join them or inciting them to violence, its propagandists are able to evoke and sustain a sense that its ranks are forever swelling.

7. *Nature and landscapes*: there are 31 photo reports in the dataset that depict things of beauty, predominantly natural but sometimes man-made: rare birds, wild camels, breaking dawn, brightly lit bridges, dust storms and lightning.⁶³ While these may seem to be, at first sight, a superfluous addition to the Islamic State propaganda corpus, they provide a further layer of detail to what life is like in the 'caliphate'. In this manner, life is romanticised by Islamic State's propagandists with promises of a bucolic, rural existence – not, contrary to the popular view, by promises of a 'five star jihad'.

The unambiguous emphasis placed on the civilian aspects of life in Islamic State-held territories is telling. It drives home the fact that supporters of the group are not all bloodthirsty maniacs, as much

⁶² 'Collective *bay'a* from the tribes of Um al-Qura', *Homs Province Media Office*, 22 July 2015; 'The joy of the believers at the *bay'a* of the Caucasus *mujāhidin*', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 29 July 2015; 'The *bay'a* of the Mujadima tribe to the caliph of the Muslims', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 1 August 2015; 'Hafiz Sa'id Khan - Come to join the caliphate', *Khurasan Province Media Office*, 5 August 2015; 'Heartfelt words to our brothers in the Caucasus', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 8 August 2015.

⁶³ 'The old bridge - City of Raqqa', *Raqqa Province Media Office*, 31 July 2015; 'The abundance of animal life in Euphrates Province', *Euphrates Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; 'Conservation of Abu Manjal birds', *Homs Province Media Office*, 9 August 2015; 'The scene at the break of dawn in Nineveh Province', *Nineveh Province Media Office*, 14 August 2015; 'Dust storm in the town of Qayrawan', *Jazira Province Media Office*, 4 August 2015; 'Thunder and lightning in Qaryatayn sector', *Damascus Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015; 'Lightning in Tadmur', *Homs Province Media Office*, 6 August 2015.

of the Western media narrative would have us believe. On the contrary, the 'caliphate' appeals to people not just because of its brutality, but because of the judicial order, economic plenty, religious piety and social justice that its propaganda promises countless times a day.

4. Concluding remarks

In spite of the impressive level of scrutiny that Islamic State's propaganda machine has been subjected to recently, there has been a persistent tendency to allow the volume, regularity and quality of the media in question to get in the way of meaningful analysis of the strategy behind it. The above pages, based as they are on a comprehensive 1-month examination of Islamic State's official media, allow for a great level of granularity, something that facilitates a truly comprehensive and detailed dissection of Islamic State's desired image of itself.

As governments, civil society organisations and activists around the world seek to challenge the group, there has been a constant search for the panacea counter-narrative that, once identified and delivered properly, will be able to singularly undermine its ability to attract sympathisers and, ultimately, turn them into recruits. This study has resolutely proven that no such thing exists. In order to meaningfully challenge the group's media strategy, all parties in the counter-Islamic State effort must recognise that different things appeal to different people, and thus that success is attainable only through variation. Above all, those involved in the information operations campaign must have a rounded, robust understanding of what they are actually countering in order to be effective. Conclusions based on anything other than empirical research of the issue have misdirected public and political discourse, something that needs urgent correction.

This report has shown that Islamic State's brand is flexible and constantly subject to change. Its supporters are presented with a comprehensive idea of what life in its 'caliphate' is like. Brutality plays an important role in this image, but is by no means the key to Islamic State's appeal, as is regularly argued. Mercy and belonging, both narratives that featured heavily in the run up to and immediate aftermath of the 'caliphal' declaration on 29 June 2014, are no longer as prominent as they had been in the past, something that is reflective of a shift in priorities for the group. Far more conspicuous are

its attempts to reinforce the victimhood narrative by playing upon the 'War on Islam' conspiracy and documenting the collateral damage resulting from enemy incursions. Beyond this, Islamic State's propagandists expend a great amount of effort portraying it as militarily dynamic and ever-expanding. After all, the perception of momentum is central to its 'winner's messaging'. The most prominent narrative, by far, is that of utopia. At once the most appealing promise of the group and the most difficult to convince observers of, there is a predictably disproportionate emphasis upon it. Islamic State's media strategists ensure that its utopia is sold as a comprehensive project, where the economy flourishes, 'Islam' is implemented, wildlife thrives, rule of law prevails and the government governs.

The 'caliphate' is a comprehensively designed and carefully branded operation, and we must therefore seek to counter it in a similarly complex manner. Persistently relying on the panacea counter-narrative myth, that a single idea or concept can undercut the Islamic State brand in one fell swoop, is extremely detrimental; it sets out non-existent boundaries and cripples any attempt to be dynamic. Instead of perpetually searching for a non-existent catch-all counter-narrative, we must seek an *alternative* narrative, something that serves as, in the words of Richard LeBaron, the first director of the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, our own 'compelling story'.⁶⁴ Islamic State's propaganda is not the sole agent of radicalisation, let alone the means by which vulnerable individuals are recruited to its cause. However, it plays a central role in both processes and must be undermined. The ideals portrayed by this vast operation can only be challenged by a scaled up, progressive and energetic set of counter-propaganda campaigns from state *and* non-state actors that understand the need for narrative and audience variation. Meaningful engagement in the information war is only achievable once this has been recognised and integrated into the global strategy. Until this is the case, counter campaigns, while commendable, will always face a Sisyphean task.

⁶⁴ Richard LeBaron and Will McCants, 'Experts weigh in: can the United States counter ISIS propaganda', *The Brookings Institution Markaz*, 17 June 2015.

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