

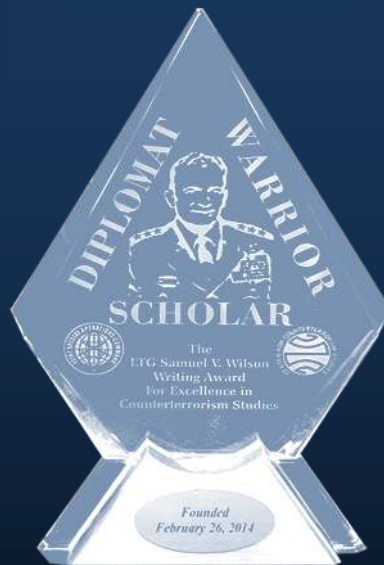
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LTG Samuel V. Wilson Writing Award Recipient

ISIS and Social Media:

*The Combatant Commander's Guide to Countering
ISIS's Social Media Campaign*

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The Center for Counterterrorism Studies



Figure 1: LTG Sam Wilson

LTG Samuel Vaughan Wilson epitomizes the Warrior, academic, diplomat. During his 37 year active military career LTG Wilson rose through the ranks from private to lieutenant general by constantly volunteering for the hardest jobs at the cutting edge of doctrine and technology. He relayed the vast knowledge he gained from his experience to rising Army leaders during his numerous periods as an instructor. His innovative thinking led to him conduct foundational work in the doctrine for low intensity conflict, through which he created the phrase counterinsurgency (COIN). His last five years on active duty, LTG Wilson worked directly in the intelligence

community culminating as the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. LTG Wilson also excelled as a statesman through his involvement with the Department of State's U.S. Agency for International Development under the terms of the Participating Agency Service Agreement. Following his military service, LTG Wilson began teaching at Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia. During this time he consulted with leaders in the intelligence community, legislators and U.S. presidents. He served as a member of the Holloway Commission following the Iranian hostage rescue attempt and later facilitated the drafting and passage of the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Act creating the United States Special Operations Command and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict.

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ISIS and Social Media: The Combatant Commander's Guide to Countering ISIS's Social Media Campaign

This paper analyzes ISIS's use of social media and offers recommendations to the combatant commander on what he/she can do to counter the threat. By exploring the relevance and importance of social media, I will demonstrate how social media represents a paradigm shift in communication. I will illustrate the significant opportunities and challenges that social media creates, and provide the operational commander's staff with a guide to address this new construct. This paper offers a brief history of ISIS as an historical frame of reference and details how ISIS uses social media in its operations. I will demonstrate the important role social media plays in ISIS's operational and strategic objectives. Next, I will illustrate the importance of this to the combatant commander in intelligence collection, lines of effort, and current/future operations. Finally, I will provide tailored suggestions for the combatant commander and his staff to consider when prosecuting an information operations campaign against ISIS consistent with U.S. policy and First Amendment Constitutional concerns.

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Figure 2: Extract from the ISIL Propaganda Magazine, Issue 8

About the Author

Lieutenant Commander Nathan K. Schneider received his commission on 16 December 2000 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of San Diego. He received his Naval Aviator Wings in June 2003 in Meridian, Mississippi and began flying EA-6B Prowlers at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Washington. He has over 1,600 total flight hours in the EA-6B and EA-18G. LCDR Schneider deployed in four combat tours in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. His last operational tour was with the VAQ-131 Lancers from May 2012 to January 2015 where he served as the Administrative Officer and as the Operations Officer. LCDR Schneider is currently a student at the Naval War College attending the College of Naval Command and Staff (CNCS). He is projected to graduate in March 2016 with a Masters in National Security and Strategic Studies.

INTRODUCTION

ISIS Caught the United States, and the Rest of the World Flat-Footed; ISIS is Currently Winning the Information Campaign in Social Media

It is difficult to imagine how an organization seemingly hell-bent on thrusting civilization back to the 7th century could be so effective at utilizing cutting edge technology in its operations, but ISIS has managed to do just that with its use of the internet. Specifically, ISIS has successfully used social media as a source of intelligence, and as an integral part of its information operations. The U.S. Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC), US Central Command (USCENTCOM), is currently leading the United States' military campaign against ISIS. As the leading actor, USCENTCOM must develop an effective strategy to counteract ISIS's successful use of social media in order to enable its degradation, and ultimately, its destruction.

Addressing this area, U.S. joint doctrine states, "Social media enables the rapid transmission of information and disinformation to domestic and international publics and communities of interest. Friendly forces should be aware of these social media tools, be able to identify adversary influence campaigns and operations that are developing and provide a timely response."¹ Mustapha Ajbaili, a correspondent with *Al Arabiya News*, notes that even the most successful American social media marketing experts are not operating on the same level as ISIS.² Dina Templeton-Raston, a columnist with National Public Radio, agrees, proclaiming that ISIS unfortunately serves as: "one of the prototypes of 21st century media strategies and communications."³ We can see that joint doctrine addresses the topic of social media, and provides the combatant commander (CCDR) with amplifying information. However, the reality is that ISIS has caught the United States, and the rest of the world,

by surprise and is currently winning the information campaign being waged throughout social media.

In this article I will start by addressing the importance of social media, and how it has revolutionized the way the world's population processes information. Next, I will briefly examine the history of ISIS, followed by its use of social media. I will then examine the balance between gathering intelligence and conducting social media operations against the oppositions imposed by freedom of speech constraints contained within U.S. law and policy. Finally, I will conclude by offering several recommendations to the CCDR and his/her operational staff (J-3).

Social Media – Its Relevance and Importance

Hugh Brooks, a security consultant for the U.S. government, defines social media as “all the devices and platforms that allow users to virtually create and share information with each other.”⁴ He goes on to define platforms as the virtual spaces where individuals go to create and share information. He defines devices as the technologies that enable users to access these platforms.⁵ The device that is revolutionizing the impact of social media is the smartphone. Brooks asserts that the smartphone will likely become ubiquitous within the next decade, even in the poorest areas of the world. This will result in the vast majority of the next generation growing up with the ability to access social media any time and any place.⁶

Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are three of the most popular and influential social media platforms today. There were 1.39 *billion* active users on Facebook as of the December 31, 2014.⁷ Figure 3, shows social media users among U.S. adults.

Of note, the total number of Facebook users in the Arab region as of May 2014 was eighty-one *million*.⁸ Figure 4, shows Facebook’s penetration in the Arab region. As of March 2015, there were a reported 289 *million* active users on Twitter.⁹ As of March 2014, close to six *million* of these active Twitter users were in the Arab region.¹⁰ YouTube has more than one *billion* users worldwide. An astounding 300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube *every minute*.¹¹ Statistics on the number of individuals, and the amount of information being shared in social media is astonishing. However, it is the efficacy behind these statistics that is of real importance. We will further explore how ISIS has successfully used Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in its information operations in a later section.

Social media users among all adults

Among all American adults ages 18+, the % who use the following social media sites

Facebook	58
LinkedIn	23
Pinterest	22
Instagram	21
Twitter	19

Source: Pew Research Center’s Internet Project September Combined Omnibus Survey, September 11-14 & September 18-21, 2014. N=2,003 adults in the U.S. ages 18+.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3. Social Media Users among All American Adults.

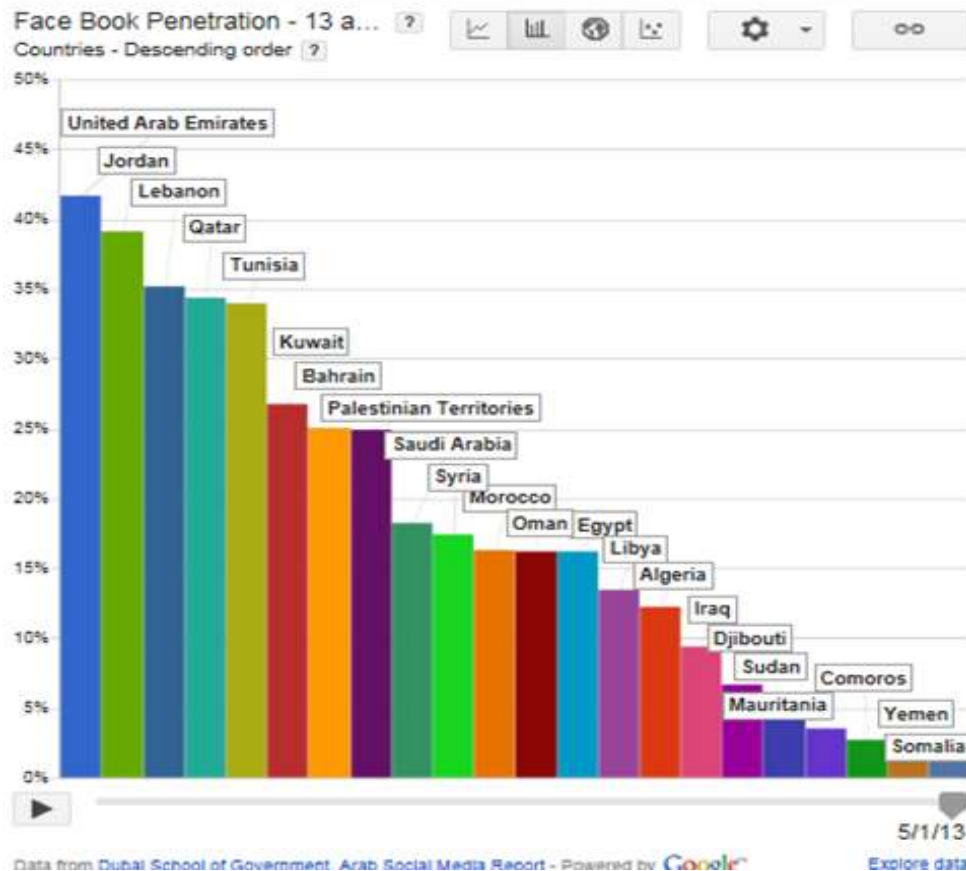


Figure 4. Facebook Penetration in Arab Countries

Many individuals will be tempted to argue that social media is insignificant to the CCDR and is little more than a convenient way to keep up with tabloid gossip, or the latest fad. Surely, social media often deals with the trivial and the mundane, but it can also be of significant importance. This is clearly demonstrated by the pivotal role that social media had in the role of the Arab Spring. Social media was a catalyst and key enabler for the regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The Arab Social Media Report states that the influence of social media goes beyond the Arab Spring and permeates the day-to-day lives of millions of Arabs in social, business, civil, and government settings.¹² The prudent CCDR should be cognizant not to downplay the significance of social media in current and future operations.

The spontaneous and interactive nature of social media represents a paradigm shift in communication and is having a revolutionary impact on society. Regarding this shift, Neville Bolt, a professor of War Studies at King's College, points out, "flows of data are no longer linear, but exponential; they spread virally through electronic networks, creating endless, global feedback loops... what distinguishes today's media landscape from those of earlier eras is instant connectivity - digital technologies collapse time and space."¹³

Social media provides many new communication opportunities; however, social media also poses some very serious challenges. Ascertaining the quality and credibility of information in cyberspace can be exceedingly difficult. Anthony Olcott, an associate at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, takes an ominous tone when he points out that society may be heading back to an era before the printing press where informal, free-flowing, non-specific, and non-hierarchical information dominates civilization.¹⁴ Ironically, Olcott's notion of social media's influence driving civilization back to an earlier era, when communication was passed predominately through word of mouth, seems very possible. This new construct has resulted in information's rapid dissemination into the world via social media, by virtually anyone, at any time, without little or no credible vetting.

Social media has restructured the communication structure from that of top-down to that of bottom-up. Social media has severely complicated the ability of governmental authorities to control the political narrative. The intense speed with which information and disinformation moves through social media presents a new and different challenge. For example, detailed information and pictures about the attack on

the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi appeared almost immediately throughout social media, but official news media outlets did not report on the full scale of events until the next day.¹⁵ Additionally, during the August 2011 riots in the UK, social media technology helped rioters stay one step ahead of the government and law enforcement.¹⁶ The operational commander must understand the new communication landscape being shaped by social media. As such, a commander's success may depend on his/her ability to adapt to the new social media environment and use it as a critical strength, and simultaneously deny his/her enemy's ability to use it in the same manner.

ISIS - A Brief History

A complete understanding of ISIS will give the CCDR important insight into how it currently uses social media to its advantage, and how social media can be used against it. The CCDR must resist the temptation to use mirror imaging, or to try to fit ISIS into a simple, pre-determined ideological box. This is especially important when trying to design an information campaign via social media.

A good historical starting point in our analysis of ISIS is that of the Shia/Sunni sectarian divide. This divide took place in the Muslim religion shortly after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE. War and conflict along this sectarian line has persisted in the Arab region for centuries. ISIS's fanatical ties to Sunni Islam drive much of its ideology. This ideology is used to rationalize many of its violent and barbaric acts as acceptable within ISIS's interpretation of Islam.

ISIS's roots can be traced back to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was formally established in October 2004 by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The Al-Maliki government put in place in Iraq after Saddam's defeat was seen by the majority of Sunnis as corrupt and as unfairly supportive of the Iraqi Shia population. AQI seized upon this sectarian divide, and committed brutal acts of terror throughout Iraq. Hassan Hassan, a Middle East analyst, points out that Al-Zarqawi was a pioneer in portraying horrific acts of violence through mass media. Contractor Nicholas Berg was likely decapitated by Zarqawi himself in 2004.¹⁷ Soon thereafter, a video of Berg's murder was posted online and circulated throughout the world. Chillingly, this same technique would later be used by ISIS with the murders of Americans James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig. This dramatization/glorification of the horrific included putting the victims in orange jumpsuits at the time of their execution. The jumpsuits were specifically intended to mimic those used at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.¹⁸ Figure 5 shows an ISIS social media post of James Foley's execution.



Figure 5. ISIS Social Media Post: The Execution of James Foley

Source: <http://derhonigmansagt.worldpress.com>

Al-Zarqawi was killed by U.S. airstrikes on June 7, 2006 and the group was subsequently rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). ISI was nearly defeated in 2007 during the period of the Sunni Awakening and the U.S. military surge. For the next few years, ISI's influence was minimal, but in April 2010 Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi rose to power. Tony Dodge, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, offers this description of Al-Baghdadi, He holds a PhD in Islamic Studies, and has engendered a loyal following as the emir-al-mu'min (Commander of the Faithful). Under his leadership ISI became a fiercely loyal, tightly controlled, ruthless, professional organization with an almost bureaucratic-like management style.¹⁹

The chaotic civil war in Syria and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq helped bring about the resurgence of ISI. At odds with Al-Qaeda and other rebel groups in Syria, they eventually emerged as the dominant terrorist group in the region. In April 2013, ISI became known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). ISIS made significant military gains throughout Syria and Iraq; by June 2014, it had conquered Mosul, formally split ties with Al-Qaeda, and declared itself a caliphate under the self-proclaimed title: The Islamic State (IS). ISIS's high operational tempo, expertly maintaining the offensive, caught the rest of the world by surprise.

According to CIA estimates, ISIS has 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries, and approximately 2,000 of those fighters are Westerners.²⁰ Dodge offers insight into why this steady stream of non-indigenous fighters is important. The foreign fighters play an important role as willing suicide bombers and they also portray the image that the Islamic State stands as a transnational force of the ummah (Community of Believers).²¹ ISIS attempts to use foreign fighters as the means by

which to achieve its stated strategic ends - creating a worldwide caliphate made up of many diverse members. Figure 6, depicts a Tweet from a French citizen who decided to join ISIS.



Figure 6. Tweet From a French ISIS

Source: Klausen. "Tweeting the Jihad"

It is important to note how ISIS interacts with the local population in Syria and Iraq. ISIS presents itself as the only organization capable of offering "purified" Islam.²² Hassan explains how ISIS will start by "gently" taking over a town, at which point it will quickly impose strict sharia law and punish recalcitrant individuals with torture.²³ However, perversely, ISIS has had some success in winning the hearts

and minds of the local populous. Dodge points out that ISIS has actually shown an ability to govern the local population effectively. It has provided such societal services as: children’s education, healthcare and vaccinations, subsidized food prices, and maintenance of local infrastructure.²⁴ ISIS needs to maintain control over the local population in order to accomplish its operational objective of seizing and holding territory in Iraq and Syria. This operational objective is nested in its desired end state of eventually achieving a global caliphate. Figure 7, depicts a Tweet of children in “ISIS fan gear.” This shows the extent to which ISIS is trying to win worldwide popular support through social media propaganda.



Figure 7. Tweet of Children Dressed In ISIS Fan Gear
Source: Klausen. “Tweeting the Jihad”

ISIS – Another View and Analysis

A far cry from how ISIS's propaganda machine defines its own organization, Hasan offers this more realistic view, "[ISIS] spans an array of backgrounds and belief systems, from godless opportunists to war profiteers to pragmatic tribesman to committed takfiris."²⁵ This knowledge can be used by the CCDR to exploit the true nature of ISIS, and debunk its social media campaign of misinformation.

Through an astute analysis of the enemy and the operating environment, some important facets of ISIS should emerge to the CCDR. The strategic center of gravity for ISIS is its ideology. The CCDR should focus his/her effort on attacking this center of gravity through information lines of effort. Critical capabilities of ISIS consist of its ability to recruit foreign fighters and its ability to maintain the relative support of the local population. I will point out in the next section how social media serves as both a critical strength and as a critical vulnerability for ISIS. The CCDR can attack this critical vulnerability in order to prevent ISIS from achieving its strategic and operational objectives.

ISIS and Social Media

United States joint doctrine, in Joint Doctrine Note 2-13 says, "The main effort for winning the battle of wills, particularly in operations characteristic of irregular warfare, will likely occur in and through the information environment."²⁶ Acting almost in accordance with *U.S. doctrine*, ISIS's successful use of the internet and social media is at the center of its information operations campaign, and has been crit-

ical to its overall rise in power. It has intelligently used social media in an asymmetric and unconventional manner, thereby accomplishing much more than it could have through conventional military means alone. To date, ISIS has predominantly focused on three social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Jytte Klausen, a Professor of International Cooperation at Brandeis University, points out that social media changed the entire dynamic for ISIS; it was no longer dependent on traditional media to get its message out.²⁷ In fact, ISIS has progressed to establish control over the messages being delivered about it through social media. Additionally, traditional media is now being used as an ISIS tool to amplify specific messages, images, deceptions, and misinformation that it posts on social media.²⁸ ISIS quickly recognized this new bottom-up landscape of communication as a critical vulnerability that could be exploited. Social media rapidly became a critical strength for ISIS.

ISIS's social media presence is not merely a collection of random "tweets" and YouTube videos haphazardly uploaded to the internet, which is a common misperception about how it manages its social media operations. Demonstrating a clear command and control (C2) structure, ISIS allegedly has a Chief of Media Operations. He is a Syrian-American named Ahmed Abousamra. He is purportedly fluent in English and Arabic and at one point worked at a telecommunications company in the United States.²⁹ Klausen notes that ISIS tightly manages its communications content. A few trusted militants maintain a high volume of social media content derived from the battlefield.³⁰ New recruits are required to turn over their cell phones, and violations of this rule could result in execution.³¹ This highly regulated content is

then released into mainstream social media channels in huge quantities by supporters, often females (“umms”), operating outside of the region.³² Figure 8, shows how ISIS uses Twitter in its information campaign. The official Twitter accounts of the few trusted militants are shown in step 1. These accounts are followed by regional fighters as show in step 2. Finally, the regional fighter’s accounts are followed and re-tweeted in mass quantities by supporters outside the region shown in step 3.

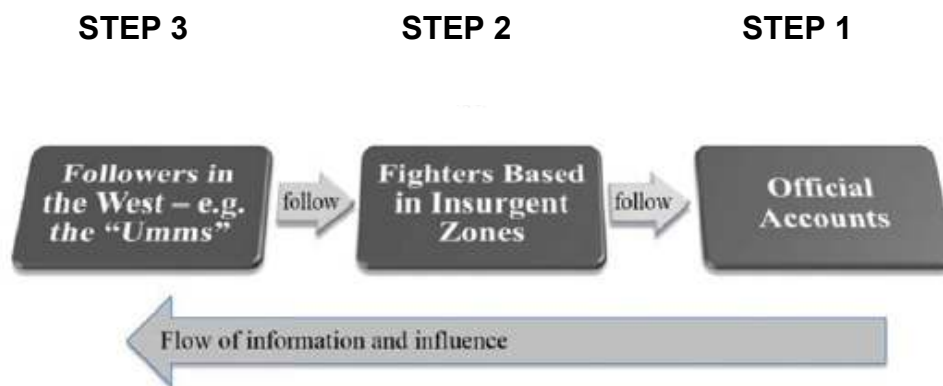


Figure 8. Information Flow in the Twitter Network.

Source: Klausen. “Tweeting the Jihad”

ISIS – Social Media Savvy

In its execution of informational lines of effort, ISIS has developed many savvy social media techniques to ensure the continuity of its message. It developed a social media application called the “Dawn of Glad Tidings” that allowed users to simultaneously send out centralized messages, thereby swamping social media platforms with ISIS themed propaganda. It developed its own satellite-linked networks and community run Wi-Fi networks in Syria.³³ It has also used an encrypted application named “Zello” which has been used to simulcast jihadi sermons.³⁴ Hasan has described Zello as a “very effective” recruiting tool.³⁵ ISIS accounts sus-

pendent on Twitter have been showing up on the popular Russian-based social media website VKontakte only days later. One final example of ISIS's technical expertise was outlined by CBS News correspondent Alexander Trowbridge. He illustrates how ISIS will coopt a trending hashtag on Twitter in order to reach a multitude of people.³⁶ Figure 9, is an example of the coopted Twitter hashtag, #napaquake. ISIS's technical expertise has clearly surprised the U.S. with its cunning and unexpected ability to maintain a dominant presence in social media.



Figure 9. Example of ISIS's Coopting a Trending Hashtag on Twitter

Source: Trowbridge. "ISIS Swapping Hashtags"

Social media integration has been pivotal in ISIS's success at the operational level of war in Iraq and Syria. Demonstrating a keen ability to achieve a unity of effort, ISIS has been successful at synchronizing its social media efforts with its military operations in Iraq. ISIS released its most popular video, "Clanging of the

Swords” just two weeks before the fall of Mosul. It was a high quality, professional, Hollywood-style production that contained numerous on-screen murders, and encouraged Sunnis to turn over their weapons and join them.³⁷ Iraq’s former national security advisor told Al Jazeera that, “Twitter and Facebook caused 30,000 Iraqi Security Force soldiers to more or less drop their weapons, eschew their uniforms, and leave Mosul free for the Jihadists’ taking.”³⁸

ISIS – “Lone Wolves” Campaign

ISIS’s campaign to recruit “lone wolves” in the United States via social media is another area where information and military operations can be seen working in tandem. ISIS called on lone wolves to “use the ‘yellow pages,’ and social media to find the addresses of service members, ‘show up [at their homes] and slaughter them’.”³⁹ ISIS allegedly hacked CENTCOM’s Twitter and YouTube sites sending out a Tweet that read: “American Soldiers we are coming, watch your back.” Figure 10, depicts CENTCOM’s hacked Twitter account.



Figure 10. ISIS Hacking CENTCOM’s Twitter Account

Source: www.usnews.com

In March 2015, ISIS published on the internet a 'kill list' with the names, addresses, and photos of one hundred American military members. Although not successful in achieving its stated objective of killing American military members, it has arguably been successful in inculcating a level of fear and of reshaping some Americans' behavior. I personally know of military members who have cancelled their Facebook accounts in response to ISIS social media operations in the United States.

ISIS – Recruitment Through Social Media

A critical capability for ISIS towards achieving its objectives is member recruitment. Recruitment is focused on, and operates largely through, social media. ISIS has been much more successful than its predecessors, such as Al Qaeda or Jabhat Al Nusra, in this arena. Klausen does an excellent job of breaking down ISIS strategy, "The purpose of the seemingly innocuous tweeting of cat pictures and hanging around with your friends, blended with staggering depictions of brutality, is to drill home one message: You belong with us because jihad is an individual obligation for every Muslim. The content conveys that fighting – and dying – will give your life meaning."⁴⁰ She goes on to explain how ISIS makes its extreme lifestyle seem normal, and how they have focused on recruiting children.⁴¹ ISIS has managed to appeal to many different demographics: the would-be martyr, the adrenaline junkie, and the disillusioned youth looking for a sense of belonging and purpose. However, it is spinning a thinly veiled web of deception – one that could be exploited by the CCDR.

ISIS – Western Involvement

ISIS has taken social media innovation to a new level with its recruitment of foreign fighters of Western descent. Intelligence officials estimate that between 140-150 Americans are thought to have travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS, and the British contingent is believed to be about twice that number.⁴² It is particularly concerning to think about what could happen if these mission capable Westerners return from the battlefield undetected. To be sure, TV media outlets often sensationalize any Western involvement in ISIS, giving them a larger-than-life presence. This serves to further divorce perception from reality, which plays right into ISIS's hands.

Similar to Al-Qaeda, ISIS floods social media with ideological propaganda. Klausen notes, "Proselytizing and instruction in the proper understanding of the jihadist belief system are priority themes. The continuity of the messaging is striking, even as the technology has changed dramatically."⁴³ ISIS understands that spreading its ideology through social media serves as a primary strategic objective; the CCDR must exploit ISIS's online jihadi propaganda and use it against them.

ISIS – Social Media Legacy

Assuming ISIS is eventually defeated by U.S. and coalition partners, or that it ends up collapsing under its own weight, it will still leave behind an enduring social media legacy. What sets ISIS apart from previous terrorist organizations is the degree of success it has had in integrating social media into its military operations, spreading its extremist ideology, and its success in recruiting individuals to perpetrate that ideology. The following information operations presented to USCENTCOM

are tailored specifically for ISIS but could also be used to help defeat any future terrorist organizations.

Balancing Intelligence Collection and Information Operations with the Freedom of Speech

Before collecting intelligence and developing social media lines of effort, it is critical for the CCDR to understand the legal constraints imposed by the U.S. Constitution. A line of effort that violates American's civil liberties would be worse than no line of effort at all. The U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Subcommittee discussed the pertinent legal issues at length in a hearing on May 26, 2010. They cite that speech is not protected when it, "is an incitement to immediate violence or constitutes a true threat."⁴⁴ Although this line may be a bit difficult to define precisely, two historical examples can be used to show when the line is definitely crossed.

A censorship program today under the guise of national security would play right into the terrorists' hands. ISIS would like nothing more than to see its social media efforts provoke a U.S. government overreaction, resulting in damage to Americans' freedom of speech. The censorship brought on by both McCarthyism, and by the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 constituted gross governmental overreach and violated 1st Amendment legal standards. What resulted in each instance was a massive witch-hunt. Domestic intelligence obtained by interagency and civilian partners may turn out be invaluable to the CCDR. However, this information

must be obtained and shared with the CCDR in accordance with all applicable U.S. law, in accordance with the U.S. Constitution, and by reliance on the interagency. Figure 11, shows the dynamic relationship between Americans' concern between security and civil liberties.

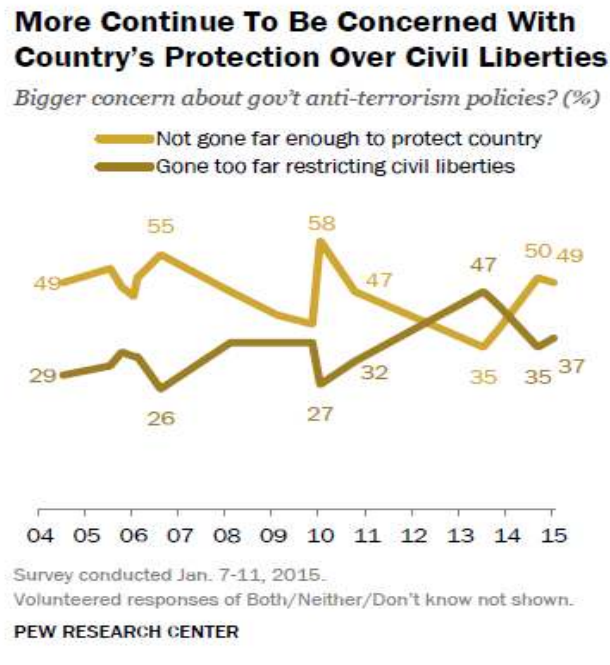


Figure 11. Pew Research Poll on Civil Liberties

Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT)

The first step in countering the social media threat is to develop an effective system of collecting intelligence. The benefits of the intelligence to be gained through social media far outweigh any attempts to censor it completely. The enemy would likely adapt in a highly censored social media environment, thereby making it increasingly difficult for the CCDR to use social media as a tool to gather intelligence.

Jamie Bartlett, Director for the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, suggests developing a new branch of open source intelligence (OSINT) called social media intelligence (SOCMINT).⁴⁵ SOCMINT would describe the current environment, but it could also be predictive in nature. In practice, SOCMINT would be used by the CCDRs' J-2 (intelligence) directorate. SOCMINT would be collected by using Social Network Analysis (SNA) to determine the online and offline relationships of individuals located in the CCDR's operational area. Language and Sentiment Analysis (LSA), which identifies patterns of linguistic content, could also be used to help reveal critical information about ISIS.⁴⁶

SOCMINT could be used at the operational level in theater (OCONUS), in various ways. It could be used to reveal current and future plans, operations, movements, etc... SOCMINT could be used independently, or it could be used in concert with other forms of intelligence. For example, exploited SOCMINT from an ISIS member using a geo-located social media application could be confirmed by an overhead UAV, and this information could be used for real time targeting. SOCMINT could be used in concert with SOF forces, or Iraqi Security Forces operating in Iraq. SOCMINT could be used to fill in the gaps when other intelligence means are unavailable. This intelligence could greatly help the CCDR reduce the operational factor of time. Understanding the operating environment is crucial to the CCDR and is listed as a tenet of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in U.S. Joint Publication 3-24.⁴⁷ Intelligence gained on the enemy and the operating environment obtained through social media could prove invaluable to the CCDR at the operational level of war.

The operational intelligence gained via SOCMINT channels could also be defensive in nature. Interagency, and U.S. law enforcement organizations, could exploit ISIS's use of social media to thwart its terrorist efforts in the United States and in other allied countries. Through focused and persistent SNA, these partners could legally infiltrate opens source ISIS social media networks and potentially prevent a terrorist attack on US soil. Brooks contends that social media is often the first line of defense in detecting events that may otherwise go unnoticed. Through effective coordination and communication with interagency partners, SOCMINT could bring the CCDR much closer to total information awareness.⁴⁸

Anti-ISIS Strategic Communication

In addition to intelligence collection, effective offensive and defensive social media operations must be conducted. As alluded to earlier, the CCDR must use a nuanced approach that is not overly simplistic, and must avoid the use of mirror imaging. The target demographic for ISIS recruitment is typically the disillusioned Islamic youth. Framing the argument in American terms of democracy and freedom will likely not resonate with this at-risk population. We must be especially cognizant not to frame our strategic communication in a way that could be interpreted as a crusade against Islam. Stephen Corman, Director for the Center for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University, advocates sending messages that point out the dishonor in such things as killing innocent children, and how this is against the teachings of the Quran.⁴⁹

Discrediting Al-Baghdadi's brand of extremist jihad should be a top priority for the CCDR. Stories of the victims suffering torture at the hands of ISIS and stories of

ISIS defectors must be told repeatedly throughout social media to a point that they become viral in nature. Strategic communication should reframe the narrative and point out that a terrorist is nothing more than a common criminal, and will be treated as such. This narrative, if it were to gain widespread acceptance, would deprive ISIS of appealing to those would-be martyrs looking for glory.⁵⁰

In order to gain credibility, strategic messaging should come from respected Muslims. The CCDR should develop covert and overt measures to ensure respected Muslim religious leaders advocating the peaceful tenets of Islam can safely promote their message through social media. It is imperative that the CCDR has the right cultural advisors in place on his staff to get this message out. Effective Measures of Performance and Measures of Effectiveness also need to be put in place. Quick adaptations should be made as the social media environment changes.

The CCDR should use social media to publicize operational victories such as those obtained in Tikrit and Kobani. USCENTCOM should also use social media to trumpet any successful measures by Iraq's Prime Minister Abadi in addressing local grievances or reducing government corruption. These measures would counter current ISIS propaganda in Iraq and Syria and help to win the support of the local population. Developing the counterinsurgency narrative is vitally important for the CCDR and is listed as a 2nd tenet of COIN in U.S. Joint Publication 3-24.⁵¹

Domestic Social Media Lines of Effort

Government partners outside the Department of Defense have developed lines of effort in social media that employ strategic communications. One key part-

ner is the State Department. The State Department currently has a campaign underway called, “Think Again Turn Away.” Its mission is real time strategic communications targeted directly toward those at-risk youth on social media. Figure 12, shows an image from the “Think Again Turn Away program.”

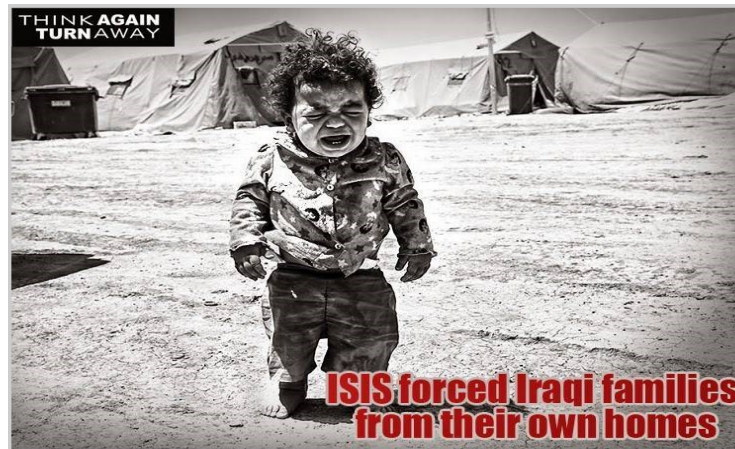


Figure 12. Think Again Turn Away Post

Source: <http://metro.co.uk/2014/09/22/islamic-state-the-social-media-war-4877890/>

Another key partner is the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). The mission of this group is to, “coordinate, orient, and inform government wide foreign communication activities targeted against violent extremism... there are three components- integrated analysis, plans and ops, and a digital outreach team.”⁵² Additionally, as the lead agency for domestic counterterrorism (CT), the FBI also plays a pivotal role in countering the social media threat. By collaborating with these interagency partners, the CCDR can incorporate their best practices and lessons learned into his/her OCONUS lines of strategic communication. A cohesive whole-of-government approach for information operations should factor in non-DOD entities to ensure there is a unity of effort.

Finally, the CCDR must develop cooperative partnerships within the private

industry to maintain lawful avenues of SOCMINT. United States Code, Title 47(c) (2) (a) states that, “on-line service providers are not responsible for the content of their users and may develop a robust user service agreement without fear of legal reprisal.”⁵³ Fortunately, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have all been willing to voluntarily suspend the accounts of users posting graphic violent terrorist content, and have taken down graphic terrorist images and videos. YouTube even has a full time staff on hand focused solely on reviewing user complaints about videos.⁵⁴ USCENTCOM should individually, and via the interagency, continue building cooperative relationships with civilian partners to ensure the majority of ISIS’s vile online content is removed, while still keeping open avenues for SOCMINT.

Conclusions

To defeat ISIS, all instruments of national power must be used in tandem. A campaign that is solely focused on the military instrument of power (without utilizing economic, diplomatic, and information instruments of power) will likely exacerbate the current situation and serve to recruit more ISIS members. USCENTCOM needs to develop an effective information campaign that is balanced and synchronized with all other lines of effort. Social media operations would be pivotal in collapsing the operational factor of time and in providing crucial information for the operational function of intelligence. A successful social media campaign should be at the heart of any successful information campaign.

Having analyzed how ISIS has successfully used social media in its operations to give it a persistent and global presence, I have concluded that ISIS’s social

media campaign serves as a force multiplier. ISIS's current global presence would be impossible through traditional military means alone. Furthermore, the analysis shows that social media serves as both a critical strength and a critical vulnerability for ISIS. By examining its history and its use of social media, several critical vulnerabilities emerge. ISIS's reliance on social media leaves it vulnerable to avenues of exploitation. Its lapses in social media operations security are targetable. This vulnerability should be exploited to collect intelligence and to develop offensive and defensive information lines of effort.

ISIS's reliance on extreme violence that falls directly along sectarian lines is a seam that can be exploited by the CCDR. Its ideology can be refuted by credible and peaceful Muslim leaders around the globe. The CCDR can, either overtly or covertly, insert credible Muslim leaders into his/her information campaign. The CCDR can also develop lines of effort that give a voice to those surviving victims brutally tortured by ISIS, and to disenfranchised insiders who know the true nature of ISIS. ISIS's strategic center of gravity is its ideology. This is not something that can be bombed with coalition airpower. ISIS's operational center of gravity is the will of the local population. This is also something that cannot be destroyed by military means.

The importance of social media in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world cannot be overstated. With the increasing trend in social media usage, its impact will play even more of a dominant role in the future. Analysis has demonstrated the many ways that ISIS has used social media to its advantage. USCENTCOM should act with a sense of urgency and improve its efforts countering ISIS's

social media campaign in order to enable its demise. A balanced approach, involving more than just kinetic fires, must be taken in order to defeat ISIS.

Recommendations

Prior analysis demonstrated the importance of social media, showed how ISIS has used it to achieve its objectives, and offered some solutions on what can be done to counter it. Specific recommendations tailored for the combatant commander are provided below.

USCENTCOM must ensure that an information operation (IO) cell is stood up in order to deal with the current threat posed by ISIS. The cell should consist of members from the J-39 (information operations staff). The focus of this IO cell should be on degrading and defeating ISIS, and should have a strong focus on social media lines of effort. The IO cell should be made a top priority. It should be provided sufficient resources and staffed with the most capable personnel. It is of critical importance that the cell be staffed with advisors who have a thorough understanding of the cultures ISIS has been most successful operating within - the Middle East and North Africa. These advisors should align their efforts with credible leaders throughout various Muslim communities.

Vital to the success of the CCDR's information campaign is a well-functioning and integrated J-2 (intelligence directorate) operating in close coordination with the IO cell. Applying some of the techniques already mentioned, the J-2 staff should use social media to determine the adversary's capabilities as well as the operating envi-

ronment (OE). It is imperative that the J-2 keeps the CCDR apprised of the intelligence environment. The information obtained through SOCMINT will need to be integrated and synchronized with other lines of military effort.

The establishment of a Joint Inter-Agency Task Force (JIATF) focused on countering ISIS's social media campaign would be of immense value. Absent this entity, a key to the CCDR's success will be the effective use of his/her Joint Inter-agency Coordination Group (JIACG). The CCDR has the available resources through the JIACG that are needed to ensure a unity of effort. As the entity charged with prosecuting Operation Inherent Resolve, the responsibility for ensuring unity of effort should fall on USCENTCOM. We have already identified three key interagency partners: The Department of State, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, and the FBI. Operating independently, the efforts of each of these agencies will be stove-piped and of minimal utility. Operating in tandem, and in conjunction with coalition military operations, their efforts will serve as a force multiplier. The JIACG should also make sure that there are not any other governmental agencies that have been overlooked which could add value to the overall operation. The JIACG must work with civilian partners to reduce ISIS's influence on popular internet platforms. The JIACG can also work with local communities, and local law enforcement agencies for lawful domestic CT efforts. Where possible, this intelligence should be collated and integrated into the overall information campaign. Finally, DOD entities will need to work with civilian partners to develop new and effective Social Network Analysis tools – given the sheer volume of social media content this will not be an easy task.

In theater, the top priority should be given to eliminating key ISIS media personnel and key media infrastructure; this could be a kinetic mission for coalition or Iraqi combat assets. USCENTCOM operations (J-3) and communications (J-6) directorates should work with USCYBERCOM to plan Offensive Cyber Operations (OCO) aimed at destroying or degrading ISIS social media capabilities. USCENTCOM should remain flexible due to the very dynamic social media environment. The CCDRs information campaign should underpin, and be in synchronization with, all other lines of effort and instruments of national power in order to enable ISIS's defeat.

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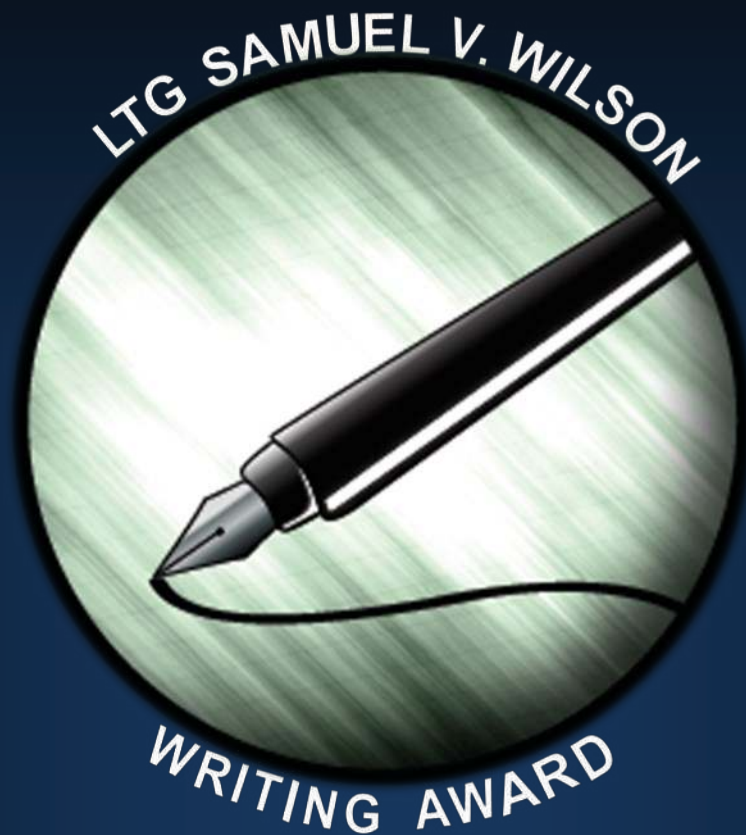
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