

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

IS' Changing Narrative: How To Counter It

By Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah

Synopsis

Despite losing territories, the self-styled Islamic State (IS) continues to remain resilient by reinventing its propaganda. To counter violent extremism proponents should keep themselves abreast of the IS 'post-territorial defeat narrative'.

Commentary

ADVOCATES OF counterterrorism should not breathe a sigh of relief at reports of IS' territorial defeat. History has shown that Fascism did not die out with the death of Hitler in 1945. Likewise, Communism still persists after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The same could be expected of IS.

The violent ideology that IS propagated since 2014 has not shown any sign of decline. Presently, countering IS thinking is still a work in progress, even though the global Muslim communities continue to distance themselves from IS' warped religiosity. The added challenge now is to counter IS' new narrative, which it introduced after the collapse of the so-called Islamic caliphate.

Al-Baghdadi's 'Glad Tidings'

Speculations concerning the "caliph's" death were ridiculed when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his speech, which became available on the Internet on 22 August 2018. IS fighters and supporters rejoiced hearing their "caliph" speaking, to reiterate that IS is still formidable. With the speech came the much-awaited spiritual and strategic guidance for IS supporters and sympathisers.

Al-Baghdadi responded to IS enemies' counter-narrative by delivering at least two important messages in his speech. First, he instructed IS fighters and supporters to

be patient in fighting evil. He did this by simply quoting the Quran 2:155, “*wa bashshir aṣ-ṣābirīn*” (But give glad tidings to those who are patient in adversity). It implies that whatever the group’s condition might be, those who are loyal to the group would be the clear winners.

The loss of its territories and disintegrating military capabilities in Iraq and Syria are all part of the divine will. They should not be the cause of despair and loss of hope amongst the true believers mistakenly equated with IS fighters and supporters.

Al-Baghdadi’s ‘Purification’ Message

Second, he spoke about *tamhīṣ*, which is Arabic for purification. It is what some scholars refer to as “*ayah* [Quranic verse] mutilation” involving the de-contextualisation of the Quran. Al-Baghdadi quoted the Qur’an 2:214 to drive his message of *tamhīṣ*. According to his logic, IS’ suffering the loss of souls and lands is but a purification process by which God chooses only the best who are true believers to travel along His path.

It is Al-Baghdadi’s answer to those who question IS’ legitimacy because of its waning condition and suspicion over the group’s ability to deliver on its promise of ‘remaining and expanding’ (*bāqiyā wa tatamaddad*). To al-Baghdadi, the answer is clear that God has willed all these calamities to be processes to purify IS from the weak-hearted. Only those who succeed would see the silver lining at the end of the tunnel.

Both messages are IS’ attempts at damage control and also a psychological defence mechanism to ensure the loyalty of IS’ fighters and supporters whatever the future might hold for the group.

Rallying Others to Do Good Deeds

On the issue of loyalty, IS’ Arabic newsletter, *an-Naba’*, in its 151st edition published on 11 October 2018 an article, “*al-musāra’ah fi al-khairāt*” (The Urgency to Do Good). The article insists on the urgency to perform “good deeds” after an order has been issued.

It tells the story of the Prophet Moses in the Quran 26:45 who threw his staff which turned into a snake and in another verse, 26:63 striking the sea with the staff causing the sea to part, on both occasions when commanded by God. These are indirect justifications for carrying out IS’ orders without delay and avoiding the unnecessary question.

IS is suggesting that a true believer should act without delay whenever commanded to do so. The problem is, in Moses’ case it was God who commanded him. IS does not deserve the same obedience as God especially when its commands involve killing innocent people. Furthermore, the suggestion to carry out violence and murders on IS’ orders will never be rewarded by God.

This IS view is a misinterpretation of the Quranic verse. While acting on God’s commands is a sign of authentic faith (*imān*), acting on IS’ commands by going against God is the opposite. IS asserts that it is acting in the name of the *ummah* but in reality

whatever it did is without the *ummah*'s consent. IS continues to act even after the *ummah* disapproved its actions.

The Response

Undoubtedly, there is an intrinsic flaw with the IS logic and argument. Even when IS quoted verses of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions, it does not amount to a definitive ruling for Muslims. Its alleged claim of being the 'authentic party of God' that has emerged as foretold by the religious texts on the 'greater sign' of the End Times has proven to be false.

Dabiq, the name of the IS magazine was supposed to signify the great battle that would take place at a location with a similar name but never materialised. Instead, the *Dabiq* magazine ceased its publication and was replaced by another e-magazine named *Rumiyah*. With its release, IS shifted to targeting the Christians and suggested that the next decisive battle would be in Rome.

In July 2017, *Rumiyah* suffered the same fate as *Dabiq* just after its twelfth issue. IS, again, failed to fulfil the prophecy to bring the battle to Rome. These two accounts reiterate the attempt by IS to propagate the fallacy that they are the 'authentic party of God'.

Countering the IS narrative is essential. In-depth research and theoretical frameworks further strengthen present efforts, with arguments based on sound Islamic religious sciences and principles to dispel IS' claims using sacred texts. These should then be shared with the public through open engagement and education programmes. It would equip and enable the public with the ability to repel extremist ideological propaganda based on sound framework of knowledge.

Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman is an Associate Research Fellow with the International Centre for Political Violence & Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also a religious counsellor with the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg