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Islamic State

# The propaganda war

**The terrorists' vicious message is surprisingly hard to rebut**

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A MASKED man stands behind a kneeling victim preparing to slit his throat, put a bullet in his head, or slice it off with a sword. Islamic State (IS) did not invent this gory bit of stagecraft, but it has now, in effect, taken ownership of it. Televised murder—all too often mass-murder—is the main trademark for the group's particular brand of jihadism. Its most recent appearance was on August 12th, when it circulated macabre pictures showing the body of a Croatian hostage purportedly beheaded in Egypt. Such images are appalling; that they have become familiar is even more so.



The success that IS has had in winning followers with such messages perplexes its enemies, who are many. Indeed it has no friends at all; loathing for IS is about the only thing that unites Shias and Sunnis, Saudi Arabia and Iran, America and Russia, Turkey and the Assad regime in Syria. Within this motley coalition there is a growing belief that the battle of ideas and imagery may prove as important as war on the ground. After all, governments have repeatedly succeeded in eradicating terrorist groups, only to find that new ones, often similar but worse, pop up to replace them.

So it is that virtually every Muslim-majority country has taken some form of ideological countermeasure against IS, from pressing traditional religious authorities to excommunicate the group to encouraging comics to satirise it. A growing number of Western countries, including Britain and America (see [article](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21661002-britain-struggling-deal-new-breed-fundamentalist-battle-ideas>), have joined the propaganda war, too. Some have hired digital scribes to undermine the IS message online, for instance by highlighting its atrocities against fellow Muslims. Others have pressed internet firms to police their content, and to close accounts associated with IS where possible. Despite wariness of wading into battles over dogma, some Western officials favour openly promoting “moderate” Islam.

Clashing ideas are harder to measure than kinetic warfare, and it is possible that such initiatives have dented the appeal of IS. Yet it is also clear that the group continues to inspire many. Since September the American-led coalition fighting it has flown some 6,000 sorties and killed, according to American intelligence sources, as many as 15,000 of its fighters. Yet estimates of the group’s force have grown in the same period from around 20,000-30,000 soldiers to as many as 70,000, including 15,000-20,000 foreigners.

Despite some territorial setbacks, IS continues to dominate an area the size of Britain. It has spawned brutally thriving franchises in half a dozen other countries, from Afghanistan to Egypt, Nigeria, Tunisia and Yemen. Its size and, more important, its recruiting prowess now dwarf those of al Qaeda, a group with 20 years more experience in the terror business. The style of the self-declared caliphate, whether in dress, speech or cruelty, is what wannabe jihadists everywhere now aspire to.

One reason may be that since its declaration of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria last year, IS has stood out from terrorist predecessors for the quality of its propaganda. Its video productions are “a generation ahead” of other groups, reckon Cori Dauber and Mark Robinson, media experts at the University of North Carolina. In a recent paper they outline a range of sophisticated techniques the group wields to heighten the power of its visuals, from care in choosing starkly contrasting colours—think black uniforms and orange jumpsuits—to the use of multiple cameras, tight focus, “subjective” angles and intimate sounds to create an eyewitness effect.

As well as excelling in production skills, the group has succeeded at reaching audiences. Alberto Fernandez, who ran the State Department’s counterterrorism communications unit before recently joining the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), believes that IS sympathisers hold more than 50,000 Twitter

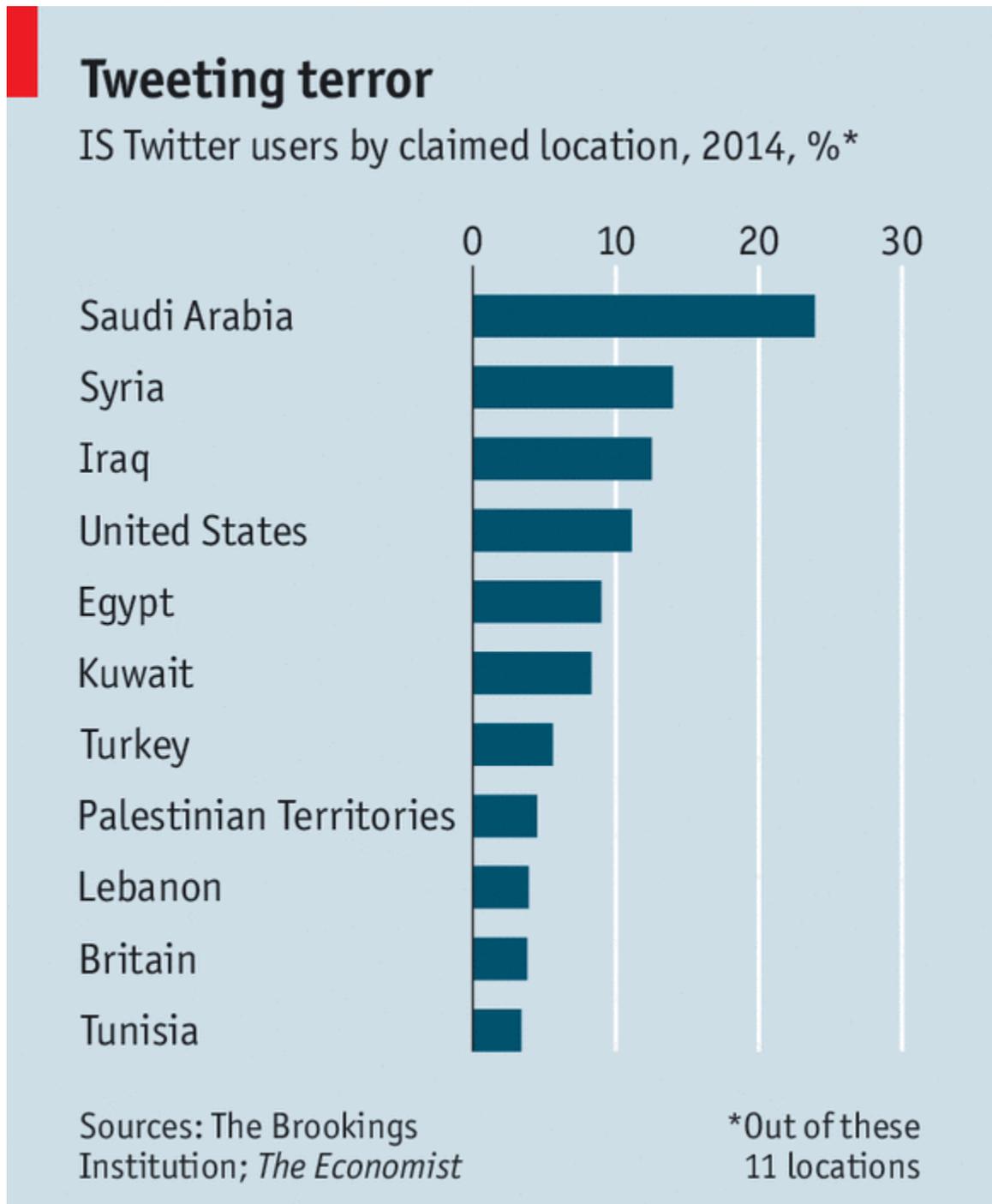
accounts. Many of these are scattered across the Middle East (see chart). This means its every message can be swiftly magnified. A study of a single week's output by IS conducted by Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Studies found 123 media releases in six languages, 24 of them videos. The savage imagery that many contain is calculated to shock and grab mainstream media attention.

Yet violence may not be IS's most potent visual message. In a detailed analysis of its propaganda, Charlie Winter of the Quilliam Foundation, a think-tank, identifies a range of themes that include mercy, victimhood, belonging and Utopianism in addition to war and murder. Rather than the chopping of heads, it is dreams of Sunni brotherhood and of revived Muslim glory that inspire, says Mr Winter.

Whereas previous jihadist narratives were all about "resistance" to imagined enemies, IS propounds what Mr Winter calls "the propaganda of the winner". Building on well-worn grievances of political Islam, it does not just talk about creating a caliphate but actually does so (sort of). It doesn't merely speak of eradicating colonial borders but physically bulldozes them. And it does not merely aspire to reintroduce "full *sharia*", but imposes the most starkly unrevised and demonstratively cruel version of Islamic law seen in centuries, if not ever.

In Mr Zelin's research of a week's propaganda output, more than a third of IS's messages were not about war. Instead they extolled the caliphate and its Islamic virtues, showing hospitals opening, schoolchildren smiling and citizens eagerly pledging loyalty to the caliph. Charles Lister, a scholar at Brookings, another think-tank, suggests that such positive images explain IS's staying power: "In both Syria and Iraq, IS presents itself as both an army and an alternative "state" to defend against and replace repressive or failed political systems perceived as oppressive to Sunni Muslims." This approach has allowed IS to put down roots that could help it survive for a long time, he says.

In the context of collapsed states, in other words, IS functions as a mafia or street gang, a cruel but necessary arbiter with its own code of honour. Don Winslow, the author of a book on Mexico's drug cartels, calls their similar mixing of extreme violence with flamboyant acts of civic virtue "terro-communication". Having goaded the Mexican state to respond with brutality equal to their own, he says, "the cartels would follow up by building clinics, churches and playgrounds, hold festivals for children and Mother's Day celebrations in which they would give



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every woman a washing machine or refrigerator.”

The gangland context within which IS operates, whether in Iraq, Syria, Egypt’s lawless Sinai peninsula or in Sirte, Libya, where the group has staked territory, is partly what explains its adherents’ immunity to persuasion. Traditional Islamic

religious figures, and even jihadist preachers who are seen as not radical enough, have no authority over a group that believes most Muslims have strayed from the true path. "IS is a product of the democratisation of knowledge and information," says Mr Fernandez of MEMRI. "Its religious argument is delivered by people with no credentials except fighting, being on the ground and in action."

All this implies that the most effective way to combat IS propaganda is not with more propaganda, but with counteraction. "The key to defeating IS is solving the societal and political failures in Iraq and Syria," says Mr Lister. But it is a tall order to put back together states that have broken or are failing. In the meantime, fighting the group may be the best option. "IS is a puffer fish," says Mr Fernandez; "they blow themselves up to be bigger than they are." Nothing would be so devastating to their propaganda as a sound military defeat.

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