



## Reference Aid: ISIS and al-Qa'ida English-Language Online Messaging

This reference aid describes the messaging themes and official English-language media products the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qa'ida use to radicalize and recruit individuals and the growing importance of encrypted mobile messaging applications in these efforts.<sup>a,b</sup>

### Key Points

English-language terrorist media products are widely available on the internet and social media, which has meant that individuals who are radicalizing can find ISIS and al-Qa'ida videos, magazines, and leadership statements online which criticize the West, call for retaliatory attacks, and provide targeting and tactical guidance.

The internet and social media also provide platforms for violent extremists to widely broadcast their views and solicit advice on committing attacks at home or traveling overseas to fight. Another key function of these technologies is their ability to virtually connect geographically isolated violent extremists throughout the world and facilitate their exchange of ideas and information. Such virtual connections often reinforce violent extremists' support for terrorism and influence their decision about whether to commit an attack.

- **ISIS**, with the help of its online supporters, since 2014 has developed the most innovative and prolific English-language messaging capabilities of any [designated foreign terrorist organization \(FTO\)](#). The group uses multiple platforms, especially Twitter<sup>USPER</sup> and Telegram, to consistently release high quality English and foreign language media products with English subtitles.
- **Al-Qa'ida** has struggled recently to compete with ISIS's daily release of new media products.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001, al-Qa'ida was using static websites to promote its message, which was rarely in English.<sup>2</sup> The group later began releasing its media products on an evolving set of al-Qa'ida-accredited online forums, which had invite-only spaces where violent extremists could interact.<sup>3</sup> Some of al-Qa'ida's affiliated groups, such as al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Nusra Front (which now claims to be part of the Syrian group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) have shown a greater willingness and ability than core al-Qa'ida to leverage social media and consistently release media products.

### Types of Media Products

ISIS, as well as al-Qa'ida and its affiliated groups, produce videos and magazines, which have been influential in some US-based individuals' radicalization to violence. They also disseminate a variety of official media products such as leadership statements, photographic reports, radio news bulletins, and chants known as nasheeds.

#### **Videos**

- **ISIS** routinely releases high quality action videos that highlight its alleged battlefield victories, claim the West is attacking civilians in territory it controls, and idealize life in the group's self-declared caliphate.
- **Al-Qa'ida** releases videos less frequently and often recycles previous statements made by current or now-deceased senior leaders such as Usama bin Laden. Its affiliates—such as AQAP and Nusra Front—more regularly disseminate action videos featuring terrorist operations and highlighting recent regional developments, but often these videos do not feature English speakers or subtitles.

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<sup>a</sup> **Radicalization** is defined as the process through which an individual changes from a non-violent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use violence as a method to effect societal or political change. Some radicalized individuals elect to mobilize by inciting, supporting, or preparing to engage in violence.

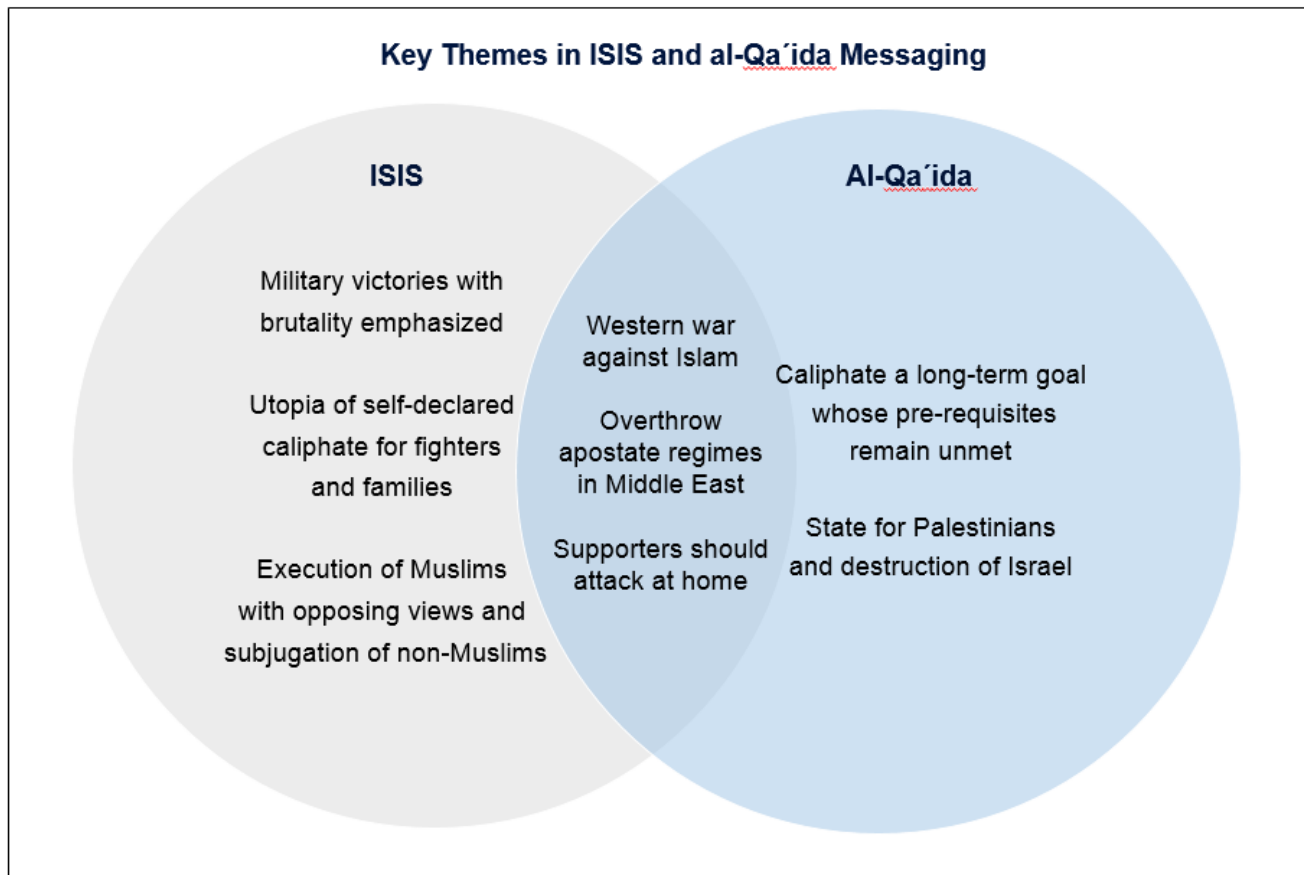
<sup>b</sup> ISIS is also commonly referred to by others as ISIL, which stands for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Daesh, which is the acronym for the derogatory Arabic-language name al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa ash-Sham. Ash-Sham is a historical term often previously used to describe the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River, and Anatolia (in present day Turkey) and Egypt. The group calls itself the Islamic State or IS.

### Magazines

- **ISIS:** The group's flagship online magazine, *Rumiyah*, is released approximately monthly in multiple languages, including English.<sup>4</sup> Some of the English-language issues have contained a "Just Terror Tactics" section, which provided general tactical and targeting advice.<sup>5</sup> *Rumiyah* was preceded by the group's now defunct English-language *Dabiq* magazine, which covered many of the same themes as *Rumiyah* but lacked operational guidance.<sup>6</sup>
- **Al-Qa'ida:** One of the group's affiliates, AQAP, since 2010 has released an English-language online magazine called *Inspire*, which continues to be popular among both supporters of al-Qa'ida and ISIS. *Inspire* is best known for its "Open Source Jihad" section, which has included step-by-step instructions for using a variety of weapons, and the magazine has offered justification for killing civilians.<sup>7,8</sup> AQAP has also produced a short publication called *Inspire Guide* that has provided lessons learned from recent attacks in the West—even if they were unconnected to al-Qa'ida—and encouraged readers to review *Inspire's* operational instructions.<sup>9</sup>

### Messaging Themes

ISIS and al-Qa'ida's English-language messaging emphasizes many of the same themes including alleging that Western nations are at war against Islam, Muslims leaders allied with Western nations should be violently overthrown, and Muslims living in Western nations should pursue plotting at home.<sup>10,11</sup> Despite these commonalities, there are key differences in their messaging themes, which often revolve around ISIS and al-Qa'ida's differing views concerning the pre-requisites for declaring a caliphate and how it should be governed, as well as how to treat Muslims who do not share their religious views.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Many of these differences and similarities are noted in the graphic below.



### **Encrypted Mobile Messaging Applications**

- Members of FTOs and their supporters sometimes canvas social media sites looking for potential recruits. Recruits are often initially vetted by engaging them in private direct messaging. These online conversations sometimes move to an end-to-end encrypted mobile messaging application (app) where FTO members provide guidance on plotting attacks or terrorist travel.<sup>15,16,17</sup>
- Mobile messaging apps are also being increasingly used by ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and other FTOs to release official media products, provide updates on regional developments, and claim responsibility for attacks.<sup>18</sup> Currently the most popular app for many of these groups is Telegram, which offers public and private channels, as well as an encrypted chat feature which can be used to engage individuals in secure discussions.<sup>19</sup>

### **Flagging Violent Extremist Content on the Internet**

Many social media platforms have recently become more aggressive in removing pro-ISIS and al-Qa'ida content, which violates their terms of services and suspending the users who post it. For example, to assist future removal efforts, last year Facebook<sup>USPER</sup>, Microsoft<sup>USPER</sup>, Twitter, and YouTube<sup>USPER</sup> committed to the creation of a shared industry database of “hashes”—unique digital “fingerprints”—for violent extremist content previously removed from their platforms.<sup>20</sup> Despite recent progress, these efforts remain challenged by the high volume of violent extremist content posted online daily and some suspended users’ resiliency in reestablishing their accounts. Below are links which members of the public can use to report violent extremist content on some of the most popular social media sites.

- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/help/reportlinks/>
- **Microsoft:** <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/concern/hatespeech>
- **Twitter:** <https://support.twitter.com/forms/abusiveuser>
- **YouTube:** <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802027>

- <sup>1</sup> Counter Extremism Project; "Digital Developments: Extremists' Use of Modern Communication Tools;" <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/digital-developments-extremists-use-modern-communication-tools>.
- <sup>2</sup> New America Foundation; "The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis;" Aaron Y. Zelin and Richard Borow Fellow; JAN 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> New America Foundation; "The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis;" Aaron Y. Zelin and Richard Borow Fellow; JAN 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> Based on a review of 13 issues of *Rumiyah* magazine; SEP 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Based on a review of 13 issues of *Rumiyah* magazine; SEP 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Based on a review of 15 issues of *Dabiq* magazine; SEP 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Based on a review of 17 issues of *Inspire* magazine; SEP 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> Based on a review of 17 issues of *Inspire* magazine; SEP 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Based on a review of five issues of *Inspire Guide*; SEP 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> IPI Global Observatory; "A Tale of Two Jihads: Comparing the al-Qaeda and ISIS Narratives;" Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Benjamin Sugg; 9 FEB 2015; <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/02/jihad-al-qaeda-isis-counternarrative/>.
- <sup>11</sup> International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague; "Al-Qaeda's 'Single Narrative' and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge;" Alex P. Schmid; JAN 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> IPI Global Observatory; "A Tale of Two Jihads: Comparing the al-Qaeda and ISIS Narratives;" Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Benjamin Sugg; 9 FEB 2015; <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/02/jihad-al-qaeda-isis-counternarrative/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Washington Post; "Hoping to Create a New Society, the Islamic State Recruits Entire Families;" Keith Sullivan and Karla Adam; 24 DEC 2014; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hoping-to-create-a-new-homeland-the-islamic-staterecruits-entire-families/2014/12/24/dbffceec-8917-11e4-8ff4-fb93129c-9c8b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hoping-to-create-a-new-homeland-the-islamic-staterecruits-entire-families/2014/12/24/dbffceec-8917-11e4-8ff4-fb93129c-9c8b_story.html).
- <sup>14</sup> Long War Journal; "Analysis: Al Qaeda attempts to undermine new Islamic State with old video of Osama bin Laden;" Thomas Joscelyn; 15 JUL 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> Washington Institute for Near East Peace; "How Technology Has Transformed the Terrorist Threat Fifteen Years After 9/11;" Michael Steinbach, Executive Assistant Director of FBI's National Security Branch; 21 SEP 2016; pg. 3.
- <sup>16</sup> US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations; "Hearing Concerning the Federal Government's Efforts to Monitor, Disrupt, and Counter Terrorist Propaganda, with Particular Focus on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's Online Communications;" Statement of Michael Steinbach, Executive Assistant Director of FBI; 6 JUL 2016; pg. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point; "The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs;" Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes; 9 MAR 2017.
- <sup>18</sup> Counter Extremism Project; "Terrorists on Telegram;" <https://www.counterextremism.com/terrorists-on-telegram>.
- <sup>19</sup> Counter Extremism Project; "Terrorists on Telegram;" <https://www.counterextremism.com/terrorists-on-telegram>.
- <sup>20</sup> NPR; "Tech Companies Create Shared Database To Track, Remove 'Violent Terrorist Imagery;'" 6 DEC 2016; <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/12/06/504554126/tech-companies-create-shared-database-to-track-remove-violent-terrorist-imagery>