

SYMBOLIC LOSS OF DABIQ PROMPTS ADAPTED PROPAGANDA STRATEGY FOR ISLAMIC STATE

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One of the greatest tools of the Islamic State (IS) is its propaganda machine. Since its creation, IS has mastered the art of communication, especially on social media, through video production, and by positioning itself to be found during internet searches. **It has adopted a communication strategy that is calculated, planned, and powerful.** This strategy allows IS to recruit, to inform, and also to terrorize its enemies by releasing videos of mass executions and decapitations. In recent months, the coalition forces have begun to systematically dismantle this machine, both in terms of personnel and electronic infrastructure, forcing IS to adapt and focus more on private electronic messaging and on quality over quantity of materials published.

The propaganda machine of IS has been a main target for coalition forces, who seek to disrupt its organization and its ability to spread radicalizing messages. Recently, there have been a number of successes in targeting high-ranking IS members within the propaganda apparatus, including al-Fayad, the group's "information minister," al-Tounousi, the head of the Aamaq news agency, and al-Adnani, the official spokesperson. **These successes have disrupted certain propaganda publications, but IS has also had to re-tailor its propaganda to the current situation on the battlefield.**

Faced with strong counter-offensives in Iraq and Syria and constant bombing from an international coalition, IS has been steadily losing ground over the past few months. This has changed the tone of its propaganda. For several weeks, the organization's videos have been dwindling in presence on social media. **Older videos lauded the triumphs of IS** and featured dramatic cuts of IS soldiers in the thick of battle. **Now, when videos are released, they call on jihadists to have "patience"** and emphasize suicide attacks. **Many recent videos attempt to reassure IS fighters that their territory losses are merely "temporary" or a "trial" that they are facing.** In an effort to keep more positive messaging alive, older videos have been re-released with small edits.

Perhaps the most telling example of how IS has strategically adapted their propaganda is arguably their most important tool for international recruitment, the discontinued multilingual newspaper Dabiq. Dabiq's

name was based off an apocalyptic interpretation of the Koran by IS that foretold of a final battle between jihadists and an “infidel horde” in the town of Dabiq, located between the Turkish border and Aleppo in Syria, and captured in 2014 by IS. This prophecy was the source of much IS propaganda that extended far beyond the name of the newspaper. IS published multilingual additions of Dabiq in very high production quality on the internet starting in 2014.

Dabiq articles extolled IS fighters, interpreted Koran verses to suit IS needs, denounced “crusader” forces, and gave instructions on how to carry out various attacks. **Then, after 15 issues, production abruptly halted in July 2016. Seamlessly, a new multilingual magazine of similar production quality began to be published IS, this time called Rumiya. Now, numerous experts speculate that Rumiya is simply a rebranding of Dabiq, made by the same production team.**

The reason for this rebranding is simple: IS realized last year that they would lose Dabiq, as forces from Turkey and Iraq recaptured swaths IS-controlled territory. After July’s issue, IS rhetoric shifted dramatically. It asserted that the battle in Dabiq could not happen until several other prophecies were fulfilled, pushing the date of the climactic battle into the future. IS alluded multiple times to a possible temporary loss of Dabiq. The argument was that even if enemy forces captured the town, it could always be recaptured later, allowing the battle to take place. These interpretive acrobatics were a far cry from the group’s earlier hyping. Eventually, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels captured the town with little resistance on October 14, provoking no special reaction from IS.

Rumiya’s title is based on a different interpretation of Koranic prophecies that predicts the fall of Rome. It carries the same general theme of a religious prediction of victory, but **unlike Dabiq, it does not risk being undermined by events on the battlefield.**

As ESISC reported upon its release, the second and latest edition of Rumiya contains new threats of attacks against tourists, sports teams, and diplomats, and also gives instructions and recommendations for knife attacks.

However, **no Arabic version of the magazine has yet been published.** This is a strong sign that **IS increasingly wishes to target foreign audiences,** or at the very least to segment special propaganda to them. Dabiq was published in English, French, and German, and Rumiya adds Indonesian, Russian, and a Turkish dialect. Rumiya articles also search further afield for praise-worthy terror attacks. For example, this second addition includes an article that extols jihadist attacks in Bengal.

In a time when public IS propaganda circulation is down, **this change is important, but not to be overstated. The apocalypse narrative will be suspended, but it has not been sterilized.** IS anticipated the loss of Dabiq, and though **downplaying its previous narrative certainly reveals new weaknesses,** their adaptations have been adequate to prevent weakening credibility among its supporters. If anything, **the calculated changes that have taken place demonstrate the emphasis that IS places on its media strategy.**

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