After San Bernardino: The Future of ISIS-Inspired Attacks

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The Honorable Alberto M. Fernandez, Vice-President, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Washington, D.C.

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Two weeks ago a 15 year old boy tried to stab to death a Jewish teacher in Marseilles, France. When he was arraigned, he said that he was "ashamed" that he had failed and when asked whether he represented ISIS – he had claimed the attempted murder in the name of the Islamic State – he noted "I don't represent them, they represent me."

The San Bernardino attack and the one thousand open investigations on alleged ISIS members inside the United States are ample testimony to the enduring appeal of the Islamic State.

A SUCCESSFUL BRAND

Measured in comparison with most other terrorist groups and insurgent movements, the ISIS brand is a huge success. The fact that it has mobilized tens of thousands to flee their countries, thousands of those leaving very comfortable circumstances in the West, is testimony to the power of its message. It most certainly does represent, as one scholar noted recently, very much a revolutionary, contemporary appeal. Many of the components of this message are not new but the message is nothing if not contemporary.

This is a compelling package, which includes a strong Salafi Jihadist ideological component, a political project which is portrayed incessantly as seemingly successful and growing, and a 21st century appeal to substantive and consequential participation aimed at youth searching for purpose and identity in a apparently aimless, empty and hedonistic world; fame and notoriety, vicarious violence, sex, and the end of the world.

It is actually remarkable that MORE people haven't joined and been mobilized given the vast potential pool of recruits existing out there. But what the Islamic State has succeeded in doing, at least for some, is creating a post-modern Salafi Jihadist sub-culture: high tech, cool, ultra-traditional, and non-compromising.

The brand is a "condensed symbol" which has multiple layers of meaning, different things to different people and here I can refer you to the work of many researchers and scholars such as Charlie Winter, Will McCants, J.M. Berger, Peter Neumann, Lorenzo Vidino, Javier Lesaca and Aaron Zelin. One of the few good things which have come out of the spectacular rise of ISIS is some first rate research and insight.

The fully formed brand as we know it today is really new, about 18 months old, dating from the double blow of June 2014: the fall of Mosul and the declaration of the Caliphate. Despite being so new, its success is complete in that it is now not a specific video or statement that mobilizes but rather the concept or image of the

organization that does so. Certainly there was ISIS Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's September 2014 message calling for attacks in the West, but aside from planned events like Paris, we see a wider range of inspired individual actions like San Bernardino that are evidently not centrally directed. We know the ideas of "leaderless jihad" and Lone Wolves are not new and we usually shouldn't compare anything to the Nazis, or compare ISIS to National Socialism, but when thinking of the ISIS brand I can't help but think of Ian Kershaw's concept of "working towards the Fuhrer" where individuals felt that they were in a way going along the broad lines indicated by the general stance of the German dictator and not necessarily following a specific order. It is the big idea that mattered, the meaning embedded in the High Concept. One result, clearly, of such attacks is to make the Islamic State look even more ubiquitous, powerful and conquering than it actually is, something that we in the West – including in government and the media – are sometimes unwitting accomplices in helping to suggest.

Of course, much of the elements in this spanking new ISIS brand are much older: Salafism is a couple of centuries old. The particular Salafi Jihadist template that we know is a few decades old. The conflict in Syria, which served as a powerful mobilizing agent for so many young Muslims, is entering its fifth year. And the organization itself, Zarqawi's creation, began in the 1990s and was forged in the crucible of the confrontation with the Americans in Iraq.

Zarqawi himself was something of a showman and a video pioneer, he certainly talked about that end-times battle of Dabiq and marked a line independent of Al-Qa'ida from the beginning. It also must be said that one element that you DON'T see in the ISIS brand is much that comes from the way the Iraqi Ba'ath Party did media, some of the grotesque violence, perhaps, but it doesn't look or sound like material put out by any Arab regime. The ISIS of today, which has roots both in Zarqawi and in elements of the previous Iraqi regime has far superseded both of them.

If I was to try to be as precise and narrow in the words to describe the ISIS brand, it would be "Khilafa Rebellion Now." These three words sum up thousands of videos, tens of thousands of graphics and millions of tweets. They encompass the mobilizing appeal to both Westerners and to people who have never set foot in the West.

"Al-Khilafa" (the Caliphate) summarizes both the religious and state-building efforts that are unique features of the Islamic State. "Rebellion" captures the youth revolt, the "insurrectionist" nature of the movement, this is a revolt against "the way things are now," the status quo, the mundane both in bourgeois Western democracies and Arab dictatorships. This also rebellion against "the Other," the

Jews, the Shia, the Christians and all those described in these words of power that ISIS uses: *Kufar* (Infidels), *Mushrikeen* (Polytheists), *Rafida Najas* ("Dirty Shia"), *Taghut* (Tyrant). And "Now" because the call is for action now, it includes a palpable sense of urgency, not something to be done in some fuzzy future.

But "Khilafa Rebellion Now" is only part of the problem. Imagine it as the core, the smallest in a series of Russian nesting dolls. The next size doll is that old chestnut, the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), "Islam is the Solution." Of course, the MB are bitter enemies of ISIS and vice versa. But the ISIS message is one part of a much larger ongoing Islamist ferment, a spectrum of great variety, ranging from contending political Islamist movements to complex regimes to different and divergent Salafi Jihadist insurgent factions. The ISIS message is one part of this larger construct, it reacts to and draws strength from this milieu, from a wider range of beliefs and attitudes within this Islamist spectrum.

So for example, when Saudis – who are both key targets of ISIS subversion and also share some of those same Salafi views – promote the over the top sectarianism of media outlets like "Wesal TV" as MEMRI pointed out recently in an exhaustive study, they are in a way helping to propagate elements of the ISIS message. Of course, many Islamists who are bitter foes of the Islamic State share views quite similar to that of ISIS when it comes to the *Kufar*, *Mushrikeen*, *Rafida Najas*, *Taghut*.

The fact that "Islamism" is now, in a way "fashionable," even in the West is also part of this political stew. And even though the very broad definitions of Islamism and even Jihadism are not exactly the same thing as ISIS, there is a focus and a forward motion on "things Islamist" (this includes people saying bad things about it and obsessing about it) which is useful to ISIS radicalization. "Islamism" and all sorts of (positive and negative) reactions to it and about it are "trending" if you go by the amount of media coverage the issue receives.

Just like an extremist political candidate who seems to be doing well, can drag the discourse on certain issues in a certain direction, so does the seeming success of ISIS drag others - rivals, critics and imitators - into a sort of ideological and propaganda arms race. ISIS itself has succeeded in resurrecting, of course, both the concept and reality of *Khilafa* and *Jizya*, the historic, humiliating tax imposed on non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.

This fierce competition is certainly very clear with the production and actions of groups like Nusrah Front in Syria and AQAP in Yemen. And this deadly rivalry could bear fruit even beyond the possible defeat of the Islamic State in its Syria/Iraq heartland given the shakiness of so many regimes in the region. I know

that when I was in government as recently as 2013, we hoped that the struggle between ISIS and Al-Qa'ida would have them fighting over the same finite pie, as a result discrediting both, but what has happened is that their struggle continues within the context of a growing pie.

If "Khilafa Rebellion Now" and "Islam is the Answer" are two of those nesting dolls which have a very clear Islamic connection, the third one which informs that brand, does not. It is something I wrote about recently for MEMRI and someone similar to what anthropologist Scott Atran wrote about in even greater length and that is that while ISIS is one high profile part of a rising wave of "radical Arab Sunni revivalism," it can also be seen as part of a larger trend of a deterioration of traditional culture and deep crisis of authority and institutions occurring most drastically and dangerously in the Middle East but also occurring – to a real if much less extent – in the West. In this reading, a wide range of disparate elements that have nothing at all to do with the Islamic State– Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, paramilitary groups, the Far Right, the Far Left, anti-Capitalist extremists and anarchists, the "lostness" of so many people in a changing and seemingly pitiless world – suggest some sort of sense of rebellion and can provide an inkling into some of the pressures and fissures many contemporary societies worldwide are experiencing. This is a clash of civilizations but it is not Samuel Huffington, rather a clash WITHIN civilizations happening both in the East and West.

If this internal civilizational shaking is even a little bit true, then the disarray we see in the Middle East is not a blast from the past but ONE possible vision of a future, even our future. I don't mean to suggest that we will ever descend into the brutal depths we see in the region today, but there is little doubt that the globalized, deracinated lumpen youth we see today in many places is at risk to all sorts of very different social and political pathologies. The Islamic State is only one of them, although perhaps one of the most spectacular and strangest ones of all.

We see today an Arab Middle East unmoored as most of the pillars of power and authority are shaken but you can read something like, for example, George Mason University Professor's Tyler Cowen's recent utopian/dystopian book "Average is Over" and see the dawning of a future which could drastically change our own civilization if not unmoor it. This may seem a bit something out of a "Mad Max" apocalyptic movie but I am not talking so much about what actually WILL happen but about how some young people in the West feel, and the ISIS image is, among other things, a lot about feelings and young people.

KINETIC PROPAGANDA BREAKS THE BRAND

So what to do with this really successful Islamic State brand? It has some real weaknesses despite the impressive success. It is in a way – part Ferrari and part donkey-cart – with this incredible powerful and shiny image tethered to a less shiny, actually sordid reality on the ground. This ISIS brand is a tremendous media success, the ISIS "state" is also an impressive accomplishment but has demonstrated somewhat less sticking ability than the virtual state online. I have frequently said that <u>the best way to weaken the ISIS propaganda appeal is on the battlefield</u> and that is really true.

One thing I watched closely when the Coalition began bombing ISIS in August 2014 to this day was to see how much the ISIS discourse of victory and indomitable progress would have to adapt to account for and explain away the inevitable battlefield reverses. It would be logical to take such a step but ISIS has done little to address this. There are calls, including most recently by Baghdadi, to persevere and stand fast, there are a handful of videos of civilian victims of Coalition bombing, playing the victim card, but not much.

The ISIS victory narrative has been sustained by the use of two elements – the actions and growth of the ISIS franchises and these continued attacks in the West such as Paris, which mimic and in a way replace the image of military victory on the ground.   This still can be sustained for a while especially if the continued progress against ISIS on the ground in Iraq and Syria remains slow and gradual. As long as the idea of the ISIS *Khilafa*, the unsullied brand, remains plausible it will continue to attract recruits, copy cats and spawn terrorist operations focusing on targets of opportunity worldwide. You cannot "contain" the ISIS brand if the ISIS Caliphate is merely contained.

Only a few days ago, we read the well-connected David Ignatius say that victory against ISIS will take decades. Obviously this depends on how you define "victory" but I do not think that is the case, as able as the organization is and as much as the region is in disarray. Matthew Levitt and my old boss Ambassador Jim Jeffrey at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy have recently spelled out some commonsense political-military steps on the ground which could accelerate the process of defeating ISIS in its core-Caliphate area. I defer to military experts on what would be the most realistic timetable for accelerating this campaign.

Certainly the shedding of the ISIS "proto-state façade" is something to be achieved as soon as possible and will have important ramifications for their power to mobilize. But unfortunately, the sheer number of ISIS supporters, the volume of the organization and its adherents – as propagandists and as fighters – means that the organization's decline back into mere "Al-Qa'idism" – a terrorist group

targeting enemies in the region and beyond – will take longer than it should. And as long as it has a critical mass of numbers made of up of people of various nationalities, the group will be able to a certain extent, "surge" into wherever in the region governance may collapse or weaken. We see this, for example, in Libya and Yemen.

While it is certainly possible that additional pressure in the Middle East on the ISIS state will make it lash out and motivate its supporters in the West to more action like San Bernardino, this pressure can tarnish not just the ISIS brand but disrupt the actual propaganda cycle. This has actually happened in the past such as in 2012 when Yemeni military action against safe havens in South Yemen disrupted AQAP's production of material. You certainly can't produce material about the great life in the Caliphate if your propagandists and support structure are on the run.

In any case, there is a problem in that the actual reverses that the Islamic State has suffered from Mosul Dam in September 2014 to Ramadi in January 2016 are rarely if ever personalized or presented in a way that would be appealing or impactful to our target audience – that is to Sunni Arab Muslims or Westernized Muslims living in the diaspora. We have actually never extracted the full propaganda value from these victories in the way that ISIS has actually done so with some lesser accomplishments. The Iraqi military has made some small efforts in this direction in Arabic, some material was produced after the fall of most of Ramadi recently, but it was nothing like the volume, human dimension, immediacy, high quality and multiple foreign languages that ISIS provides in its material. Look at an ISIS battle video and look at anything produced by its adversaries and you will see the contrast.

LOWERING THE VOLUME

In addition to this political-military dimension, another way to weaken the ISIS brand is to interrupt its propaganda cycle. This may seem like bolting the door after the horses have fled the barn but it still has value in cutting up the ISIS online network and blowing up the image of constant volume and production. It is the sheer scale of the ISIS network that gives it some of its power. The distribution system now is well known and is mostly involving a few high-profile platforms such as Twitter, Germany-based Telegram, San Francisco-based Archive.org and Justpaste.it. That is just four key platforms – Facebook and YouTube are somewhat less problematic now.

To give you a sense of the rapid rise of Telegram, especially in the past six weeks, for most of 2015 MEMRI mined ISIS material principally from Twitter, followed

by Facebook and then YouTube. Since October of 2015, 35% of our material comes from Telegram, 34% from Twitter. 10% from Internet Archive, 7% from YouTube and 10% from Jihadi forums. Facebook as a source declined from 25% to 2%.

Telegram today is probably the single most important online safe haven for ISIS. In a recent discussion by ISIS supporters that we at MEMRI monitored, one well-known figure described Telegram as his "hideout" and lamented that he wasn't able to keep up with the many suspensions on Twitter. "Remember Twitter back in 2014 when we hijacked hashtags and spread the news for the entire world," he noted wistfully. It seems clear that Telegram's encrypted chats were used as a platform to recruit people in Southeast Asia with Malaysian police recently arresting several who has been recruited through this particular messaging service.

Suspension of accounts and deleting material is not some sort of panacea in the fight against the Islamic State, especially given the larger military and ideological dimensions, but it does strike a blow. <u>Cyberwarfare and better policing of the terms of service of social media companies</u> are not a crutch we should rely on but they are a real tool, even if some ISIS fanboy posts a picture of a cake celebrating the 100th time he was suspended on Twitter.

A 2016 MEMRI special report described in detail the developments that have been made over the past few months by the ISIS propaganda network to maintain a high production tempo and respond to an increase in disruption attempts by digital adversaries:

> ISIS has slowly integrated the whole media apparatus into its own internal structure, from production to distribution. ISIS operatives were always part of the distribution process, passing on the media content and relying on pro-ISIS supporter networks to distribute to a wide audience. However, with disruption making the job harder by shutting down key accounts, ISIS media now needs to rely on more systematic methods, such as robot accounts to automatically distribute content through hundreds of accounts simultaneously and thus reduce the overall effect of shutdowns.

> High definition videos, as are daily published by ISIS, require broadband connections and large remote storage space in order to be made available to a large public. At this stage of the distribution process, the data flow is concentrated between ISIS media production operatives who are locally holding onto the data, and public hosting services on which they are dependent on for wide distribution. This dependency on free public hosting services is a double edged sword: on the one hand, it makes ISIS less

vulnerable to cyber-attacks and allows them to use privacy protecting laws in their own favor; on the other hand, they are subject to censorship and the content may be deleted fairly fast.

ISIS operatives need to find a hosting platform where this voluminous, large size data will stay long enough for the entire distribution process to take effect and thus generate dozens of copies of the new material. At that moment, the data has lost its early vulnerability to disruption by opponents. The well-documented use of "bots", automatic distribution accounts, enables ISIS media managers to rapidly get the links out to primary distributors before any kind of censoring response has been made.

For those who seek to disrupt this cycle, the issue is the <u>stemming of the data flow prior to it getting out of potential control within the network</u>. There is a critical, vulnerable point in time when the data is shared but not yet copied in enough different places.

THE IDEOLOGICAL FIGHT AND USG EFFORTS

The third element – after the political-military and the technical – is the ideological. Here again, what needs to be done seems relatively straightforward if difficult. The difficulty factor is increased, in my view, by the suspicion and ambivalence which this Administration's policies have created among key partners, our Sunni Arab Muslim allies stretching from Morocco to the Gulf. Given the current crisis of authority and its profound political implications for these states, it will be difficult to convince all of them to take on the public war of ideas to discredit the very premises of Jihadist Salafism when some of these countries use these same premises for their own ends.

On the surface, the rebranding of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) into the Global Engagement Center seems to be nothing but more than a public relations gambit. In the State Department press release announcing it, not one of the responsibilities listed was new. All of them had been within CSCC's mandate and were things CSCC had worked on, with its limited funds, as far back as 2011. According to press accounts, the new Center will no longer be in the direct messaging business which would mean – if the budget is not increased and remains at the old amount of about $5.5 million – freeing up about $3.5 million a year for the creation of proxies and indirect messaging platforms. Certainly a <u>reasonable increase earmarked for the Center's budget to fund overseas proxies</u> is worth trying, along with solid performance metrics and Congressional oversight.

The coordination of counter-terrorism communications efforts, often highlighted as a key part of the old office, or the new office's work, is important. But all too often in government, and including in this particular effort, it becomes a way of prioritizing process over actual results and activity over real forward mention. And coordinating a stagnant or shrinking effort is of limited utility.

One way not to do it is – at least not yet – the single public signature State Department effort launched this year. I am on delicate ground here since I had a very small role to play in this process very early on in mid-2014, and I believe that there is a grain of a potentially good nascent effort here, and of course CSCC was intimately involved in this start-up working closely with the Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA) in the State Department. Launched to great fanfare in July 2015, the Sawab Center in the United Arab Emirates is a largely UAE funded operation contracted out but also including two American FSOs detailed to the operation. It is, six months after its launch, a bit underwhelming with 2624 tweets since it was launched. This is like a smaller, more timid version of CSCC's digital outreach team.

Although it should have greater freedom to do things that overt USG communications lacked, Sawab so far is missing two things the ISIS brand has in abundance: volume and passion. Reportedly, there were deep individual tensions between NEA and CSCC at the launch of this initiative. One can hope that this initiative will mature and others in the pipeline like it will evolve into something more substantive and be replicated in ways that will be more consequential.

I don't want to dwell on it too much because it may seem like Schadenfreude but the USG basically wasted an entire year in the propaganda war in 2015. When I left CSCC in early February 2015, I assumed that the powers that be would go in a radically different direction from me but that whatever they did it would be well funded, politically supported and focused. None of those things seemed to have happened. The apparent micro-managing from the NSC, the risk adverse mentality, and the obsession of form over substance prevailed. One hopes something has been learned from this debacle and that the new leadership will be empowered and given freedom to work, but it is too early to tell.

I do want to recognize some of the valuable work CSCC seems to have done in 2015 in facilitating information on ISIS defectors and recanters. It is still early days, but is certainly a very worthwhile effort that should be supported and expanded. Governments receiving returnees from ISIS ranks should find creative ways to incentivize counter-radicalization media outreach as much as integration and law enforcement. And certainly, the leadership disorder at the top does not detract from the dogged and valuable work being done in this field by the

dedicated civil servants, Foreign Service Officers, and detailees from other government agencies involved in this effort.

Given the importance of Iraq and, especially, Syria, in the ISIS discourse and how it is sold to Western audiences and even non-Western populations distant from the Front, there is real value in <u>empowering Syrian and Iraqi Sunni Muslim voices</u> who can speak directly to wavering individuals outside the Middle East and say to them directly: "I am one of those Muslims whom ISIS claims to be defending and I am speaking from personal knowledge and the image you are being presented of our reality is a false one."

Look at the faces of the people talking in ISIS videos, how so many of them speak clearly and directly, stating with uncovered faces all sorts of (often awful) things with tremendous conviction and clarity. This is the power of personal testimony. I noticed a recent effort by the London Police to use Syrian mothers speaking in Arabic in one video to reach out to UK populations and that is a small step in the right direction.   This is a worthy experiment. The question is whether this can be deepened and individualized to replicate the peer to peer radicalization process which is so often a key factor in influencing the actions of new recruits. It should be.

There should also be room for a <u>well-funded regional media effort promoting tolerant, liberal Arab Muslim values in contradistinction to the vision of Salafi Jihadism.</u> This is a longer term project that has value in promoting the pluralism, tolerance and open discourse which is anathema to Takfiri Salafi Jihadists like ISIS and Al-Qa'ida. Certainly there are enough eloquent individuals – Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians and others, even in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia – who believe in such a worldview but are rarely empowered by us or by anyone else for that matter, certainly not on a consistent basis and not like the support lavished on a range of Salafi – non-ISIS - media.

Again, this is not something the United States can do directly, but it can certainly promote.   But attempting such an initiative also underscores a deficit in our counter-terrorism communications efforts. The default for our government is all too often to work with either friendly governments or to contract out our efforts to companies or organizations inside the Beltway. Nothing wrong with that but more is needed. <u>Government should also look to empower and expand the scope of non-governmental messaging platforms and organizations within the Middle East</u> with a goal towards building sustainable messaging efforts against Salafi Jihadists.

An ISIS Nineveh video a couple of days ago launched as part of a coordinated campaign on North Africa spent almost as much time attacking Sufi Muslims and

liberals as it did in criticizing the political authorities. The Salafi "sea" where ISIS rises from matters and it would seem to me to be good policy to seek to push back on a political and societal discourse which sets the stage for violence. This is not something the US Government can do directly but certainly something that needs to be prioritized. The Islamic State is ONE prominent and extreme part of a larger trend that inimical to our values and our foreign policy interests.

So this is the state of play in bringing down the ISIS brand. It isn't rocket science nor particularly exciting. Despite my profound policy differences with the Administration I do see that some of the basic elements needed in this fight are more or less in place, and slowly moving in the right direction, albeit in a weak, confused or poorly directed form. Certainly more tangible progress on the ground against ISIS is not unachievable this year even if we will have to rely on very problematic sectarian or ethnic local forces which do not contribute to solving some of the basic problems of governance and extreme sectarianism and can make it even worse.

Turning the ISIS Caliphate back into a terrorist/insurgent group running around in the wilderness of Syria and Iraq and which tries to launch attacks in the West, is not a definitive solution to the problem but it would definitely lead to a qualitative change in its current unique appeal. It removes some, but not all, of the motivation for individual San Bernardino-type action. It particularly damages the concept of the Islamic State as an ongoing concern with a bright future that a young person would want to support.

Disrupting the delivery system and ramping up the quantity and quality of the anti-ISIS material being generated on a daily basis are also important steps to blunt the utility and freshness of ISIS propaganda.

This revolutionary ISIS brand rose and flourished not because it was so startling effective – it very much is that, in relative terms – but because of the political, military and propaganda vacuum which allowed it to flourish and present a stance and an option – political and religious – that was both extreme and plausible. Working on the former part - the extreme message - is a longer term project, but working on the "plausible" part is something we need to do now and we do have some tools to do so.