

House Testimony

Radicalization: Social Media and the Rise of Terrorism

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross
Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Chief Executive Officer, Valens Global

**Hearing before the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

Washington, D.C.
October 28, 2015



1726 M Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC

Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss how violent extremist organizations use social media and other tools to radicalize and mobilize supporters.

This testimony focuses primarily on the propaganda and recruitment strategy of the Islamic State (IS), which has justifiably moved to the top of the U.S.'s national security agenda. IS has shocked the world not only with its utter barbarity, but also with the quality and quantity of its propaganda output, particularly on social media. The proficiency of IS and its supporters as communicators can be discerned from the group's creation of tightly choreographed and slickly produced videos, its apparently deep understanding of how to catch the Western media's attention, and IS's coordinated distribution of its content on platforms like Twitter.¹ Through the strength of its communications, IS has helped inspire unprecedented numbers of young Muslims from across the globe—around 30,000—to flock to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq to fight on behalf of jihadist organizations. IS has provoked a wave of terrorist attacks in the West that raises legitimate questions about whether extremists' savvy use of social media might produce a permanent rise in so-called lone-wolf terrorism.²

But IS's propaganda machine is not indestructible. Beneath the hard shell that IS has cultivated through its propaganda campaign there is a soft underbelly: IS relies on cultivating an image of perpetual success and momentum, and should this image of a successful organization be disrupted, IS's "brand" may precipitously decline. IS's flawed military strategy has left it surrounded by foes, fighting wars on multiple fronts. As IS fights a range of foes, from the nation-states bombing its convoys to the shadowy vigilantes killing IS officials in the group's territory,³ IS's propaganda has become the key to recruiting new fighters in order to prevent IS's overstretched caliphate from experiencing even greater setbacks.

IS's grotesque propaganda and battlefield successes have also had a significant impact on al-Qaeda. In many ways that impact has been negative, as al-Qaeda has lost both leaders and affiliates—including Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt's Sinai and Boko Haram in Nigeria—to IS. But in other ways al-Qaeda has been able to benefit by playing itself against IS's more overt brutality, adopting a propaganda strategy that stands in contrast to IS's hyper-violent and highly public approach. Al-Qaeda has quietly engaged in an image makeover. Using IS's over-the-top brutality as a foil, al-Qaeda has depicted itself as a more reasonable and controllable entity, one that represents an extension of the aspirations of people in the areas it operates, rather than being purely imposed by force. This rebranding campaign, which al-Qaeda has sought to implement ever since the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq (IS's predecessor) in the 2007-09 period, has gained traction among local Sunni populations and some Sunni states, which have come to see al-Qaeda as a potential bulwark against expansion by both IS and Iran. But behind this façade, al-Qaeda's core objectives remain the same: to weaken and overthrow impious regimes in the Middle East and

¹ See, e.g., J.M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014; J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015).

² The limitations of the term "lone wolf" to describe recent IS-inspired attacks in the West are discussed later in this testimony.

³ E.g., Sam Kiley, "Underground Guerrilla Force Battles IS in Mosul," *Sky News*, April 21, 2015.

North Africa, and to reestablish a global caliphate.

This testimony first explores two core elements of IS's propaganda strategy: projecting and maintaining an image of strength, and presenting the caliphate as a religiously legitimate utopia. It then illustrates how IS, using its propaganda machine, has inspired significant numbers of individuals living in the West to migrate to the caliphate or to carry out violent attacks on its behalf. The testimony then explores al-Qaeda's rebranding strategy, and the early successes it has attained. Finally, the testimony examines policies that legislators can consider to undercut jihadists' propaganda efforts.

IS's Propaganda Strategy: The Victorious Caliphate

The central theme of IS's propaganda strategy is that the group is extraordinarily powerful, constantly gaining new territory, and in perpetual possession of momentum. Indeed, IS has based its legitimacy on its ability to establish, defend and expand the caliphate's territory. The group's slogan, *baqiya wa tatamaddad*—remaining and expanding—speaks to the importance of defending and enlarging the caliphate.

IS relies on three primary sources of external support: “foreign fighters” from outside the Syria/Iraq theater, likeminded jihadist organizations outside Iraq and Syria who may pledge allegiance to IS or otherwise support it, and other rebel factions in Syria and Iraq who can bolster IS's local capabilities. IS's propaganda machine—which emphasizes its strength, and thus can be understood as a “winner's messaging”—is critical to the group's efforts to attract these kinds of support, particularly from individuals who might never come into physical contact with IS fighters.⁴

The military campaign against the Islamic State has been confused, disjointed, and slow to find success. Nonetheless, as the group comes under increasing military pressure due to the war it is fighting on multiple fronts, its winner's narrative is challenged. IS's victories in Ramadi and Palmyra in May 2015 were highly significant, but came in the context of a broader trajectory of slow decline. Put simply, IS took on too many enemies too quickly, and refused to cooperate with potential allies, which has hampered the group's ability to sustain its gains. IS is now in a defensive position in most theaters. In the months following the Palmyra and Ramadi offensives, IS has made only incremental gains while ceding other territory, such as the cities of Ain Issa and Tal Abyad in Syria's Raqqa Province, and the Bayji oil refinery in northern Iraq.

For this reason, IS has systematically exaggerated its gains and its capabilities, particularly in Africa. In October 2014, a group of militants in the eastern Libyan city of Derna openly pledged *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to IS, and declared that they had established an emirate in the city. Soon after the *bayat* pledge, IS flooded social media with videos and pictures of IS militants in Derna, including a video showing a parade of militants waving IS flags as they drove down a thoroughfare in the city. This show of force led many observers to conclude that the Islamic State controlled Derna, and numerous major media outlets reported IS's control of Derna as an objective

⁴ See a more complete discussion of IS's “winner's messaging” propaganda strategy in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment,” written testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Government Affairs, May 7, 2015.

fact.⁵ But in reality, control of Derna was divided between a number of militant groups, including some al-Qaeda-linked groups that opposed IS's expansion into Libya.

Recent developments demonstrate that IS's reported control over Derna was highly exaggerated. In early June, Islamic State militants killed Nasir Atiyah al-Akar, a senior leader in the Derna Mujahedin Shura Council (DMSC) with longstanding ties to al-Qaeda. Clashes broke out between the Islamic State and DMSC immediately after Akar's death. On June 9, Islamic State militants killed Salim Darbi, the commander of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and the head of the DMSC. In response, the DMSC launched an offensive to oust the Islamic State from the city. Without drawing upon outside reinforcements, the DMSC defeated IS in most of Derna, swiftly confining the group to limited areas in and around the city. The fact that IS was so easily forced out of Derna suggests that it did not control Derna to begin with.

In addition to exaggerating its gains, IS has sought to downplay, or deflect attention from, its military losses. Relatively little media attention has been devoted to IS's losses in Derna—which is actually justifiable, as IS came to control the city of Sirte, which is a significant victory for the caliphate. But an even more under-publicized IS setback has been its losses in Algeria.

An IS branch emerged in Algeria in mid-2014, when the “center zone” of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which was based in the Kabylie coastal mountain region, announced that it was defecting and joining the Islamic State. The commander of the unit, Gouri Abdelmalek, declared that al-Qaeda had deviated “from the true path,” and announced that his group would now be known as Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate). Days after Jund al-Khilafa was formed, the group posted a video of its beheading of Hervé Gourdel, a French hiker whom it had kidnapped. The Islamic State's Algeria branch was never well-positioned to endure a great deal of attrition because, even at its peak, Jund al-Khilafa only had around thirty fighters. In December 2014, the Algerian army killed Gouri Abdelmalek and two other militants in a raid in the Boumerdès region east of Algiers. But an even deadlier blow occurred in May 2015, when Algerian security forces launched a large-scale military operation against a high-level meeting of Jund al-Khilafa militants in the Bouira region. The Algerian operation not only killed about two dozen fighters at minimum, but also new emir Abdullah Othman al-Asimi and five of Jund al-Khilafa's six military commanders. Algerian security forces were able to kill three more Jund al-Khilafa fighters the following day. The May 2015 operation imposed significant attrition on the Islamic State's Algerian branch at the leadership and foot soldier level, and at this point IS is essentially irrelevant in Algeria from a strategic perspective unless it can rebuild its in-country capabilities.

Overall, IS's winner's message is prone to disruption and reversal. IS's claim that the group is defeating its opponents on the battlefield is not a simple matter of opinion: It is either objectively true or not. Yet IS's opponents have done little to publicize the group's most significant losses.

IS's Propaganda Strategy: The Idyllic Caliphate

IS's brutality and military exploits should not cause us to overlook another core component of IS's strategic messaging: the group's effort to portray itself as a capable governor, and to create

⁵ For examples of these reports, see Maggie Michael, “How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group,” *Associated Press*, November 9, 2014.

the perception that the caliphate is an Islamic utopia. IS must show that it is able to govern, implement *sharia* (Islamic law), and provide basic services to its “citizens.” If IS cannot demonstrate its credentials as a governing entity, then the integrity of the caliphate project may be called into question. Conversely, if IS can show that the caliphate is a functioning and *sharia*-adherent state, it can bolster the group’s legitimacy relative to both its jihadist competitor al-Qaeda (which has refrained from declaring a caliphate) and Sunni states in the region.

One IS propaganda genre specifically focuses on IS’s governance efforts, projecting the image that the caliphate is the only place in the world where Muslims can live according to the precepts of the Qur’an and *ahadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad). Charlie Winter, an analyst at the London-based Quilliam Foundation, recently published a rich and detailed report examining IS’s propaganda focused on governance, justice, and life in the caliphate.⁶ Examining IS’s propaganda from mid-July to mid-August 2015, Winter found that more than half of IS’s propaganda content during that period focused on life in the caliphate, a category Winter defined as the “utopia” narrative. Winter further divided IS’s utopia narrative into seven sub-categories: religion, economic activity, social life, justice, governance, expansion, and nature and landscapes. Each sub-category projects an idealized image of the caliphate. For instance, content focusing on religion and justice highlights, among other things, IS’s implementation of *hudud* punishments, the piety of IS’s citizens, and IS’s efforts to eliminate forbidden (*haram*) or questionable items such as cigarettes. In this way, IS seeks to demonstrate that it is purifying society and implementing *sharia* as it was practiced by the first generations of Muslims. Propaganda that highlights governance and economic activity seeks to show that IS is providing services to local populations, and that the caliphate is thriving financially, rather than the destitute and crumbling entity that is depicted in Western media reports.

The target audiences of IS’s utopia narrative overlap with, though differ somewhat from, the intended targets of the group’s military propaganda content. This material appeals primarily to “migrants” (individuals who move to the caliphate to build the society) rather than to foreign fighters, to whom military propaganda may be more inspiring. Charlie Winter also notes that the utopia narrative resonates more with people living in the Arab world than it does with Western IS supporters.⁷ Perhaps the utopia narrative resonates more deeply in areas where there are more governance failures on the part of the existing authority. Content focusing on life in the caliphate is also internally directed, intended to persuade those who live in the caliphate’s confines that IS is providing public services and governing effectively. Propaganda with a justice motif, including footage of IS members implementing corporal punishments, may also be designed to deter IS’s “citizens” from opposing the organization or otherwise engaging in behavior deemed forbidden or undesirable under IS’s austere version of *sharia* law.

Just as IS’s winner’s messaging is prone to disruption, so too is the narrative that the caliphate is a utopia. Much of IS’s governance-focused propaganda is embellished or fabricated entirely. The few news accounts of life in the caliphate that have emerged indicate that IS has failed to provide most public services, and that individuals living in IS’s territory suffer from

⁶ Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015).

⁷ Charlie Winter, “More than Just Beheadings: How the Islamic State Sells Itself,” *War on the Rocks*, October 15, 2015.

shortages of food, medicine, electricity and other key resources.⁸ If the United States and other actors involved in countering IS's propaganda can expose the destitution and strife suffered under IS's rule, they may be able to shift the narrative of life in the caliphate from one of utopia to dystopia.

The Successes of IS's Mobilization Strategy

IS has experienced unprecedented success in mobilizing its supporters, largely due to its mastery of social media. The group's propaganda machine has yielded remarkable results, both in terms of the number of foreign fighters and "migrants" that the group has attracted to the caliphate and in the group's ability to inspire individuals from the West to carry out attacks in the IS's name, often without ever meeting an IS supporter face-to-face.

To date, around 30,000 foreign fighters and migrants have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups since 2011. This is the largest foreign fighter flow that any jihad has attracted, including the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s, and the Bosnian and Chechen conflicts in the 1990s. Though most foreign fighters have come from the Middle East and North Africa, a significant number—at least 4,500—have come from the West, including 250 Americans who either joined or tried to join jihadist groups.⁹

IS has also honed its ability to inspire lone individuals and small groups to carry out attacks in the West in the Islamic State's name. These attacks are typically referred to in the media as "lone wolf" attacks, meaning these individuals acted on their own, and lacked connections to a broader network. But the term *lone wolf* appears increasingly misleading in the age of social media. Many IS-inspired individuals have developed strong relationships online with IS members and sympathizers, though they may never meet them in person. IS-inspired attacks in the West play an important role in IS's propaganda strategy. Such attacks create the perception that IS is present everywhere. They also give IS an advantage in its competition with al-Qaeda, allowing IS to portray itself as the jihadist organization best equipped to sustain the struggle against the West.¹⁰

Since June 2014, when IS declared the establishment of its caliphate, the organization has inspired attacks across multiple Western countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark and France. One of the more notable IS-inspired attacks was the October 2014 Ottawa Parliament operation, in which Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, a convert to Islam, killed a Canadian soldier guarding the National War Memorial and then stormed into the Parliament building, where he was shot and killed. Investigators concluded that Zehaf-Bibeau had followed IS social media accounts, including the Twitter account of Abu Khalid al-Kanadi, a Canadian convert and IS member fighting in Syria who called for attacks in Canada.¹¹ Zehaf-Bibeau's attack came the day after Martin Couture-Rouleau, another convert and IS social media follower, struck two members of the

⁸ See, for example, Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is Failing at Being a State," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2014.

⁹ Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts," *New York Times*, September 26, 2015.

¹⁰ For more on the competition between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jason Fritz, Bridget Moreng and Nathaniel Barr, *The War between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict* (Washington, DC: Valens Global, 2015).

¹¹ Stewart Bell, "Ottawa Shooter Read Posts by ISIS Convert Calling for 'Jihad in Canada,'" *National Post*, January 24, 2015.

Canadian military with his car before initiating a high-speed car chase that ended in his death. Other high-profile IS-inspired attacks in the West since June 2014 include:

- September 2014: Alton Nolen, a convert to Islam and ex-convict who had just been fired from his job at a food processing plant, entered his former workplace and beheaded an employee with a knife. This attack combines elements of workplace violence and terrorism. Nolen had been a voracious consumer of IS propaganda, a fact reflected on his Facebook page.¹²
- September 2014: Abdul Numan Haider, an 18-year-old whose passport was revoked by Australian authorities who were concerned that Haider would join IS in Syria and Iraq, stabbed two Australian counter-terrorism officers at a police station in Melbourne before he was fatally shot. Haider had reportedly waved an IS flag at a local mall, and had also threatened to attack then-prime minister Tony Abbott.¹³
- December 2014: Man Haron Monis, an Iranian refugee who had been granted asylum in Australia, raided a café in Sydney and held more than ten patrons hostage for sixteen hours before police stormed the café, killing Monis. Two hostages also died. In the days prior to the attack, Monis posted a pledge of *bayat* to IS on his personal website.¹⁴
- February 2015: Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein, a 22-year-old Danish citizen of Palestinian descent, opened fire at an event in Copenhagen featuring Lars Vilks, a cartoonist who had received death threats after drawing the Prophet Muhammed as a dog. El-Hussein missed Vilks but did kill a filmmaker who was attending the event. El-Hussein then attacked a synagogue, killing a Jewish man who stood guard outside before El-Hussein himself was killed by Danish security forces. The Danish intelligence service concluded that El-Hussein may have been motivated by IS propaganda.¹⁵

Ramón Spaaij's book *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* helps to put into perspective the recent wave of IS-inspired attacks.¹⁶ Spaaij examined trends of lone wolf attacks from 1968 to 2010 across 15 countries, and found that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was an average of 7.3 lone wolf attacks per year across all 15 nation-states for *all types of ideologically-motivated terrorism* (including jihadist, far left, far right, and single issue). When considered within the context of Spaaij's research, the recent phenomenon of IS-inspired attacks in the West over the last year-plus appears particularly significant.

¹² Michael Daly, "The Muslim Convert Behind America's First Workplace Beheading," *Daily Beast*, September 27, 2014.

¹³ Ian Lloyd Neubauer, "A Teenage Terrorism Suspect Is Shot Dead in Australia After Attacking Police," *Time*, September 24, 2014.

¹⁴ Ashley Fantz et al., "Sydney Hostage-Taker Called Himself a Cleric—and Had a Criminal Record," *CNN*, December 17, 2014.

¹⁵ Alexander Tange and Alister Doyle, "Special Report: How Denmark's Unexpected Killer Slipped through the Net," *Reuters*, April 22, 2015.

¹⁶ Ramón Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (SpringerBriefs in Criminology, 2011).

Social Media as a Mobilizer

IS's recruiting successes are largely related to the group's ability to exploit social media to facilitate polarization, radicalization, and mobilization. There is a rich body of research on online communication (known to academics as *computer-mediated communication*, or CMC) and human behavior that psychologists, sociologists, and communication scholars have produced. Academics have been studying the impact of CMC on human behavior since the 1960s, and the literature on the subject, especially from the field of social psychology, can do much to inform our exploration of online radicalization.

Three concepts from social psychology are particularly relevant to online radicalization: identity demarginalization, group polarization, and the social identity model of deindividuation effects.

Identity demarginalization is a theory articulated by Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh in the 1998 study "Coming Out in the Age of the Internet: Identity 'Demarginalization.'"¹⁷ Exploring why some social groups are more drawn to online communication than others, McKenna and Bargh found that membership in online groups is of greater importance to individuals with "concealable and culturally devalued identities" than to those with mainstream identities. "For the first time," the authors wrote, individuals exploring their marginalized identity in an online environment "can reap the benefits of joining a group of similar others: feeling less isolated and different, disclosing a long secret part of oneself, sharing one's own experiences and learning from those of others, and gaining emotional and motivational support."

CMC allows for a degree of anonymity, however imperfect, thus emboldening individuals with concealable marginalized identities to discuss issues that may be taboo in a mainstream social setting.¹⁸ Further, CMC is not constrained by geography, and allows individuals with nonmainstream identities to link up to other people across the globe with similar identities. In a study examining the website Stormfront and the white nationalist movement, Neil Caren and two colleagues note that the absence of spatial boundaries in CMC allows online communities "to draw in otherwise isolated movement participants."¹⁹

McKenna and Bargh also explored the impact that participation in online groups had on marginalized individuals' social identity. They found this participation positively correlated with group identity importance, as people who actively took part in online group discussions came to "consider the group identity more important than did those who did not actively participate."²⁰ This contributed to what McKenna and Bargh described as *demarginalization*: individuals with marginalized identities who joined groups of like-minded people online came to view their identity

¹⁷ Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh, "Coming Out in the Age of the Internet: Identity 'Demarginalization' through Virtual Group Participation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75:3 (1998).

¹⁸ See Lynne Hillier et al., "The Internet As a Safety Net: Findings From a Series of Online Focus Groups With LGB and Non-LGB Young People in the United States," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 9:3 (2012), and Deborah E.S. Frable, "Being and Feeling Unique: Statistical Deviance and Psychological Marginality," *Journal of Personality* 61:1 (1993).

¹⁹ Neil Caren et al., "A Social Movement Online Community: Stormfront and the White Nationalist Movement," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 33 (2012).

²⁰ McKenna and Bargh, "Coming Out in the Age of the Internet."

more positively, thus strengthening self-acceptance and potentially reducing feelings of isolation. Positive reinforcement from peers in online networks can also result in validation and normalization of marginalized behavior. A 2008 study by Jeff Gavin and colleagues that examined pro-anorexia online communities found that such forums were “an ideal space for maintaining and validating a pro-anorexic identity,” and accentuated in-group (pro-anorexic)/out-group dynamics.²¹ In turn, McKenna and Bargh found that such acceptance of one’s concealed marginalized identity made participants more likely to reveal this identity to family and friends, and make it a part of their public persona.

Identity demarginalization theory suggests that salafi jihadists and other adherents to violent ideologies that are socially marginalized can reinforce and even normalize their extremist views through participation in online social networks. And normalization of a marginalized identity can prompt individuals to make that identity a “social reality” through public, and not just online, expression of these views. While the public expression of previously concealed identities is a positive development for many marginalized populations, the costs of normalization are greater when the individuals in question adhere to violent extremist ideologies.

Group polarization theory expands upon some of the themes highlighted in identity demarginalization. Group polarization refers to the propensity for a cohesive group to move toward a more maximalist stance. As with identity demarginalization, this process is neither inherently good nor bad: a group predisposed to doing community service may become even more committed to altruism following deliberations. But group polarization presents significant challenges when a group is predisposed to racial or ethnic prejudice, or religious extremism.

Numerous studies have concluded that groups interacting via CMC experience a greater degree of group polarization than groups that interact face-to-face.²² There are several possible explanations for why CMC contributes to group polarization. For one, CMC, as opposed to face-to-face communication, is characterized by an absence of visual and verbal cues, which may make individuals interacting via CMC less inhibited or apprehensive about communicating their opinions.²³ As inhibitions decline, participants become willing to “contribute more novel arguments and engage in more one-upmanship behavior,” which may drive group polarization.²⁴

The *social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE)* provides a theoretical framework for understanding processes like group polarization and demarginalization in an online setting. SIDE is a revision of classic deindividuation theory, which suggests that group immersion and anonymity within a group result in a loss of self-awareness and increase in anti-normative behavior.²⁵ SIDE, in contrast, concludes that in the CMC context, anonymity and group immersion

²¹ Jeff Gavin et al., “The Presentation of ‘Pro-Anorexia’ in Online Group Interactions,” *Qualitative Health Research* 18:3 (2008).

²² For a review of these studies, see Choon-Ling Sia, Bernard C. Y. Tan and Kwok-Kee Wei, “Group Polarization and Computer-Mediated Communication: Effects of Communication Cues, Social Presence, and Anonymity,” *Information Systems Research* 13:1 (2002).

²³ Charlotte Gunawardena, “Social Presence Theory and Implications for Interaction Collaborative Learning in Computer Conferences,” *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications* 1:2 (1995).

²⁴ Sia et al., “Group Polarization and Computer-Mediated Communication.”

²⁵ For an overview of deindividuation theory, see Philip Zimbardo, “The Human Choice: Individuation, Reason, and Order versus Deindividuation, Impulse, and Chaos,” *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 17 (1969).

do not foster anti-normative behavior but rather cause individuals to ignore idiosyncratic differences between in-group members, and to more closely identify with a common group identity. As Tom Postmes and his colleagues explained in a 1998 study, the SIDE model found that individuals who adopt a group identity are receptive to group cues, and are thus more susceptible to adopting local group norms through CMC, regardless of whether they are normative or anti-normative in the general societal context.²⁶

The SIDE model has significant implications for online communications. Several studies have suggested that CMC reduces the salience of personal characteristics and interpersonal differences, and increases the salience of group identity and group norms.²⁷ Anonymity in CMC interactions may also accentuate in-group/out-group distinctions, and intensify intergroup hostility. In his doctoral research, social psychologist Tom Postmes found that individuals had more negative perceptions of out-group members when out-group members were anonymous than when they were visible.²⁸

Other factors besides anonymity may also facilitate the shift from individual to group identity in CMC. In a 2011 study, Haines et al. modified the SIDE model, concluding that group identity becomes more salient in online interactions when a group identifier (for example, avatars or other labels that distinguish in- and out-group members) is visible to others.²⁹ Thus, Haines found that group influence actually decreases in *completely* anonymous online situations—for example, where “no labels are attached to comments”—due to lack of awareness of others’ opinions. But group influence increases when common group identifiers exist. This finding is particularly relevant for platforms like Twitter and Facebook, where group identifiers can be reflected in avatars or other symbols attached to a user’s profile.

Identity demarginalization, group polarization and SIDE all have considerable explanatory power in informing the discussion about online radicalization. All three theories demonstrate that certain characteristics of online communications, including reduced social cues and high degrees of anonymity, often strengthen group influence at the expense of individual identity.

Al-Qaeda’s Image Makeover

While IS has shown off its brutality and strength in its propaganda, al-Qaeda has adopted a different approach. With IS dominating the media spotlight and horrifying observers with its savagery, al-Qaeda has seized upon a long-awaited opportunity to recast an image that it believes was tarnished in large part through the excesses of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Thanks to two parallel developments—IS’s emergence and rising Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions in the Middle East—al-Qaeda’s campaign to rebrand itself has been invigorated. Al-Qaeda has taken on the image of a more reasonable—and perhaps controllable—alternative to the Islamic State, and a bulwark

²⁶ Tom Postmes et al., “Breaching or Building Social Boundaries? SIDE-Effects of Computer-Mediated Communication,” *Communication Research* 25:6 (1998).

²⁷ Tom Postmes et al., “Social Influence in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Effects of Anonymity on Group Behavior,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27:10 (2001).

²⁸ Tom Postmes, “Social Influence in Computer-Mediated Groups,” unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Amsterdam.

²⁹ Russell Haines et al., “A New Perspective on De-Individuation via Computer-Mediated Communication,” *European Journal of Information Systems* 20:2 (2011).

against Iranian expansion.

Al-Qaeda's belief that it needed to remake its image dates back to the group's campaign in Iraq in the mid-2000s. AQI ascended rapidly to the fore of the global jihadist movement and burnt out just as quickly, scorching al-Qaeda's image as well. AQI's early success during the U.S. occupation derived in part from its ability to spark sectarian strife through waves of attacks into Shia areas; AQI correctly believed that it could interject itself into a sectarian civil war by presenting itself as the Sunnis' protector. Yet even while it offered protection from the Shia reprisals that it had provoked, the group oppressed those same Sunnis by imposing an alien form of religious law through its reign of terror in Anbar province.

AQI's proclivity for brutality and indiscriminate violence worried al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL), which feared that AQI would alienate Iraqis. Members of AQSL sent at least two letters—from then-deputy emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and *masul aqalim* (head of regions) Atiyah Abd al-Rahman—to AQI's emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, exhorting the hot-headed Jordanian to moderate his approach. The objections offered by Zawahiri and Atiyah were strategic rather than moral. Indeed, Zawahiri noted that rather than beheading AQI's prisoners, "we can kill the captives by bullet." The preeminence of strategic over moral concerns can be discerned also in al-Qaeda's current rebranding efforts, where rather than avoiding atrocities, al-Qaeda appears more concerned with keeping them off-camera and minimizing the negative attention that often accompanies this brutality.

However, Zarqawi disregarded AQSL's instructions, and after a period of repression, the Sunni population in Anbar rebelled in a tribal uprising known as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement. The *Sahwa* soon spread to other provinces and, along with the "surge" in U.S. troops and American shift to population-centric counterinsurgency, contributed to AQI's downfall. It amounted to a repudiation of AQI—and by extension, of al-Qaeda itself.

After AQI's failed experiment, top al-Qaeda commanders began exploring how to repair the group's reputation. Perhaps the clearest evidence of al-Qaeda's rebranding efforts can be found in a letter that bin Laden wrote to Atiyah in May 2010.³⁰ Bin Laden lamented the damage that affiliates had done to al-Qaeda's image, noting that indiscriminate violence had "led to the loss of the Muslims' sympathetic approach towards the mujahedin." Bin Laden proposed commencing a "new phase" in al-Qaeda's operations that would "regain the trust of a large portion of those who had lost their trust in the mujahedin." Bin Laden emphasized minimizing Muslim casualties, and directing affiliates to exert caution when civilians could be harmed. He urged a new media strategy, ordering media operatives to avoid "everything that would have a negative impact on the perception of the nation towards the mujahedin."

AQSL even considered changing the organization's name. In a letter discovered in bin Laden's Abbottabad compound, an unidentified official remarked that the group's name had become disassociated from Islam, allowing Western states to claim that their war was with al-Qaeda and not the broader Muslim community. The official asserted that al-Qaeda (*the base* in Arabic) had become associated solely with a "military base," without any "reference to our broader

³⁰ Letter from Osama bin Laden to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, SOCOM-2012-00000019, May 2010.

mission to unify the nation.” The official proposed several alternative names.³¹

Officials continued to try to put a rebranding plan into action following bin Laden’s death. In September 2013, Zawahiri released a document titled “General Guidelines for Jihad” that made public al-Qaeda’s new, population-centric approach.³² Zawahiri instructed affiliates to avoid conflict with Middle Eastern governments when possible, asserting that conflict with local regimes would distract from efforts to build bases of support. Zawahiri also instructed affiliates to minimize violent conflict with Shias and non-Muslims in order to prevent local uprisings, and to abstain from attacks that could result in Muslim civilian casualties. A purportedly leaked letter that Zawahiri wrote to the Islamic State’s caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in September 2013 notes that the General Guidelines were distributed to all of al-Qaeda’s affiliates for review prior to their publication to allow for comments and objections, thus suggesting the document represents the unified policies of al-Qaeda as a whole.³³

But despite AQSL’s push to institute a new organization-wide strategy, early efforts to change al-Qaeda’s image yielded mixed results. Some affiliates executed the rebranding strategy poorly or inconsistently, while others disregarded this more constrained approach entirely.

The jihadist experience in northern Mali in the spring of 2012 illustrates how aggressive local commanders could undermine al-Qaeda’s rebranding efforts. When jihadist groups under the command of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) took control of northern Mali, they implemented a harsh form of *sharia*. The jihadists’ strict governance was at odds with Malians’ more moderate religious practice, and the jihadists’ heavy-handed approach—militants frequently beat, whipped, and stoned locals—sparked a mass exodus of civilians to neighboring Mauritania.³⁴ This approach earned a rebuke from AQIM’s emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, thus illustrating the cohesion between AQIM’s leadership and its counterparts in Afghanistan-Pakistan. In a letter to the Mali-based jihadists, Droukdel criticized the “extreme speed with which” they imposed *sharia*, castigating them for destroying Sufi shrines and for relying excessively on corporal punishments. Droukdel instructed the Malian jihadists to ally with other militant groups, including Tuareg rebels and other non-salafists, and to focus on amassing public support.³⁵ These directives closely mirrored the guidelines for jihad that Zawahiri would release publicly a year later.

This uneven implementation was true also of AQAP, al-Qaeda’s Yemen-based affiliate. In December 2013, AQAP militants attacked the defense ministry compound in the capital of Sana’a. A hospital was targeted, and several unarmed medics and civilians were killed.³⁶ While AQAP immediately claimed credit, the group backpedaled after a video aired on state television showing an AQAP fighter gunning down doctors and other civilians in the hospital. Qassem al-Rimi, AQAP’s then-military chief, was forced to issue a rare apology, claiming the hospital attack had been the work of a rogue militant. He promised that AQAP would pay blood money.³⁷

³¹ Letter from unknown al-Qaeda official, SOCOM-2012-0000009, date unknown.

³² Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” September 2013.

³³ The “leaked” letter can be found at <http://justpaste.it/asrarwkk>.

³⁴ Adam Nossiter, “Jihadists’ Fierce Justice Drives Thousands to Flee Mali,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2012.

³⁵ Letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel to the Shura Council of Ansar Dine, Date Unknown, available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf.

³⁶ “Al-Qaeda Apologizes for Yemeni Hospital Attack,” *Al-Jazeera*, December 22, 2013.

³⁷ “Al-Qaeda Branch in Yemen Regrets Hospital Attack,” *Associated Press*, December 22, 2013.

The Mali case suggests a disconnect between top-level leaders and local commanders, while Yemen is more likely an instance of al-Qaeda trying to show moderation only after having its atrocities broadcast. At any rate, uneven implementation often undercut al-Qaeda's early rebranding efforts.

But IS's emergence on the global stage was a watershed moment in al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign. While al-Qaeda's missteps prior to IS's rise as a competitor received considerable media scrutiny, the group's use of violence has been eclipsed by IS's unchecked atrocities. IS's beheadings, immolations, and mass executions have allowed al-Qaeda to change its image in a way that would have been unthinkable when the "Arab Spring" revolutions first gripped the region in 2011. Al-Qaeda is in the process of recasting itself to two audiences: locals and regional governments. IS has become a convenient foil, and Sunni-Shia geopolitical tensions have also been a boon to al-Qaeda's rebranding strategy. The intensifying rivalry between the Sunni Gulf states and Iran has provided al-Qaeda an opportunity to present itself as a potential ally in the fight against Iranian influence in places like Syria and Yemen.

As part of its rebranding initiative, al-Qaeda has launched a full-blown media campaign in recent months, deploying top officials to give interviews with mainstream media outlets. These officials downplay the threat the group poses to the West, and sometimes even encourage the perception of al-Qaeda's weakness. One of the first concrete signs of this media offensive came in early 2015, when Zawahiri issued a directive to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the emir of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, ordering Julani to improve Nusra's ties with the Syrian population and other rebel groups.³⁸ Zawahiri's decree codified, to some extent, Nusra's existing strategy. Since 2012, Nusra has collaborated with other Syrian rebel groups, and amassed considerable public support. However, in the latter half of 2014, Nusra was involved in infighting with other rebel groups, and Zawahiri's edict was intended to clarify Nusra's position.

Since then, Syria has become a primary testing ground for al-Qaeda's rebranding strategy. In March 2015, Al Jazeera aired an interview with Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, an Australian cleric who became one of Nusra's top religious officials. Muhajir contrasted Nusra with IS, stating that Nusra's primary goal was to topple Bashar al-Assad and "restore the right of the Muslim people to choose their leaders independently." His emphasis on popular representation and claim that Nusra focused on national objectives would become hallmarks of Nusra's media campaign.

After Muhajir's interview, Nusra granted Al Jazeera a conversation with Julani. In May 2015, Nusra's emir sat for a 47-minute interview in which he too contrasted Nusra's approach with IS's extremism.³⁹ Julani asserted that Nusra's sole goal was to topple Assad's regime, and adopted a comparatively tolerant stance toward religious minorities, promising that Nusra would neither target Druze nor Alawites. (Julani did say that Alawites would have to renounce elements of their faith that contradicted Islam, and Al Jazeera's English-language reporting on the interview conveniently omitted these ominous statements.)

³⁸ For a discussion of this directive, see Charles Lister, "An Internal Struggle: Al-Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate is Grappling with its Identity," *Huffington Post*, May 31 2015.

³⁹ For a video clip of Al Jazeera's Arabic-language interview with Julani, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QBuwsg0Gc>.

Al-Qaeda ideologues have also been involved in rebranding efforts. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, two of al-Qaeda's most prominent religious figures, gave an in-depth interview to the U.K.'s *Guardian* for an article published in June 2015.⁴⁰ Both Abu Qatada and Maqdisi slammed IS, while claiming that IS's emergence had caused al-Qaeda's organization to "collapse." The two clerics' statements look different when examined in the context of al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign: Their portrayal of al-Qaeda as a dying organization fits the group's strategy of understating its strength in order to avoid drawing the attention of Western militaries and alleviating Gulf states' fears.

Nusra has buttressed this media offensive by adopting a more collaborative approach toward other Syrian rebel factions. In March 2015, Nusra and several other prominent rebel groups, including the hardline salafi group Ahrar al-Sham, announced the establishment of a new coalition, Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest).⁴¹ Since then, Nusra and its allies have made considerable gains in Idlib province. Nusra has exported this collaborative model to other provinces, and has signaled that it is open to sharing power with other organizations: After Jaysh al-Fatah captured Idlib city, Julani stated that Nusra would not "strive to rule the city or to monopolize it without others."⁴² But consistent with the uneven implementation of al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign, some of Nusra's actions have departed from its goal of displaying a moderate face.⁴³

Al-Qaeda is also implementing its rebranding strategy in Yemen, where the conflict between Iranian-backed Houthis and a Saudi-led military coalition, as well as the Islamic State's emergence, have enabled AQAP to portray itself as a force that can counter the Houthis and IS. AQAP sometimes fights the Houthis alongside the Saudi-led coalition, and has engaged in a careful balancing act where it carries out attacks against Houthi militants while distancing itself from IS's terrorist operations against Houthi civilians.⁴⁴ AQAP capitalized on the anarchic conditions in Yemen to carve out territory for itself, and has exhibited a gradualist approach to governance. In April, AQAP seized the city of al-Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt province and Yemen's fifth-largest city. The group refrained from hoisting jihadist banners, and even issued a statement refuting rumors that it would ban music and shorts for men. AQAP established an umbrella group to rule Mukalla known as the Sons of Hadramawt, a name intended to emphasize the group's local roots, and has generally avoided measures that could alienate the local population.

Al-Qaeda's rebranding efforts have already found some traction with local populations and Sunni states, and even some Western analysts. In both Syria and Yemen, al-Qaeda affiliates have

⁴⁰ Shiv Malik et al., "How ISIS Crippled Al-Qaida," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2015.

⁴¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda and Allies Form Coalition to Battle Syrian Regime in Idlib," *Long War Journal*, March 24, 2015.

⁴² "Al-Qaeda in Syria Signals Sharia Law for Captured City," *Reuters*, April 1, 2015.

⁴³ One such example is Nusra's treatment of the Druze. At one point, Nusra apologized for slaughtering a number of Druze civilians. "Jabhat Al-Nusra Apologizes For Massacre In Druze Village, Says Its Commanders Were Unaware Of The Killing," The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), June 14, 2015. Despite this, Nusra has forced Druze to publicly relinquish their faith and put them through "re-education" programs, policies that meet the technical definition of genocide.

⁴⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Why AQAP Quickly Denied any Connection to Mosque Attacks," *Long War Journal*, March 20, 2015.

received support from, or fought alongside, Sunni states. The Jaysh al-Fatah coalition in Syria has become a favorite aid recipient for Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, AQAP has benefitted from the Saudi-led coalition's preoccupation with the Houthi and Iranian threats. Mukalla residents say the tribes that run the city receive Saudi aid, some of which almost certainly reaches AQAP.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia has refrained from carrying out air strikes against AQAP strongholds, and has looked the other way as AQAP develops a foothold in other parts of southern Yemen. Prince Faisal bin Saud bin Abdulmohsen, a scholar at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, explained the Saudis' approach toward al-Qaeda and IS: "At this point we must really differentiate between fanaticism and outright monstrosity."⁴⁶

The IS threat has also raised al-Qaeda's stock in Jordan. When IS captured a Jordanian air force pilot in December 2014, Jordan tasked Abu Muhammad al-Maqqdisi with negotiating with IS. Later, Jordan released Maqqdisi from prison and allowed him to appear on Jordanian television. While Jordan isn't naïve about Maqqdisi or al-Qaeda, the Hashemite Kingdom appears to be tolerating Maqqdisi and other al-Qaeda supporters in the hope that they can curb IS's growth.

As IS dominates headlines, analysts seem to be underestimating al-Qaeda's capacity to adapt and thrive. Al-Qaeda's affiliates have worked to restore the group's image, garnered public support in countries like Syria and Yemen, and even won the support of some Sunni states. This rebranding campaign puts it in a strong position today.

Conclusion: Addressing Violent Extremism in the Online Sphere

So what can be done? I offer four major recommendations.

First, refute IS's narrative of strength. The group's narrative is not impregnable. IS's propaganda campaign relies on deception and exaggeration to sustain its narrative of strength and perpetual momentum. Contrary to its propaganda, IS is not in constant possession of military momentum; the group has not made major territorial gains in months, and is on the defensive in Iraq. Though the group is far from defeated, IS's winner's messaging is contrived, and defanging it can dilute some of the group's appeal to foreign fighters and migrants. Similarly, IS's caliphate more closely resembles a failed state than a thriving utopia. The U.S. should expose the myths that underpin the militant group's narrative. This means fact-checking IS's claims, publicizing the group's lies, and producing a stream of reports that highlight IS's battlefield losses and governance failures. In the propaganda fight with IS, quantity and speed matter every bit as much as the quality of content.

Second, the U.S. government should collaborate with civil society and private sector actors. Tech firms are now becoming interested in how they can play a role in mitigating some of the damage that their platforms are unleashing. This is a good thing. American tech companies are highly creative, and thus far extremist groups like IS have harnessed far more creativity than the various actors who oppose them. Bringing the ingenuity of these firms to bear on the problem set

⁴⁵ Maria Abi Habib and Mohammed al-Kibsi, "Al Qaeda Fights on Same Side as Saudi-Backed Militias in Yemen," *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2015.

⁴⁶ Yaroslav Trofimov, "To U.S. Allies, al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria Becomes the Lesser Evil," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015.

can help efforts to combat online violent extremism; and similarly, the U.S. government should be more proactive in alerting these firms to possible negative second-order consequences of their technologies in the future.

Third, the U.S. should resist al-Qaeda's rebranding strategy. While IS has grabbed headlines with its raw brutality and mastery of social media, al-Qaeda's rebranding efforts have enabled it to garner significant support from both local populations and Sunni states. The U.S. should take the lead in exposing the lies underpinning al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign, and reminding its partners of the various international legal frameworks that prohibit support for al-Qaeda.

Fourth, legislators should immediately demand an explanation from the administration as to why the CIA is arming and supporting rebel factions in Syria that are collaborating with Jabhat al-Nusra. Numerous news reports, quoting U.S. officials, show that Syrian rebel factions that have received arms, training, and funding from the CIA are collaborating on the battlefield with Nusra in places like Idlib province.⁴⁷ Regardless of the fact that some CIA-supported rebel factions describe their collaboration with Nusra as an "uncomfortable marriage of necessity," the fact remains that weapons the CIA distributes to rebels in Syria are consistently ending up in Nusra's hands, and CIA-backed rebels have helped Nusra make gains.⁴⁸ Fourteen years after the 9/11 attacks, there is no justification for the United States to be aiding an al-Qaeda affiliate. Legislators should demand to know how and why this has happened, and should call for the administration to end all of its foreign support that it knows will help al-Qaeda affiliates, or has reason to believe will do so. Further, it may be worth inquiring whether any U.S. material support law were violated in the process.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Ken Dilanian, "Officials: CIA-Backed Syrian Rebels Under Russian Blitz," Associated Press, October 10, 2015.

⁴⁸ Anne Barnard and Karim Shoumali, "U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War with Russia," *New York Times*, October 12, 2015.

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Chief Executive Officer, Valens Global



Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and is the chief executive officer of Valens Global, a D.C.-based consulting firm that focuses on analyzing and crafting responses to the challenges posed by violent non-state actors (VNSAs). He is also an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's security studies program, and a lecturer at the Catholic University of America. Gartenstein-Ross is the author or volume editor of seventeen books and monographs, and has published widely in the academic and popular press. He frequently conducts field research in relevant regions, including North Africa and South Asia.

Gartenstein-Ross frequently consults for clients who need to understand VNSAs and twenty-first century conflict. His client work has included advising the U.S. Department of Defense and Dutch ministry of foreign affairs on the crisis in North Africa, participating in live hostage negotiations in the Middle East, conducting risk assessments for oil and gas companies, undertaking border security work in Europe, and developing both stories and series for major media companies. He regularly lectures for the U.S. Department of Defense's Leader Development and Education for Sustained Peace (LDESP) program, and has designed and led training for the U.S. State Department's Office of Anti-Terrorism Assistance.

Gartenstein-Ross has taught or been on faculty at a number of major academic institutions, including the Catholic University of America, the University of Maryland, and the University of Southern California. He holds a Ph.D. in world politics from the Catholic University of America and a J.D. from the New York University School of Law. Gartenstein-Ross can conduct research in five languages.